

The Facebook Commentary on Revelation

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Revelation Chapter 6

Rev 6 (General Introduction)– The seven seals of Revelation 6 are a natural extension of chapters four and five. In chapter five the Lamb takes the scroll from the right side of the One sitting on the throne and is acclaimed worthy to break its seals and open the book. Chapter six continues the story begun in chapter five, but the location moves from heaven to earth. The Lamb breaks the seals one by one and the accompanying events take place on earth. In a sense, heaven and earth are linked together in this chapter so that nothing happens on earth that is not triggered by something in heaven first. The events are not a glimpse into the contents of the scroll, they are simply events that accompany the breaking of each seal. The scroll itself is not opened until all seven seals are broken. So the seven seals are grounded directly on the vision of Revelation 5. But before we get into the details of chapter six we need to explore a number of aspects of the relationship between chapters five and six. Once we have looked at the larger picture, we will be in a position to take up chapter six verse by verse and detail by detail.

Rev 6 (The Timing of the Seals)– What is immediately clear on the timing of the seven seals is that the conclusion of the events of Revelation 6 brings us to the conclusion of earth's history and the events surrounding the second coming of Jesus (6:15-17). But the beginning point of the seven seals is a bit more disputed. What is reasonably clear is that everything that happens in Revelation 6 follows on from what happened in Revelation 5. Chapter six takes up from where Revelation 5 left off, so the timing of Revelation 5 is crucial to the beginning of the seven seals. We concluded that the vision of Revelation 5 describes the inauguration of the heavenly sanctuary and the enthronement of Jesus and that both events occurred around 31 AD. Let me review briefly how we came to that conclusion.

The timing of Revelation 5 was set, first of all, in Revelation 3:21. That duodirectional verse indicates that Revelation 5 is about Jesus joining His Father on the throne as a result of His overcoming on the cross. This connects the vision of Revelation 5 with the ascension of Jesus after His resurrection.

We also noticed abundant evidence that the vision of Revelation 5 pointed to the inauguration of the heavenly sanctuary, an appropriate event to occur at the starting point of the Christian era. If the cross was a fulfillment of the Passover, it would not be surprising to see the ascension of Jesus in association with the feast of Pentecost and the events that occurred in the temple on that day in AD 31 (Acts 2). We also saw how the Davidic kingship and Deuteronomy 17 lay in the background of the scroll. This too would point to Christ's enthronement at the beginning of the Christian era. So the evidence so points to the day of

Pentecost in AD 31 at the day when the Lamb took the scroll and prepared to begin opening the scroll's seven seals.

Further evidence for seeing Revelation 5 at the beginning of the Christian era rather than toward the end is the chiasmic structure of the book as a whole. In general, the visionary sequences of the first half of the book cover the whole Christian era, while the second half of the book focuses particularly on the Second Coming and the events that precede and follow it. So the starting point of the seven seals is when Jesus ascends to Heaven on the Day of Pentecost. That suggests that the seals cover the entire era from from the enthronement and inauguration of Christ on one end to the second coming at the other. However we interpret the details, the series begins at the beginning and ends at the end of the Christian era. Dramatic further evidence that the seven seals portray the era from the ascension of Jesus to His Second Coming can be found in the strong parallels between Revelation 6 and the Synoptic Apocalypse (see Rev 6 [NT Background] for more detail on this parallel).

Dramatic further evidence that the seven seals portray the era from the ascension of Jesus to His Second Coming can be found in the strong parallels between Revelation 6 and the Synoptic Apocalypse. That is the name given to the end-time sermon of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, and Luke 21). There Jesus gives a message about the end of the world and the events that would lead up to it. No section of Revelation draws on the synoptic apocalypse in more detail than Revelation 6. Both involve (as we will see) preaching of the gospel, war, famine, pestilence, persecution, heavenly signs, and the return of Jesus. The three versions of the Synoptic Apocalypse provide the major New Testament background text for the seven seals. Revelation 6 sees the things that Jesus talked about on the Mount of Olives as the consequence of the Lamb opening the scroll. The events of Christian history are under the control of the One opening the scroll.

In the Synoptic Apocalypse Jesus described the whole Christian era as taking place in three phases. First, He described the general realities of the whole Christian age, things like proclamation of the gospel, wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, pestilence and persecution. These are paralleled in the four horsemen associated with the first four seals. Jesus then talked about a great tribulation like nothing earth had seen before. This is paralleled by the language of the fifth seal. Finally, He described end-time events like heavenly signs and natural disasters. These are paralleled by the sixth seal. The one major aspect of the Synoptic Apocalypse that you won't find in Revelation 6 is the concept of end-time deception (Matt 24:24-27). But that is also missing in Mark 13 and Luke 21. While the concept of end-time deception is not found in the seals, it is developed in Revelation 13 and 16. So the sixth seal, which covers the heavenly signs and natural disasters, parallels the material in Revelation 13-16, which also focus on deception.

Rev 6 (Structural Considerations)– One important structural consideration is the relationship between the seven seals and Revelation 3:21. As we have seen, while that verse is the climax of the seven church messages, it is also is a summary in advance of the whole seven seals vision (Rev 4:1 - 8:1). It contains the Father's throne (Rev 4), Jesus joining His Father on the throne (Rev 5) and the overcomers joining Jesus on His throne (Rev 7). The remaining part of

Revelation 3:21 concerns the process by which God's faithful people on earth overcome. Revelation 6 has something to do with the overcomer promises made to the seven churches. While the vision of Revelation 6 may seem bizarre and full of violent and disastrous images, its central theme is the provision of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, to aid His people in the process of overcoming daily trials. In other words, the global picture is rooted in everyday reality throughout the Christian era. So lurking behind the images of Revelation 6 is the Lamb on the throne opening the scroll. The trials of the saints are observed and limited by the enthronement of the Lamb.

Another strong connection between the seven seals and what precedes is the role of the four living creatures. These are introduced in Revelation 4:6-7, are mentioned several times more in the vision of Revelation 4-5, and play a central role in introducing each of the four horses of Revelation 6:1-8. So the connection between Revelation 6 and Revelation 4 is very interesting. I found a recent Masters thesis by Laurentiu Mot very helpful. In Revelation 4 the four living creatures are introduced as a group (Rev 4:7). But in the seven seals they are introduced one by one (Rev 6:1, 3, 5, 7). In Revelation 4 the four living creatures are introduced with ordinal numbers (first, second, third, etc.). The lion-creature is called the first (Greek: *to prôton*). The ox-creature is called the second (Greek: *to deuteron*). The human creature is called the third (Greek: *to triton*). And the vulture-creature is called the fourth (Greek: *to tetarton*).

Are the four living creatures introduced in the same order in Revelation 6 as they were in Revelation 4? One piece of evidence is that the same Greek ordinal numbers are used in relation to the second, third and fourth seal. The second seal (Rev 6:3) is introduced by the second (Greek: *tên deuteron*) living creature. The third seal (Rev 6:5) is introduced by the third (Greek: *tou tritou*) living creature. And the fourth seal (Rev 6:7) is introduced by the fourth (Greek: *tên tetartên*) living creature. But this description is not shared by the first living creature in Revelation 6, which is introduced with a cardinal number. The first living creature is described simply as “one (Greek: *enos*) of the four living creatures.” But this finds its parallel in “one (Greek: *mian*) of the seven seals” earlier in the verse. Is this another example of bad grammar on John's part or is there a grammatical principle being followed here? This requires further examination in the rest of the Bible.

In biblical Greek, cardinal numbers like “one” (Greek: *eis, mia, en*) sometimes have ordinal meaning (as in “first”). This can be seen in Numbers 1:1 where the “first day” of the second month uses “one” (LXX Greek: *en*) instead of “first” (Greek: *prôtos*). The same pattern is found in New Testament texts like Matthew 28:1, Luke 24:1, John 20:19, and 1 Corinthians 16:2. But even more pertinent to Revelation 6 is Titus 3:10. There the author advises Titus to reject divisive people after “a first (Greek: *mian*) and second (Greek: *deuteron*) warning” (Tit 3:10, NASB). Evidently, in biblical Greek, when “one” precedes “second” it should be read as “first.” This is confirmed in the seven trumpets of Revelation. The first woe is literally called “the one” (Greek: *hê mia*) woe in Revelation 9:12. But the second (Greek: *hê deutera*) and third (Greek: *hê tritê*) woes use the proper ordinal number (Rev 11:14). This mirrors the pattern seen in Revelation 6. So in New Testament Greek, whenever “one” (Greek: *eis, mia, ev*) appears alongside ordinal adjectives like “second” and “third” (Greek: *deuteros, tritos*), it functions as an ordinal number, signifying the first in a list. This means that the first living creature of

Revelation 6 corresponds to the first living creature of Revelation 4:7, and that the others also follow in the same order in both places.

The first living creature in Revelation 4 is the one that has the face of a lion (Rev 4:7). The first living creature in Revelation 6 has a voice like thunder (Rev 6:1). Thunder is used elsewhere in Revelation as a metaphor for a very loud voice (Rev 14:2; 19:6). This is appropriate to the lion creature much more than the others. It is safe to conclude, then, that the first living creature in both chapter four and chapter six is the one that looks like a lion. It is reasonable to also conclude that the other three living creatures in Revelation 6 follow in the same order that they do in chapter four. The lion first, then the ox, then the human, and finally the eagle/vulture.

Is there any meaning in the characterization of the four living creatures and the order in which these characterizations occur? If so, why did the vision of Revelation change the order that it inherited from Ezekiel's vision? In Ezekiel 1 the order is human, lion, ox and vulture. In Revelation 4 and 6 it is lion, ox, human and vulture. If the order has meaning it may shed some light on the mission of the four living creatures in chapter six. In Revelation the lion represents Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb (Rev 5:5-6), and that would be reason enough to put the lion first. We also see this in the list of the tribes in Revelation 7:5-8. Judah there is given the leading position, one it never held in the Old Testament lists of the twelve tribes (Gen 49:3-28; Num 1:5-15; 26:5-51; Ezek 48:1-7). Judah is the tribe whose banner is graced by a lion and Christ was born from the tribe of Judah.

Outside of Revelation and Ezekiel 1, the only other place in the Bible where you find lion, ox, human and eagle/vulture is in the Nebuchadnezzar narratives of Daniel. In Daniel 7:4 Nebuchadnezzar is portrayed with three of the four. He is a lion with eagle's wings who eventually stands on two legs like a human being and receives a human heart. There is a progression from the lion to the man. This progression is seen to be a spiritual one in Daniel 4. Daniel 4 also has three of the four characteristics of the living creatures. The progression there is from human to ox and back to human. But while he lived like an ox, his hair was like an eagle's feathers (Dan 4:31-34). Nebuchadnezzar's spiritual experience passed through the following stages. 1) At the height of his earthly power and glory he was like a lion with eagle's wings (Dan 7:4). 2) He became like an ox in behavior (Dan 4:32). 3) He developed features of an eagle/vulture (4:33). 4) He received a human heart (4:34; 7:4). These stages represent a journey from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. A human being is not truly human until he or she recognizes dependence on God. People who try to live apart from God are only animals of a different kind.

The four living creatures, then, correspond to the four stages of Nebuchadnezzar's spiritual journey. While the allusion is not certain, it is certainly plausible. The four living creatures' engagement with the four horses shows that their purpose is to assist humanity to become truly human, as happened to Nebuchadnezzar. The four horses have a gospel mission. But that mission does not succeed with everyone. In three out of four cases, the outcome is very negative. Similarly, in Daniel the path that Nebuchadnezzar followed was not adopted by his descendent Belshazzar. The call of God does not succeed with everyone. In fact, one could argue that it rarely, truly succeeds, as even relatively positive figures like the steward (Dan

1:11); Arioch (2:14-15) and Darius (Daniel 6) never give a testimony like Nebuchadnezzar's (Dan 4:34-37). So the parallel between Revelation 6 and Daniel is quite remarkable. In Revelation 6 the living creature like a lion calls forth a rider on a white horse, who is a symbol of Christ. He is the model of true humanity and proclaims God's gospel call to the world. Many, perhaps a quarter of the earth, respond to some degree. Those who reject the gospel are given over to the other three horses, which represent the consequences of rejecting the gospel (note that none of the language of covenant woes is found in the first seal, except perhaps, the association of the bow [Rev 6:2] with the arrows of Deuteronomy 32).

Why then do the four living creatures end with the vulture rather than the human being? Because the vulture represents the ultimate consequence of rejecting the gospel. In Revelation 19:17-21, the birds of the air feed on the flesh of those who fought against the Lamb and His followers in the final battle (Rev 17:14, cf. Ezek 39:17). These are the victims of end-time Babylon. The original Babylon was overcome by the other Messiah in the Old Testament, Cyrus (Isa 45:1). Isaiah pictured him with the symbol of the vulture (Isa 46:11). While Jesus offers His throne to all who overcome (Rev 3:21), those who reject that provision receive the fate of Babylon. The judgments of horses two, three and four are designed to draw people back to Christ, the model human. But persistent rejection of the gospel brings people to the place where God gives them up to the consequences of that rejection, symbolized by the vulture.

The prayers of the saints are also central to the connection between Revelation 6 and the chapters that precede it. The prayers of the saints are held in the outstretched hands of the twenty-four elders (Rev 5:8). Prayers of the saints next come into view in the fifth seal, where the souls under the altar cry out to God for judgment and vengeance (Rev 6:9-10). This connection assures the people of God throughout the Christian era that even though heaven may seem silent in the face of the persecution and martyrdom of those who follow Jesus, their prayers are heard in the heavenly throne room. And the connection between the fifth seal and the seven trumpets (Rev 8:3-4, 13) further assure that, while they may not be aware of it in this life, God is already acting in judgment against those who have abused them. This is further evidence that Christian experience is at the root of the apocalyptic vision of the seven seals. As noted in the Prologue of Revelation (1:1-8), the central focus of this book is Jesus Christ and the servants to whom this book was written.

That Revelation 6 focuses on Christian experience throughout the Christian age is supported by structural parallels with the Synoptic Apocalypse, as noted earlier. The four horsemen correspond to the general realities of the Christian age in Matthew 24 and parallels. The fifth seal corresponds to the great tribulation statements and the sixth seal corresponds to the heavenly signs and the final events in Jesus' end-time sermon. The Synoptic Apocalypse is clearly focused on the experience of the disciples and those who would succeed them. The church-related focus there is echoed in Revelation 6, which corresponds to the overcoming promises in the seven churches (Rev 2-3; 3:21). But while the seven seals have the experience of God's people on earth as their primary focus, we will discover that the seven trumpets particularly focus on the opponents of God and His people.

The content of the seals themselves and the parallels to the seven seals within Revelation offer further evidence for their focus on Christian experience. Persecution of

believers seems to be an important theme, especially in the second and fifth seals. There is evidence that the violence present in the second seal includes persecution of some Christians by others (see comments on Rev 6:3-4). The souls under the altar in the fifth seal (Rev 6:9-11) represent the people of God, they are opposed by “those who live on the earth,” a euphemism for the wicked in Revelation. The theme of persecution points us to a focus on the experience of the church rather than on the world.

The parallel between the two riders on a white horse (Rev 6:2; 19:12) suggests that the on-going battle between Christ and His people, on the one hand, and their enemies, on the other, is the focus of Revelation 6 as much as it is Revelation 19. Even though the events of Revelation 6 cover the entire Christian era and the events of Revelation 19 come at the close of the Christian era, their general character is the same, a focus on the people of God.

A frequently overlooked detail in the fourth seal may also offer a clue to the focus of the seals as a whole. The rider on the fourth horse has to do with pestilence and he's given power over a fourth of the earth (Rev 6:8). Although it is not explicitly stated, this leads me to suspect that each of these four riders has control over a quarter of the earth and the four as a whole cover the whole earth. This is supported by the parallel with Revelation 7:1-3, where four angels at the four corners of the earth hold back the four winds of the earth. We will see that the four horsemen (Rev 6:1-8) are significantly parallel to the four winds of the later passage. And each of the four winds is held by an angel, a parallel to the four living creatures. That would mean that each of the four angels has control over a fourth of the earth, and this would also be true of the four horsemen. Zechariah 6:1-5 seems pertinent to this observation. There the four horses are defined as four winds.

When you view the seals, the trumpets and the bowl-plagues as a whole, there is movement from fourths of the earth in the seals, to thirds of the earth in the trumpets, and the whole earth is in view in each of the bowl-plagues. Relevant to this is the fact that Satan's kingdom is described as having three parts in Revelation 16:19. The trumpets falling on thirds of the earth suggests to me that they are concerned with portions of Satan's kingdom (the thirds of the earth). If the seals affect quarters of the earth, three of those quarters would be portions of Satan's kingdom and one of those quarters would have to do with God's people and their experience in the world. While the Synoptic Apocalypse has a similar focus on the people of God, there is also much reference to the wicked and how they treat God's people. But the main focus of both the Synoptic Apocalypse and the seven seals is on the people of God. This larger picture will be helpful as look more closely at the details of the seven seals.

Rev 6 (OT Background)– We have seen that there is a strong Old Testament background in the vision of Revelation 4 and 5. The vision builds particularly on the five throne visions of the Old Testament. These are Ezekiel 1, Daniel 7, Isaiah 6, 1 Kings 22 (and its parallel in 2 Chronicles 18), and Exodus 19 (where the top of Mount Sinai becomes God's throne). Ezekiel 1 is the most detailed background to Revelation 4, while Daniel 7 is the strongest in Revelation 5. Both chapters focus on events in the throne room of heaven. With chapter 6, however, the throne room focus narrows to the Lamb breaking the seals, and much of the chapter is concerned with resulting events on earth. So the question arises, what is the Old Testament background that is

most critical to understanding this chapter? There are several, but two in particular stand out; the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 32 and texts that apply them to specific situations, and the four chariots scenes of Zechariah 1 and 6.

The foundation text for the covenant curses of the Old Testament is Leviticus 26. As you read the following, drawn from the New International Version (Lev 26:21-26), note the parallels with Revelation 6:1-8:

"If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions **seven times** over, as your sins deserve.²² I will send **wild animals** against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted.

²³ "If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction but continue to be hostile toward me,²⁴ I myself will be hostile toward you and will afflict you for your sins **seven times** over.²⁵ And I will bring **the sword** upon you to avenge the breaking of the covenant. When you withdraw into your cities, I will send a **plague** among you, and you will be given into enemy hands.²⁶ When I cut off your supply of bread, ten women will be able to bake your bread in one oven, and they will **dole out the bread by weight**. You will eat, but you will not be satisfied." Leviticus 26:21-26.

When you compare this passage with Revelation 6, you notice many parallels: seven times (seven seals), wild animals (fourth seal), sword (second seal), plague (fourth seal), famine (third seal), and rationed bread (third seal). There is little doubt that the four horses of Revelation 6 build on Leviticus 26. But notice the absence of direct reference to these covenant curses in the first seal, unless "conquest" is considered parallel with "sword."

The language of Leviticus 26 is actually the language of a siege, which is appropriate to the theme of exile that lurks behind the blessings and curses of Leviticus 26 (Lev 26:27-34). When God allows enemy powers to invade Israel's land, the first thing that happens is a battle to defend the countryside and repel the enemy forces (the sword). When that fails, the people scattered through the countryside flee into the walled cities for protection. Surrounded by enemy forces the people in those cities eventually suffer famine (bread by weight). With the combination of malnutrition and close quarters, contagious disease breaks out and takes its toll (pestilence). When the land is ruined and the people are taken away into captivity, the wild beasts take over and finish off the rest. So the curses of the covenant forecast the exile that signifies a spiritual divorce between God and His people (Ezek 16:35-42). The good news is that even this does not mean God has abandoned His people. He still intends to win them back in the end (Ezek 16:59-63).

Old Testament scholars call this section of Leviticus (chapters 17-26) the "Holiness Code." In it God explains to the Israelites the commandments and rules by which they are to live (and the "blessings" that flow from that) and the consequences of disobedience (called "curses"). Today's world is actually familiar with the concept of blessings and curses. In a builder's contract you might specify that a house should be finished by a certain date. If the architect and contractor are done ahead of time, there might be rewards, financial incentives to get the house done early. On the other hand, if the house is not done at the agreed time, the

builder might forfeit some of the contracted payments. In the ancient context, the rewards and penalties were called blessings and curses.

The biblical idea of covenant was adopted by God from the wider culture in which Israel lived. In Mesopotamia examples of covenant go back before the time of Abraham. Covenants were agreements that could be offered or imposed by a superior, requested by an inferior, or they could be entered into by equals. The earliest biblical examples of covenant are found in Genesis 9 and 15.

When God delivered Israel from Egypt, He entered into covenant with them at Sinai (Exod 19:5; 24:7-8, etc.). The foundation of the covenant was God's gracious action to deliver them from Egypt. In so doing, God demonstrated His faithfulness (Hebrew: *chesed*) in relationship to a people who had barely known Him before (Deut 7:7-9). He invited them to respond by offering similar faithfulness in return. The amazing thing about the covenant is that the all-powerful God of the universe, who could do whatever He wanted, chose to bind Himself to His own covenant with a relatively small group of humans. In Deuteronomy 7:7-9 God explains to Israel His deliverance of them was not a random act of grace, it was grounded in His faithfulness to the covenant He had made with Abraham.

The God of the universe made a covenant with a single human being (Gen 15:1-21) and acted mightily in the Exodus to fulfill His part of that agreement (Deut 7:7-9). In the covenant God was not asking Israel to do something He was not willing to do. He was inviting them to be as faithful to the covenant as He was. The purpose of that covenant was to safeguard the relationship between God and His people. The covenant provided security that God would not abandon His people and that if they were faithful, they would never suffer the consequences of having to "go it alone." According to the covenant, if Israel was faithful to its part, there would be positive consequences (blessings— Lev 26:3-13; Deut 28:1-14). If they disobeyed the agreement, there would be negative consequences (curses— Lev 26:14-33; Deut 28:15-68). The first recitation of these blessings and curses is found in Leviticus 26. The multiple allusions to Leviticus 26 in the four horsemen of Revelation shows that the covenant and its blessings and curses are a significant background to what is happening in Revelation 6:1-8.

The role of covenant curses is to call people's attention to their unfaithfulness to the covenant (in other words, to their relationship with God). This unfaithfulness results in a lack of security in that relationship (lose of assurance in the Christian sense). These curses, whether imposed by God or natural consequences, are employed to get their attention and invite them back to faithfulness. Their primary purpose is not penalty or punishment, but a ringing call to return to the God who has never abandoned the relationship and desires it to continue in spite of their unfaithfulness.

The curses tend to be mild at the beginning, but if the neglects and the unintentional sins turn into rebellion against God, the curses escalate into more severe forms (review Lev 26:21-26, and then 27-28 and 31-33, where this escalation is in view). Among the preliminary curses designed to wake people up are wild animals, sword (battle), plague, pestilence, disease, and famine. They invite people to change course move back in the direction of God. But if they don't repent, even worse consequences come. While Leviticus 26 uses the language of imposed penalties (note the repeated active "I will" in Lev 26:21-26), this kind of language is often

softened by the explanation that the curses are the result of God "giving them up" (Hos 11:4-9; Rom 1:24-28). While the curses of the covenant are sometimes disciplinary actions of God designed to get our attention, most of the time they are simply the natural consequences of trying to "go it alone." Ultimately, even ecological disasters are the natural result of human rebellion against God and function rightly as a call to return to Him (see Isa 24:5-6).

In Leviticus 26, the series of listed consequences are progressive because God is trying to wake up the people. The final consequence of unfaithfulness to the covenant would be exile from Israel and exile from God. God folds his tent and says, "Fine. If you are not interested in Me, I'll let you try other covenants and other gods (Babylon). We'll see how things go for you there."

As a New Testament book, Revelation does not simply adopt the Old Testament covenant ideas, it transforms them in light of the mighty act of God in Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament, who let people go into captivity to Assyria and Babylon, was not abandoning His people, He was continuing to use the curses of the covenant to get His people's attention and look forward to a time when the relationship would be restored. The prophet Habakkuk saw the coming of the Babylonians as evidence of God's unfaithfulness (Hab 1:5-19), but God points forward to a future mighty act of faithfulness on His part (Hab 2:1-4, see also Rom 1:16-17), a new Exodus, that will restore the relationship that has been lost. That mighty act would change everything.

Revelation 5 voices a similar concern as the one voiced by Habakkuk (Hab 1:5-19; Rev 5:1-4). The answer to that concern in Revelation 5 is the Lion of Judah, the Lamb that was slain (Rev 5:5-6). That action in Christ embraces but also transforms the Old Testament concept of covenant. The scroll taken by the Lamb in Revelation 5 is the book of the covenant (see Rev 5:1 [Excursus on the Identity and Contents of the Sealed Scroll]). The covenant, with its blessings and curses, will now be worked out in a different way. Jesus Christ, the righteous one promised in Habakkuk 2:4, becomes the center of the covenant. So the covenant curses in Revelation 6 have to do with followers of Jesus Christ who have wandered away from Him and are increasingly reaping the spiritual consequences. Hence the language of the consequences of disobedience--the "covenant curses."

A second Old Testament source of the language in Revelation 6:1-8 can be found in Deuteronomy 32, shortly after its own expression of the blessings and curses in chapter 28. "I will heap calamities upon them and spend my **arrows** against them. I will send wasting **famine** against them, consuming **pestilence** and deadly **plague**; I will send against them the fangs of **wild beasts**, and venom of vipers that glide in the dust. In the street the **sword** will make them childless; in their homes terror will reign. Young men and young women will perish, infants and gray-haired men." Deuteronomy 32:23-25, NIV.

Deuteronomy 32 continues later on: ". . . when I sharpen my flashing **sword** and my hand grasps it in judgement, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me. I will make my **arrows** drunk with blood, while my **sword** devours flesh: the blood of the slain and the captives, the heads of the enemy leaders.'

"Rejoice, O nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people." Deuteronomy 32:41-43, NIV.

As we have seen, Revelation 6 takes up the language of sword, famine, and pestilence and there is even a bow (for arrows) in verse 2. In addition, the avenging of the blood of His people is a topic of the fifth seal. So Deuteronomy 32 is another major background text to Revelation 6.

The book of Deuteronomy also has its "holiness code," which climaxes in this final chapter (32) of the book. Deuteronomy 32 recaps many of the images in Leviticus 26, but takes them a step further. Leviticus 26 was solely concerned about the relationship between God and His people Israel. But in Deuteronomy 32 there is the additional element that the curses of the covenant (sword, famine, pestilence, and ultimately exile) are brought against God's people by the enemies of God. Enemy nations are described as the executioners of God's judgment (Deut 32:23-25). God does not force them to do this, but He allows them to do it because Israel is no longer in relationship with Him.

But one further dimension is introduced in the latter part of the chapter. The enemy nations seems to enjoy their role as God's "judges" and they oppress the people of God even more than they deserved. When the enemies power over-reach their commission, the sword, famine, and pestilence they had exacted on God's people is now turned on them. God intervenes to deliver His people from injustice and the curses of the covenant now fall on the nations opposed to God (Deut 32:41-43).

We have seen that the curses of the covenant in both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 32 serve as background to Revelation 6, particularly the four horsemen (Rev 6:1-8). In the Old Testament context, there are two aspects to these covenant woes: consequences to God's people when they fall away, and consequences for the wider world who do not acknowledge God. In some sense, those outside of Israel were also in covenant with God, even if they didn't know or care about it. Looking at this from today's perspective, even if a person doesn't know God or the Scriptures, obedience to the way of life laid out in the Scripture has positive consequences for human experience. Similarly, living a life of unbridled rebellion against all that the Scriptures teach has its own consequences, whether or not one knows God or His Word. The blessings and curses of the covenant are directed toward God's chosen people in the primary sense. But they also have implications for behavior that is outside a conscious focus on the covenant.

The covenant themes of both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 32 became almost stereotyped in Old Testament times so that to refer to the consequences of the covenant, you only had to say something like, "War, famine, and pestilence." The books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (1000 years later than Moses) referred to how God's people lived up the the covenant (Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 32) using the words "War, famine, and pestilence". There are a dozen Old Testament parallel texts, but I will share just one striking one, Ezekiel 14:12-21, NIV.

"The word of the LORD came to me: 'Son of man, if a country sins against me by being unfaithful and I stretch out my hand against it to cut off its food supply and send *famine* upon it

and kill its men and their animals, even if these three men--Noah, Daniel and Job--were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD.

"Or if I send **wild beasts** through that country and they leave it childless and it becomes desolate so that no one can pass through it because of the beasts, as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if these three men were in it, they could not save their own sons or daughters. They also would be saved, but the land would be desolate.

"Or if I bring a **sword** against that country and say, "Let the sword pass throughout the land,"and I kill its men and their animals, as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if these three men were in it, they could not save their own sons or daughters. They alone would be saved.

"Or if I send a **plague** into that land and pour out my wrath upon it through bloodshed, killing its men and their animals, as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, they could save neither son nor daughter. They would save only themselves by their righteousness.

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem **my four dreadful judgments--sword and famine and wild beasts and plague--**to kill its men and their animals!" Ezekiel 14:12-21.

There is one further Old Testament background theme in Revelation 6:1-8, the four colored horses/chariots of Zechariah.

"During the night I had a vision-- and there before me was a man riding a **red horse!** He was standing among the myrtle trees in a ravine. Behind him were **red, brown and white horses.**"⁹ I asked, "What are these, my lord?" The angel who was talking with me answered, "I will show you what they are."¹⁰ Then the man standing among the myrtle trees explained, "**They are the ones the LORD has sent to go throughout the earth.**"¹¹ And they reported to the angel of the LORD, who was standing among the myrtle trees, "We have gone throughout the earth and found the whole world at rest and in peace."¹² Then the angel of the LORD said, "LORD Almighty, **how long** will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?"

¹³ So the LORD spoke kind and comforting words to the angel who talked with me.¹⁴ Then the angel who was speaking to me said, "Proclaim this word: This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion,¹⁵ but I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little angry, but they added to the calamity.'¹⁶ "Therefore, this is what the LORD says: 'I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt. And the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem,' declares the LORD Almighty."¹⁷ "Proclaim further: This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'My towns will again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem.'" Zech 1:8-17, NIV.

This is a major background for Revelation 6. Notice the parallel of four horses of different colors in the context of the same theme that appears in the fifth seal, "How long, O Lord?" As noted earlier, the concept of covenant woes has two aspects: 1) woes on God's people who have fallen away from Him and 2) woes on the settled opponents of God. In this case, the covenant woes are to be unleashed on the oppressors of God's people. God may have allowed the enemy nations to bring judgments on His people, but the time for reversal of that

judgment has come. The horses of Zechariah signify that God is about to execute the covenant and carry out the consequences. So, the four horses of Revelation 6 invoke the curses of the covenant as consequences of disobedience.

The theme of four colored horses of judgment is taken up again in Zechariah 6.

"I looked up again--and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains--mountains of bronze! **The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white, and the fourth dappled**--all of them powerful. I asked the angel who was speaking to me, 'What are these, my lord?'

"The angel answered me, 'These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world. The one with the black horses is going toward the north country, the one with the white horse toward the west, and the one with the dappled horses toward the south.'

"When the powerful horses went out, they were straining to go throughout the earth. And he said, 'Go throughout the earth!' So they went throughout the earth.

"Then he called to me, 'Look, those going toward the north country have given my Spirit rest in the land of the north.'" Zechariah 6:1-8.

Once again the symbolic apocalyptic imagery is similar to Revelation 6. We will have a bit more to say about this text tomorrow.

Some thoughts about the relationship of the four horsemen of Revelation 6 and the similar groups in Zechariah (1:8-17; 6:1-8). First of all, the land of the north, Babylon, was conquered by Cyrus and the Persians about the time the book of Zechariah was written. This vision suggests that the wars between the nations are not simply chance, but are the consequences of breaking God's covenant. We see wars all around, and events seem out of control. But the Bible suggests to us that God is in control of events, with the situation of His people particularly in mind. It may not be obvious, from an earthly perspective, how the seemingly random events of human history are guided by the hand of God. But prophecies like those of the seven seals and Zechariah assure us of God's intense interest in the affairs of human history.

When things go wrong for those who are trying to serve God, questions are asked as to why God allows them to suffer. Sometimes it is because they have not been willing to trust themselves with God and have tried to take matters into their own hands. God allows things to work out according to their actions, with the consequences often being less than pleasant. Powers and individuals that do not seek to serve God nevertheless unwittingly act as agents of judgment to carry out God's purpose. But eventually, as in Zechariah, God acts to restore His people and the curses of the covenant fall on those who had once been agents of God's judgment.

Notice how in Zechariah 6:5 the horses are described as the "four spirits of heaven" or in the Greek, the "four winds." In Zechariah, horses and winds are two different symbols for the same thing. That seems to be also at play in the seven seals of Revelation. We have four horses in Revelation 6:1-8, but four winds in Revelation 7:1-3. The four winds of Revelation 7 are certainly a different symbol but should be seen as another look at the four horses of Revelation 6.

"After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree." Revelation 7:1, NIV. Notice that the imagery of Revelation 6 is followed up in Revelation 7--in both cases there are four angels have control over the situation: each of the four horses is controlled by a living creature and each of the winds is controlled by one of the four angels at the four corners of the earth. So the four horses are also the four winds. Revelation 7 described a later and more final expression of what the four horses of Revelation 6 introduce.

Let me summarize what we have learned about the Old Testament background to the four horses of Revelation 6. The four horsemen in Revelation 6 and their parallel images are about disobedience and its consequences. The difference between Revelation 6 and its Old Testament precursors is that the context in the New Testament is Jesus Christ and the gospel. Whenever the gospel is preached and rejected in this world, there are real and spiritual consequences. These consequences may not even be visible to secular people at first. They usually begin with the professed people of God who are sliding into unfaithfulness. But as rebellion increases in the world, its consequences are more and more focused on the open enemies of God and the gospel. In the end, God uses the curses of the covenant to deliver His people and bring them home to a new Jerusalem.

In Revelation 6, God's judgments come in two stages. The first stage is preliminary and partial (Rev 6:1-8), designed to wake people up and call them to repentance. It is as if God used the words of a well-known television personality: "How's that working for you?" The consequences of disobedience highlight the futility of a life that neglects or opposes the gospel. As people become aware that the life they are living isn't working, they become more open to other options, including the gospel. In symbolic fashion the four horses diagnose the human condition and point to the steps that need to be taken to avoid further consequences. The four horses are not final judgments. Only the first two horses actually go out into the earth (Rev 6:2, 4). The most damaging horses--the black and the pale horses--are simply shown. They are not designed to punish people, but to offer people a second chance and to lead them to repentance. You could say that they are dark signs of hope. But after the end-time sealing of God's people (Rev 7:1-4), the consequences of the covenant are fully unleashed. Paul says that the goodness of God leads to repentance. But the seven seals tell us that God's goodness includes allowing people to suffer the consequences of their own and others choices.

The second and final stage of judgment is executive, where the consequences are fully and finally carried out. We see this anticipated in Revelation 7:1-3 and carried out in partial fashion in the trumpets. Throughout history, God has been trying to motivate people in appropriate directions. Sometimes they respond, sometimes they don't. The day is coming when God's full and final judgment will be poured out. God is in control of when that takes place. In Revelation Old Testament covenant language is used to describe the experience of God's professed people in New Testament times. Christ acts as both redeemer and avenger--a Lion as well as a Lamb. Christ's vengeance, however, when it is actively exercised, is performed with redemptive purpose.

The covenantal way of understanding Revelation 6 is confirmed in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 because they use the same language. In all these passages Jesus is describing

what life will be like between His first and second comings. In Matthew 24 and parallels He speaks about the gospel, war, famine, pestilence, persecution, heavenly signs, mourning tribes, and a Son of man who comes and sends His angels to gather the elect from the four winds of heaven. Similarly, the four horsemen describe the general characteristics of the age between the advents. The gospel will be preached to the whole world and great consequences occur on account of its rejection. The four horses describe the experience of God's New Testament people between the cross and the second coming.

Jesus also speaks of a time of heightened troubles and persecution toward the End (5th seal). Then there are deceptions and heavenly signs leading up to the second coming (6th seal). Deception is actually not mentioned in Revelation 6-7 but it is taken up in Revelation 13-17, so that passage is also somewhat parallel to the sixth seal. The seals are all about God's people overcoming obstacles on this earth between the cross and the second coming. The mission of God's people is to hang on to their trust and faithfulness in the midst of war, famine, pestilence and persecution.

What spiritual lessons can we learn from this general overview of the seven seals? First of all, as human beings, you and I have been uniquely designed by God. God's covenant is like the owner's manual in a car. It tells us where we came from, how we were made, and how we should best live. Such a manual is best written by the ones who designed and built the car. The Bible was written by the One who created us--using inspired human beings to tell us what we are like and how we best function.

Sin is like a defect that arises from neglect to properly service the car. When you have troubles with the car, you take it to someone who knows the car, can recognize defects, how they happened, and give you the service you need. In an ideal world, you would go to the very people who designed the car and know what it takes to get it back into ideal condition and teach you how to keep it that way. The Scriptures and prayer give us exactly that option when it comes to our minds, hearts and bodies. In the seven seals we are warned about the consequences of ignoring the owner's manual.

The purpose of judgments is a wake-up call to realign ourselves with the way we were originally designed. We were designed by God and if we function best in relationship to God, then the worst possible disaster would be to turn our face away from God and try to do things our own way. That's what I believe Revelation 6 is all about.

Rev 6 (The Nature of the Seals)– Further questions come to mind when viewing the seals as a whole. What is the nature of the seals? Are they judgments on the wicked? Or, are they focused primarily on Christ and His people in the world? Should the language be taken literally or symbolically? How do they build on chapter five?

First, the relationship with Chapter five depicts the enthronement of Jesus Christ over this world. As a consequence of His enthronement, He is worthy to take the book and break its seals. So the events of the seven seals that occur on earth are the result of Jesus' enthronement in heaven. That means that the breaking of the seals portrays the progressive conquest of Jesus' kingdom from the time of His enthronement to the Second Coming. But Jesus is not involved directly, as He was when he was on earth in human form. While He oversees these

things from heaven, it is the Holy Spirit (Rev 5:6) and the church (Rev 7) that are directly involved on earth. This is parallel conceptually to John 13 to 16, where Jesus speaks of going away so that the Comforter and the disciples can together do even greater works than the ones He had done while on earth (John 14:12).

The emphasis on the covenant in Leviticus and Deuteronomy suggests that for the four horsemen, at least, God's people are in view, even though they are not directly mentioned in chapter 6, outside of the fifth seal. "War, famine, and pestilence" were stock apocalyptic phrases throughout the Old Testament for God's judgments on His own people. So the emphasis in the seals is on God's people IN the world, it is the church in the world that is in view. But if that is the case, why is there so much emphasis on the curses of the covenant? That will be the focus on the next post in this series.

In Revelation 5 we see that Jesus is enthroned in heaven as ruler over the universe. But on earth there are many who don't know about His rule or who oppose it. Jesus' kingship over the earth is limited by the resistance of earth's citizenry. So an important context of the seals is to depict the process of Jesus gradually conquering His kingdom and adding to its citizens. You could say that becoming a Christian is a process of naturalization and that when you accept Jesus as the Lord of your life you become an adopted citizen of the kingdom.

The curses of the covenant imply something that is clarified more directly later on in Revelation. There is a rival kingdom that contests the spread of Jesus' kingdom (Rev 12:10-13). At the end of history, the final gospel appeal will go out to the whole world and everyone will make a decision as to which kingdom they want to be a part of. The best reading of the seals, therefore, is that they consist of the presentation of the gospel along with the negative reactions of those who reject it. Those who accept it are sealed (Rev 7:1-4) and those who reject it are progressively hardened until they become marked (13:16-17) as part of Satan's kingdom. The ultimate result of this sealing work is two harvests: the harvests of grain and grapes in Revelation 14. So the seals have to do with the extension of Jesus' kingdom through the world by the church. They are also concerned with experience of those who reject the gospel.

Should the seals be understood literally or symbolically? Interpreters have gone both ways, but I prefer to consider them symbolic for a number of reasons. First of all, the book of Revelation is a symbolic book. The vision that John saw was "signified" (Greek: *esêmanen*) by Jesus (Rev 1:1). That word means something cryptic or hidden (symbolic) which is intended to reveal the future. The model for "signified" is seen in the allusion to the vision of Daniel 2. See comments on Rev 1:1.

In Scripture, generally, it is advisable to take what you read literally unless it is clear that symbolism is intended. But if we take Revelation 1:1 seriously, the opposite stance is advisable in Revelation. Take everything you read symbolically unless it becomes absolutely clear that a literal reading is required. In other words, if something makes no sense symbolically, then you might want to ask if it should be taken literally. So the big question for the seven seals is, "Does a symbolic reading make sense?" I believe it does, and will attempt to show that in detail as we work through the various texts.

A second reason to understand the seals as symbolic is that I am not aware of a single commentator who takes the horses themselves as literal. They always represent something else; churches, political conditions, etc. While the same commentators take other aspects of these verses literally, they do not take the horses themselves literally. So if the horses are not to be taken literally, why should we take other aspects of the vision literally?

A third reason to take the seals symbolically is that Revelation 4 and 5, which set the scene for Revelation 6, are also symbolic. No one has ever suggested that such figures-of-speech as "Lion" and "Lamb" should somehow be taken literally as expressing something about how Jesus looked. These symbolic images are designed to help us get a deeper spiritual understanding of who Jesus is. If the setting of the vision is symbolic and the scroll and seals are symbolic, why would the events associated with the seals be symbolic?

A fourth reason the seals should be taken symbolically is that Revelation 6 makes coherent sense symbolically. The images in the chapter depict the realities of the Christian age, which are offered in more literal fashion in Matthew 24 but make similar sense here only if they are symbolic.

For me, a fifth reason to take the seals as symbolic is the image of the souls under the altar (Rev 6:9-11). Taken literally, these are disembodied people under a heavenly altar crying out for vengeance. Did Abel's blood literally cry out from the ground (Gen 4:7)? Was his blood living in order to give it its voice? God was intensely interested in the fact that Abel had been killed and that the fact of his blood on the ground cried out in a figurative sense for justice. God does not ignore acts of abuse, murder, and the suffering of His people. In light of the Abel story, the souls under the altar should be taken to mean that God is aware of the suffering of His people and has the intention of doing something about it.

There is one place in this chapter where it seems that the text should be taken literally, but we will come to that when we get to the details of the sixth seal.

Are the seven seals a prediction of successive events in the course of Christian history, the way some people see the seven churches? Should the seals be seen as historically consecutive, or do they have no particular order in mind? When you compare Revelation 6 with Matthew 24 and parallels, there seems to be movement from the general realities of the Christian age to great tribulation to cosmic signs. To put it another way, Revelation 5 presents the cross and the ascension of Jesus Christ, the horsemen portray the conquest of the gospel and people's reactions to it (1st-4th seals), the fifth seal portrays a call for the final judgment; and the sixth seal portrays the execution of that judgment. These observations would suggest that the seals were intended to be seen as predictions of a sequence of events in the course of Christian history.

The symbolism of the four horsemen fits fairly well into the realities of Christian history. At the beginning there is the rapid expansion of the gospel (first seal); then there is a long period of persecution, division and compromise (second seal). With the fall of the Roman Empire came the political dominance of Christendom, but with that came a loss of the clear understanding of the gospel in the Dark Ages (third and fourth horses). So the four horsemen seem to fit the pattern of Christian history in at least a general way.

The fifth and sixth seals clearly show movement toward language appropriate to the end of human history: a period of tribulation, the call for and implementation of judgment (fifth seal); the heavenly signs of the End; and the consummation of all things (sixth seal). So reading the seven seals in an apocalyptic way as a prediction of the sequences of Christian history, does not seem out of the question.

There is, however, evidence that the seals are not as rigidly sequential as Daniel 2 or 7, for example. Should we read the seven seals in terms of a rigid historical sequence or as a progression of ideas that may repeat themselves through history? Are the seven seals apocalyptic (a single-line sequence of events like Daniel 2 or Daniel 7) or are they in the prophetic tradition (capable of multiple fulfillments, like Isaiah or Matthew 24)? As we have noted, there is a strong covenant background to the four horses. The Old Testament stereotype of "war-famine-pestilence" is not rigidly sequential, these items can be listed in any order. So the covenant parallel suggests that a rigid sequence is not necessarily in view. If John had wanted to show a rigid sequence, he could have chosen a different background.

Another evidence for a prophetic perspective on the seals is the lack of movement through time, there are no time periods mentioned. By comparison, the seven trumpets have a lot of time sequences. The locusts attack for five months, the two witnesses dress in sackcloth for 42 months, etc. The three woes clearly have beginning and ending points. So the seven trumpets clearly seem to describe a rigid sequence of events, one after another. That kind of time movement is lacking in the seals.

Another evidence that the seven seals are to be taken more in the line of general prophecy than apocalyptic can be found in relation to the white horse. "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 (Rev 6:2, NIV)." Revelation 6:2.

The expression translated "conqueror bent on conquest" (Greek: *nikôn kai hina nikêsê*) in the NIV is possibly the most continuous expression in all of ancient Greek grammar. It combines a present participle (Greek: *nikôn*– "conquering," which is extremely continuous in its own right) with a purpose clause (Greek: *hina nikêsê*– "in order that he might conquer"). This combination means that the rider on the white horse goes out to conquer and does not stop conquering until there is nothing left to conquer. The white horse seems to cover the entire period from the cross of Christ through the Second Coming. This implies that the actions of the other horses are also generalized and continuous like the white horse is.

We may conclude that the seals are not a rigid historical sequence (as we will find in the trumpets), but a general progression of events realities through the Christian age, along the lines of Matthew 24 rather than Daniel 2.

We turn now to an examination of the details in each of these seals.

Rev 6:1– "And I saw when the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with **a voice like thunder**, 'Come!'" In Revelation 5, the Lamb has a scroll in His hand with the purpose of breaking the seven seals and opening the scroll. The prospect of the scroll being opened brings joy to the universe. In Revelation 6, the Lamb is

shown breaking the seals and as He does this in heaven, events take place on earth. How one handles this first seal seems to be decisive for how one handles the four horses as a whole.

The four living creatures are each described with a different face: lion, ox (calf), man, and eagle. We concluded in the introduction to this chapter that the living creatures are presented here in the same order as they are introduced in Revelation 4:7. The first living creature has a face like a lion and a lion would produce a voice like thunder. I remember being at a zoo on a sunny day when I suddenly heard thunder. There was no cloud in the sky but behind me there was a lion clearing its throat. The sound of a lion's voice is remarkably similar to the sound of thunder.

Lions in the Bible represent strength (Jdg 14:18), ferocity (Psa 7:2; Lam 3:11), fearlessness (2 Sam 17:10), stealth (Psa 10:8-9; Lam 3:10) and power (Job 10:16). The lion uses its roar to intimidate prey when it is hunting (Psa 104:21). But the power and strength of the lion here needs to be interpreted in the light of the slain Lamb (Rev 5:5-6).

“And I saw when the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’” As with many other visions of Revelation, this verse begins with “and I saw when” (Greek: *kai eidon hote*). The next four seals (Rev 6:3, 5, 7, 9) drop the word “I saw” (Greek: *eidon*) and simply open with “and when” (Greek: *kai hote*). The sixth seal (Rev 6:12) returns to the wording of verse one, “and I saw when” (Greek: *kai eidon hote*). The simple “and I saw” (Greek: *kai eidon*), without the “when,” is repeated in verse two. “And I saw” (Rev 6:1, 12) tends to introduce major sections of the book of Revelation (Rev 5:1; 7:1, 9; 10:1; 15:1).

“And I saw when the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, ‘**Come!**’” The Lamb opens the first of the seven seals and this causes the first living creature to say “come!” The events that happen on earth in verse two are also a direct result of the opening of the first seal. There are three options for who is being addressed by the “come!” The first living creature could be addressing the Lamb, John, or the horse and its rider. However, when John is being addressed directly in the book, the context makes that clear (Rev 4:1; 10:8; 17:1; 21:9). The same is also true of the Lamb (Rev 22:20). So since neither the Lamb nor John acts as a result of this command, it is most likely that it is addressed to the rider on the white horse. In response to that command, the white horse shows itself and then goes out. The command by one of the four living creatures indicates that the events unleashed by each horse follow on from prior actions and decisions taken in heavenly places. It should be noted, however, that many manuscripts have “come and see” which would more likely be addressed to John. But textual scholars do not consider that reading original.

Rev 6:2– “And I saw, and behold, **a white horse**, and the one sitting on it had a bow. A victory crown was given to him and he went out conquering and in order that he might conquer.” The first living creature calls out the white horse. In a nutshell, the rider on the white horse is carrying a bow (bow and arrow), has a crown on his head, and rides out as a conqueror. What is the purpose of this imagery? There are three main ways that the horsemen have been interpreted throughout Christian history.

First, *the preterist view*. In this view, the book of Revelation is not understood as predictive prophecy regarding the far future. Revelation 6, in preterist thinking, is a fairly literal description of military conquest during the first century of the Christian era. More specifically, the white horse is understood as a threat to the Roman Empire from the east, since the Parthians (who lived in ancient Persia, today's Iran) rode white horses.

The preterist method of interpretation treats Revelation in a similar fashion to how most books of the New Testament are read; as messages to specific groups and individuals at the time they were written. Through inspiration, these original messages in their various contexts have implications for later readers.

But the text of Revelation suggests that such a reading is not appropriate in this case. For one thing, the seals are not limited to the first century but portray events leading all the way up to the second coming. Secondly, we have also seen that the seals should be taken symbolically, and that their symbolic meaning is not limited to the first Christian century. So the preterist approach is not the most faithful to the evidence of the text.

A second main way to interpret the white horse is to see its rider as Christ. In that case the white horse represents the preaching of the gospel. That is the position taken in this commentary and will be explained in detail below.

The third main way to interpret the white horse is as Anti-Christ. In other words, the white horse represents the opponents of the gospel (this is sometimes called the counterfeit view). In this view, since the other horses all bring plagues, the military conquest mentioned in Revelation 6:2 is also to be understood as a plague. In the Old Testament, the bow (the kind that shoots arrows) can be used as a symbol of enemy nations, such as Gog and Babylon. In the New Testament, there are beasts that “conquer” God's people (Revelation 11 & 13), using the same word for conquest as Revelation 6. Counterfeit is a regular theme in the book of Revelation, so this view is not impossible.

“And I saw, and behold, **a white horse**. . . .” I do not share the view that the white horse represents a counterfeit of Christ or the gospel. In the posts that follow I will list the evidence that the white horse does **not** represent the Antichrist, but in fact **does** represent Christ and the gospel.

First of all, the color of the horse **is** white (Greek: *leukos*). The Romans used white horses in the context of triumphal processions. But the color white in the book of Revelation always refers to the things of Christ and His people and never to things that are clearly evil. This observation is without exception in the book. For example, the hair color of Christ in Revelation 1:14 is white. Overcomers in Pergamum receive a white stone (Rev 2:17). The redeemed of Sardis receive white robes (Rev 3:4-5). And the souls under the altar also receive white robes (Rev 6:11). If, in this case, we are dealing with Antichrist, it would be the only place in Revelation where the color white refers to anything but Christ, His people, or the things of heaven. Given that reality, the absence of some direct hint that this singular usage is a counterfeit seems convincing to me. Therefore, it would suggest that the white horse is a positive symbol pointing to the things of God.

It should not be missed that this is not the only rider on a white horse in the book of Revelation. The other is found in Revelation 19:12, and there He is clearly Jesus Christ. So the

rider on the white horse here is not Rome or Parthia, it is a manifestation of Jesus Christ, or at the very least (as in the Antichrist view) a counter to the representation of Jesus Christ in Revelation 19.

“And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and the one sitting on it had a **bow**. . . .” The symbol of the bow (Greek: *toxon*) is a bit more ambivalent than the color white. The bow can be used in the Old Testament as a tool of wicked people and enemy powers like Gog or Babylon (Psa 11:2; 37:14; Jer 6:22-23). But these references do not point us with certainty in the direction of evil. The bow can also be used as a weapon of God (Psa 7:12-13; Isa 41:1-4; Hab 3:9; Zech 9:13-14). And even when the enemies of God or His people hold a bow, it is only so it can be smashed by the power of God in defense of His people (Jer 49:35; Ezek 39:3). So the holding of the bow by itself is not decisive for deciding whether the rider on the white horse represents Christ or Antichrist.

“And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and the one sitting on it had a bow. **A victory crown** was given to him. . . .” The translation “victory crown” is based on the unique meaning of the underlying Greek word (*stephanos*—the name Stephen comes from this word). This is in contrast to the word for “crown” in Revelation 19:12 (Greek: *diadēma*—we get the English word “diadem” from this root word), which refers to the royal crown, the symbol of a ruler’s authority. The ancient victory crown was analogous to the medals on the uniform of a soldier or the medals awarded to victors in the Olympics today. One manifestation of it was the laurel wreath placed on the heads of Olympic victors in New Testament times.

In the New Testament and the Book of Revelation this word is always used in relation to Christ and His people (Phil 4:1; 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Tim 4:8; Rev 12:1) with one exception (Rev 9:7). In the context of the fifth trumpet, it is clear that an enemy power is wearing the victory crown. But given the consistent usage up to this point in Revelation (Rev 2:10; 3:11), the *stephanos* crown is a further indication that we are dealing with Christ and His people in the first seal.

That the victory crown “was given” to the rider on the white horse recalls the statement of Jesus in Matthew 28:18 that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him.

“And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and the one sitting on it had a bow. A victory crown was given to him and he went out **conquering and in order that he might conquer.**” A fourth piece of evidence for the identity of the rider on the white horse is the concept of conquest (expressed here by the Greek participle *nikōn*). Is this a military term in the book of Revelation? While it may seem so here, it is normally used as a spiritual term in the book. Before this point in the text, the words for conquering (overcoming) always refer to Christ and his people. The crucial texts for understanding Revelation 6:2 are 3:21 and 5:5. All three of these texts have the same original word (*enikêsa, enikêsen, nikôn*). It is difficult to grasp this point in the NIV because it masks the parallel: Jesus overcame (Revelation 3:21), triumphed (Revelation 5:5), and the rider on the white horse conquered (Revelation 6:2). But when you realize they are all translations of the same Greek word, you see these terms expressing the victory of Christ at the cross and also the victory of His people, the ones who overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony (Revelation 12:11). The word “conquer” in Revelation normally refers to overcoming in spiritual matters.

In Matthew 24 there are a series of events taking place from the cross to the second coming of Christ: gospel, war, famine, pestilence, persecution and heavenly signs. If the rider on the white horse is negative, then 1) the first and second horses are redundant and 2) the gospel would be absent in the seals. It seems reasonable that the rider on the white horse portrays Christ and the proclamation of the gospel given to the world after He is elevated to the throne in heaven.

The rider of the first horse produces no affliction in the world but the riders of horses 2-3-4 do produce it: They take peace away from the earth and cause people to slay one another (second seal); they produce famine and suffering (third seal); and they produce disease and death (fourth seal). This is further evidence that the rider on the white horse represents the gospel, rather than a counterfeit to the gospel.

A fifth reason to consider the rider on the white horse to represent Christ and the gospel is the nature of counterfeit in the book of Revelation. Counterfeit is a major theme in the book, one of the main reasons the book was written. But the counterfeits are always exposed to the reader. If the purpose of the book is to prepare readers to face spiritual counterfeits, it is essential that the reader not be in doubt as to where or when a counterfeit appears in the book. There is no hint whatsoever that the rider of the white horse is evil. To the contrary, the rider on the white horse of Revelation 19 is clearly Christ. The differences between the riders of the white horses in Revelation 6 and 19 are explainable as different stages in the larger conflict portrayed in the book. In Revelation 6, Jesus has conquered at the cross and can wear the crown of conquest but He is not yet the undisputed ruler of the entire world, He has conquered but must go on conquering. There are still plenty of people on earth who do not accept His rulership. So it seems clear that the focus of the rider on the white horse is the spiritual conquest of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Our understanding of the first seal is enhanced when we look at some key Old Testament passages. The first of these allusions is Habakkuk 3:8-9, NIV: "Were you angry with the rivers, O LORD? Was your wrath against the streams? Did you range against the sea when you rode with your horses and your victorious chariots? You uncovered your bow and you called for many arrows. . ." Habakkuk 3:8-9. The strong verbal parallel between the first seal and Habakkuk is obvious: Both texts concern horses, victory, and the rider employing a bow. Who is riding the horse in Habakkuk? It is Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. This supports the idea that the rider on the horse is a rider from God--perhaps Jesus Himself--and not simply a human rider, and certainly not a counterfeit.

A second significant allusion in the first seal is found in Psalm 45:3-5, NIV. "Gird your sword upon your side, O mighty one; clothe yourself with splendor and majesty. In your majesty ride forth victoriously in behalf of truth, humility and righteousness; let your right hand display awesome deeds. Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king's enemies; let the nations fall beneath your feet." In this major parallel to the first seal, a new king of Israel--perhaps Solomon--is being crowned and also getting married. He rides forth with his sword strapped to his side, with bow and arrows; and he rides forth victoriously. Notice that in Psalm 45 this is more than a just a military victory, it is the spiritual victory of humility, truth, and

righteousness. The victory of the rider on the white horse is a spiritual, gospel-style victory. This also supports the identification of the rider on the white horse with Jesus Christ and the gospel.

As noted in the previous, Psalm 45 is full of royal wedding imagery, it is the picture of a king going out to “conquer” his bride. So why would John allude to such a chapter in the first seal? The king in Psalm 45 is Israel’s Messiah, the son of David, as is the Lamb of Revelation 5:5. In the New Testament the equestrian king would apply to Jesus Christ (as in Revelation 19:12) and His bride would be the church. So in the first seal we have the image of Christ conquering His kingdom--His bride. When we get to the end of the book of Revelation, the imagery of a great wedding returns, it is the marriage of the Lamb. Revelation is moving forward to a wedding feast in which Christ will be married to His people. In Revelation 6 that conquest is just beginning. Throughout the era Christ is gathering believers for the great wedding at the end. In the context of Revelation, Psalm 45 does not point to an Antichrist here, but to the heavenly Messiah Himself.

How long does the conquest portrayed in the first seal go on? As we noted earlier, the rider on the white horse is "conquering and in order that he might conquer" (Greek: *nikôn kai hina nikêsê*). If you want to express something as on-going in the Greek, you can use the present tense. But an even stronger expression of continuous action is the present participle (as in *nikôn*), something is going on and on and on. Here the present participle (Greek: *nikôn*) is followed by the phrase "in order that he might conquer" (Greek: *hina nikêsê*), using a present subjunctive. This combination is the most continuous expression possible in the Greek language. The rider on the white horse goes out conquering, and will continue conquering until there is absolutely nothing left to conquer. It is an on-going process that never ends until it is totally complete. This process is certainly not limited to the first century. It also seems to me that such an expression of completeness is inappropriate to Satan or the Antichrist, both of which clearly come to an end in the book of Revelation (Revelation, chapters 18-20). So the first seal is a symbolic expression of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Rev 6:1-2 (Conclusion)—In conclusion, the rider on the white horse represents the gospel, beginning with the enthronement of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary (Revelation 5) and continuing on until the close of probation and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ itself. In harmony with Matthew 24:14, the gospel must go out to the whole world as a witness to all nations before the end comes.

Understood in this way, the four horsemen do not portray obscure apocalyptic disasters, instead they are portraying processes related to the central aspects of the experience of God's people on earth. The rider on the white horse is carrying the gospel to others so that the kingdom of Christ can be increased and the bride of Christ can receive her due and ultimate place at the wedding of the Lamb. That means that the seals which follow also find meaning in relation to the gospel.

What is the global picture that the original readers of John’s book would draw from this passage? They would understand, first of all, that while Jesus Christ was no longer a comforting presence on earth, His ascent to heaven gave Him even more power and influence over events on earth than before (John 14:12). They were right in their faith that He was the Messiah, the

royal son of David. They were right that the spiritual work that He began when He was on earth would continue to triumph until all opposition was subdued. But the seals bring out the dark side of John 14:12. They were wrong in their expectation that the conquest would be easy and quick due to the surpassing power of Christ. As quickly became evident with seals two through four, the conquest would be long and hard. Visions of war, famine, pestilence and death would fill the intervening years. The vision of Revelation was preparing them to endure in the face of hardship, knowing that victory in the end was assured.

Rev 6:3-8 (Introduction)—We have noticed a distinction between the four horses, with the first being largely positive and the other three very negative. There are two options for interpretation, if you accept the previous sentence, as I do. First, all four horses are a representation of Christ, showing the various contexts in which He seeks to influence people to align their lives with His kingdom. In this reading Christ is the one who draws people to Himself, first through the gospel and then through strife, famine, pestilence and spiritual darkness. Jesus Christ would not necessarily be the author of such calamities, but uses them to draw people to Himself. Second, the first rider is Christ and portrays the conquests of the gospel, while the other three riders portray the resistance to the gospel that Satan inspires and the increasing spiritual decline of those who resist the gospel. The second reading seems to fit the evidence of Revelation 6:3-8 better, as we will see in the comments that follow.

Rev 6:3—“And when he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, ‘Come!’” The word for “opened” (Greek: *ênoixen*) is an aorist indicative, mirroring the usage in all seven seals. These are sometimes called “visionary aorists,” in other words, visions are described as past events in the experience of the visionary. The second living creature was the calf (ox), a symbol of sacrifice. There is no mention of thunder in association with this living creature, probably because “a voice like thunder” fit best with the first living creature, the lion. See comments on verse 1.

As mentioned earlier, the second living creature is the ox or calf, which has sacrificial undertones, and is the only one of the four living creatures that has such undertones. Oxen were repeatedly sacrificed when David brought the ark up to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:12-15). They were sacrificed during the ordination of priests to their duties (Exod 29:1-14), and as a priest’s offering for sin (Lev 4:3). Oxen were also used for sacrifices on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:3, 11). They were known for their strength to pull heavy objects (Deut 22:10; 2 Sam 6:6). To have many of them was a measure of wealth (Job 42:12). The standard of the tribe of Ephraim portrayed an ox and Ephraim’s position was on the west side of the sanctuary.

While this seal uses the language of war (taking peace from the earth, killing, sword, perhaps use of the color red), the association with the ox or calf brings sacrificial overtones into the depiction, particularly in the context of the Greek word for sword in the next verse (see comments on verse 4).

Rev 6:4—“And another horse, a *fiery red* one, went out, and the one sitting on it was given to take peace from the earth, in order that they might slaughter one another, and a great sword

was given to him.” Many commentators assert that the red horse symbolizes war and slaughter, simply on account of it being red. But that does not necessarily follow in the New Testament alone. There are two words for “red” in the Greek New Testament, *eruthros* and *purros*. The former word is used in references to the Red Sea (Acts 7:36 and Hebrews 11:29), the latter in Matthew 16:2-3, where it represents the color of sunrise or sunset, here, and in Revelation 12:3, where it is the color of the dragon. In the Old Testament it is *eruthros* and its cognates that signify the normal color red. It is used for the “Red” Sea in the LXX (Exod 10:19; 15:3) or the scarlet color of dyed skins or clothing (Exod 35:23; 39:34, Isa 63:2 LXX).

The word used here (Greek: *purros*) is related to the Greek word for fire (*pur*—used more than twenty times in Revelation, among others: 8:7; 9:17; 11:5; 13:13; 20:9), hence it does not refer to crimson, but is a fiery red, the color of fire. In 2 Kings 3:22, however, this word (LXX: *purra*) is directly associated with blood. So in the ancient Greek mind, the use of “red like fire” *can* point to violence or killing, the shedding of blood. Since the rider on this horse takes peace from the earth, precipitates killing, and carries a sword, the color red here seems to imply violence. The underlying tone of covenant curses must be kept in mind here as well. Whether this text refers to general violence or specifically persecution, it is one of the consequences of breaking the covenant. In New Testament terms, therefore, this seal is associated with rejection of the gospel.

“And another horse, a fiery red one, **went out, and the one sitting on it was given to take peace from the earth**, in order that they might slaughter one another, and a great sword was given to him.” Like the first horse, the fiery red horse goes out and actively affects the environment; he takes peace from the earth. The implication of this language is that the condition immediately preceding this seal was one of tranquility that will now be disturbed by the activity of the rider on the red horse. This would make the most sense if the rider on the white horse is the author of that peace. The text is explicit that the power to take peace from the earth “was given” (Greek: *edothê*) to him. This is one of many uses of the “divine passive” in the Bible. The implied agent of the “was given” is God. Even Jesus could use the divine passive with reference to Himself. “All authority in heaven and on earth **has been given** to me (Matt 28:18, ESV). So the statement in this verse is appropriate whether or not the rider on the red horse is seen as Christ. Even if the rider represents Satan or the forces of evil, they can do nothing unless God allows it.

Is the peace (Greek: *eirênên*) in this text the kind that comes from the absence of violence or conflict, or is the peace of the gospel the primary intention here? The word for “peace” here has the article (Greek: *tên eirênên*). While this could be a general reference to peace as an abstract concept, it is more likely referring back to the peace that comes with the conquest of the gospel in the previous seal. This is further supported by the fact that the only other time the word “peace” is used in the book of Revelation (Rev 1:4-- *eirênê*), it is clearly spiritual peace that is in view. And this is the typical usage elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, in the Hebrew context, “peace” is the normal way to greet another. The Greek greeting (*chairein*), on the other hand, is related to the word “grace” (Greek: *charis*). So in the New Testament, Paul frequently opens his letters with the spiritual phrase “Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Phil 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; Phile 3). This greeting

is clearly with spiritual intent more than a wish for the absence of violence in their lives, as the theme and tone of Paul's letters makes clear. Allusions to the New Testament in what follows will further support the spiritual meaning of "peace" here.

"And another horse, a fiery red one, went out, and the one sitting on it was given to take peace from the earth, **in order that they might slaughter one another**, and a great sword was given to him." This text uses apocalyptic language to describe the experience of people who have rejected the gospel, with the result that they begin to slay one another. The word translated "slaughter" (Greek: *sphaxousin*) here is peculiar to John, being found only in Revelation (Rev 5:6, 12; 13:8, etc.) and in 1 John 3:12 in the New Testament. The language of slaying one another could be a representation of civil war, that people of common blood or faith are in combat against each other. From a gospel perspective, civil war would be the divisions that come between people as the gospel is clarified to them. Some accept the gospel, others reject it, and conflict erupts that would not have been there had the gospel not been presented. Persecution is a major consequence of rejection of the gospel.

The other possibility for the language of slaughter is violence, conflict and war in general. From this perspective, all the wars and violence we experience are the earthly consequences of Satan's rebellion in heaven. All human conflict is ultimately a result of sin.

In the Greek Old Testament (LXX) *sphazô* and its equivalents are the primary words used for sacrifice (Lev 1:5, 11; 3:8, 13; 4:4, 24, 33, etc.). There are a number of Greek words for death and killing, but *sphazô* is the one generally chosen to describe animal sacrifice. So this choice of words likely has sacrificial overtones here as well. It is not just war or civil war, but sacrificial killing. This leans the meaning of the text in the direction of persecution, rather than just conflict (see the sacrificial language in John 16:2 and Rev 16:6). When people lose sight of the gospel, they begin to slander, hurt and kill those who follow Jesus.

It is interesting that the Greek clause (*hina allêlous sphaxousin*-- "in order that they might slaughter one another") expresses purpose or sometimes result. Slaughtering one another is the result or the purpose of taking peace from the earth. In the context of the gospel (first seal), result is most likely here. The natural result of rejecting the gospel is not only the loss of peace, but a murderous hatred toward those who have accepted the gospel. The absence of peace brings out the worst in people. That is true both in the general and the personal sense.

"And another horse, a fiery red one, went out, and the one sitting on it was given to take peace from the earth, in order that they might slaughter one another, and **a great sword was given to him**." The instrument used in the slaughtering is a sword (Greek: *machaira*). There is more than one possibility for "sword" in the Greek. The sword in the second seal is a *machaira*, while the word translated "sword" in Revelation 6:8 is different (Greek: *romphaia*). The word *machaira* can be used for swords in general, but when in contrast with the *romphaia*, it represents a smaller weapon used for close-in combat or for sacrifice, as in the tool Abraham intended to use to sacrifice his son (Gen 22:6, 10). In the *Iliad*, Homer describes someone wearing both swords, the smaller one for sacrifice, cutting up meat, shearing sheep, and pruning trees. Since the sword here is a "great sword" (Greek: *machaira megalê*), a large *machaira*, it would be bigger than just a belt knife, but smaller than the larger battle sword

used by cavalry or for free-wheeling combat. So once again, the words carefully chosen by John here are appropriate to sacrificial slaying and not simply murder or warfare. Sacrificial language is used in the book of Revelation to refer to both the death of Christ (5:6; 13:8) and the death of His saints (13:10; 16:6).

Rev 6:3-4—Looking at the second seal as a whole, we seem to have two blended images--the language of war and the language of sacrifice. And one can also read the symbolism in two different ways. The first way is as an expression of division. The activities of this horseman result in division among people, so that they become enemies, slaying one another. Peace is taken away. I suspect this symbolizes the division that comes when the gospel is preached--some people accept and some reject resulting in division.

The second way to read this is as the language of persecution. When you come to the fifth seal, it is evident that the first four seals have resulted in a number of martyrs. The second seal is the place in the four horses where the symbolism best allows for that. The same Greek word for "slay" (*sphaxousin, esphagmenôn*) is used in both the second and the fifth seal. Thus, the slaying of others may not be division as much as the martyrdom of some of the saints by people who have rejected the gospel. This is also supported by the only place in the New Testament outside of Revelation that uses the "slay" word. In 1 John 3:12, Cain murders (Greek: *esphaxen*—2 times) his brother because his deeds were evil and his brother's were righteous. In that text you have true versus false worship, evil deeds versus righteous deeds and resulting persecution. Martyrdom, then, would be a consequence of the division described in the second seal.

Pursuing the martyrdom approach to the second seal, a number of parallel texts seem pertinent. "They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God" (John 16:2, NIV). The language of "offering a service to God" (Greek: *latreian*) is the language of priestly sacrifice. A time would come when people will think that killing believers is somehow pleasing to God. The civil war of the gospel is a division between those who accept and those who reject.

It may be helpful at this point to note that the rider on the white horse in Psalm 45 carries both a sword (45:3) and a bow (45:5—no word for "bow" is found here, but the rider is capable of shooting arrows). The same king who goes out and conquers his bride also conquers his enemies and wears a sword (LXX of Psa 44:4: *romphaian*). The rider with the bow in the first seal alludes to Psalm 45, but Psalm 45's rider also carries a sword. So the allusion to Psalm 45 would suggest that the riders on the white and red horses are the same (Christ?) or at least related in some way. If the rider on both horses is Christ, the symbolism of civil war expresses resistance to the prince of peace who comes riding out on the second horse.

There are other Old Testament background texts that seem pertinent to the second seal. "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3, NIV). If the seals are symbolic, as they appear to be, then the peace that is taken from the earth in the second seal is the kind that comes from trusting in God. "The wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 'There is no peace', says my God, 'for the wicked'" (Isaiah 57:20-21, NIV). The contrast is that there is perfect peace

for those who trust in God and there is no peace for the “wicked.” Other potential Old Testament background texts include Gideon's blowing of the trumpets, which resulted in the Midianites turning their swords on each other (Judges 7:22); the use of Levites to root out sin in the camp of Israel (Exodus 32:27); the Egyptians fighting against the Egyptians (Isaiah 19:2); and the enemies of God's people attacking each other as described in Zechariah 14:13.

The Old Testament imagery cited above supports the idea that the second horse represents the strife and confusion that results when the gospel is rejected. This strife and confusion could be the result of an intervention by God (Exodus 32:27), but it more likely portrays the natural result of resisting and rejecting the gospel.

In the New Testament, the gospel is the great divider of people. For example, in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16 (NIV), the gospel is a "savor of both life and death"--to those who believe, "a savor of life unto life," and to those who disbelieve, "a savor of death unto death." In John 3:18-21, it says that those listening to Jesus were judged by the light that He brought. So while the imagery of the second seal portrays warfare on the surface, in the larger context of the New Testament, these images have a gospel-oriented focus. After all, the entire book is the revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev 1:1), not the revelation of human conflict.

Two more New Testament texts show that division is the natural result of rejecting the gospel. "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law--a man's enemies will be the members of his own household"" (Matthew 10:34-36, NIV). Whenever the gospel is taken seriously, it brings division, as not all members of a family or a community are likely to embrace it. This is further underlined by Luke 12:51-53, NIV: "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

There is a certain temptation that comes whenever the gospel is heard: What will the family, relatives, and the neighbors think? People don't understand you when you take the gospel seriously. They say, "We thought you were our friend and now we're not sure." To those facing that dilemma, the message of the second seal is: "Keep in mind that true peace is achieved only in relationship to Jesus Christ. Away from a relationship with Christ, there is no peace."

In conclusion, the first horse portrays the gospel and the second, the loss of the peace of the gospel that happens when it not welcomed or is even resisted. There are consequences for accepting the gospel (persecution and loss of literal peace) and consequences for rejecting it (loss of spiritual peace, confusion, strife).

Rev 6:3-4 (Spiritual Lessons)-- In closing our comments on the second seal, let me summarize with some spiritual lessons.

1-- Violence is the result of rejecting the gospel. God's ultimate will is a universe without violence. The gospel is the free offer of acceptance with God even to people who have been

violent in the past. But violence results when people don't accept others or allow them to be who they are. When people reject the gospel, they hold conditions for other people expecting them to behave in certain ways and finally seeking to control what other people do. Violence of various types is the result. While most judgments of God happen when God "lets people go" (i.e. Rom 1:24, 26, 28) to reap the natural consequences of their own actions, God sometimes actively intervenes to restrain evil and deliver the righteous. Even such "violence" is only necessary because the gospel was rejected at some point. The Gospel offers us unconditional acceptance in Christ, but if we do not accept Christ, we put ourselves in a position where both natural and applied judgments (curses of the covenant) occur. Violence is the result of not accepting the gospel--either the violence imposed by rejecters of the gospel, or that which is necessary to rescue the weak and oppressed.

Other spiritual lessons in the second seal include:

2-- The decisive victory has already been won by Christ on the cross. The events on earth since then are the outworking of that decisive victory.

3-- Life's crucial question is whether or not we will be on the winning side in the End. That makes how one responds to the One who won the victory on the cross the most crucial question in life. Revelation points the way to the winning side.

4-- The winners in the ultimate race will rarely look like winners now. They may be the object of persecution and scorn, and may further suffer from division. If we go by our senses, doing whatever seems right, we may find ourselves on the wrong side because today's winners are not the ultimate winners.

5-- We need to be prepared to lose friends and family over the decision for Christ. If that happens to you, you are not alone--it's simply the way life in today's world goes. We should do all we can to restore divided relationships, but in many cases we will not be able to restore them. As simple as the gospel is, it does not prevent the division that happens whenever the gospel is preached.

Rev 6:5—"And when he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and the one sitting on it had a scale for weighing in his hand." There are similarities and differences here with the previous seals. Similarities include the opening of one of the seals in the scroll that the Lamb took from the One sitting on the throne (Rev 5:7), involvement of a living creature from chapters four and five, and a horse appears with one sitting on it. But in this case the horse is black. One other thing is striking in its absence. The first two horses "went out" (Greek: *exêlthen*) after they were called. This horse does not go out. It simply appears. This suggests to me that the more severe consequences seen in the third and fourth seal are not final judgments, they are limited by the One unsealing the book. Their purpose at this stage is redemptive. The four horses parallel the situation described in Revelation 7:1, where four angels hold back the four winds of heaven. In Revelation 6:1-8 you have four angelic beings (the four living creatures) controlling four horses, in Revelation 7:1, four angels hold back the four winds, which are a parallel image to the four horses (see Zech 6:5). That also tells me that the four horses are preliminary and partial judgments. When the four winds are released (Rev 7:1-3), the final judgments are in play.

“And when he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, ‘Come!’” The third living creature had the face of a man (Rev 4:7), which was found on the standard of Reuben, located to the south of the tabernacle during Israel’s wilderness experience. If this identification is significant, it would suggest this seal focuses in some special way on human beings and their role in the larger picture of the vision. In the Old Testament, humans resemble God in the role they are called to perform as rulers of creation (Gen 1:26, 28; Psa 8:6-8).

A few commentators have tried to understand the third seal more deeply on the basis of the third living creature. The 19th-Century commentator Christopher Wordsworth proposed that the human-faced creature’s involvement in the third seal indicates the rise of heresy within the church in the early centuries. The 18th Century commentator John Gill conjectured that this represents the ministers of the gospel in their humanity and reasoning capacity. As noted earlier, the contemporary commentator Laurentiu Mot connected the four living creatures with the experience of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. Nebuchadnezzar was only truly human when he acknowledge God’s superiority and committed himself to God. The four living creatures have a ministry to help human beings be truly human. If Mot is on the right track, the third seal would testify to the consequences that humanity suffers when it rejects God and the gospel.

“And I saw, and behold, **a black horse**, and the one sitting on it had a scale for weighing in his hand.” One would naturally expect the purpose of the black horse to be the opposite of the white one. But that kind of contrast between the two colors is not exhibited elsewhere in the New Testament. The word "black" (Greek: *melas*) is the root of the English word Melanesia, reference to a region of the Pacific Islands with darker-skinned people. But in ancient Greek it is the word for "ink." It can refer to writing as well as the color of hair or skin. Black was also the color of mourning and calamity (Jer 4:28; Lam 4:7-8) in the ancient world. In this verse black is closely associated with famine conditions (Rev 6:6). Mourning is one of the results of a severe famine.

“And I saw, and behold, **a black horse**, and the one sitting on it had a scale for weighing in his hand.” The color black is not primarily used in the New Testament for contrast with the color white, but if it were, it would mean the absence of the gospel. In the New Testament, the spiritual contrast is between light (good, gospel) and darkness (bad, opposition to the gospel) more than black and white. But black is related to darkness in the sixth seal. There the sun was darkened, becoming black (Greek: *melas*) like sackcloth (Rev 6:12). The sun is a symbol for Jesus Christ (John 8:12; 9:5), the Word of God (Psa 119:105) and the gospel (John 3:18-21), so an eclipse of the sun would mean the absence of the gospel (see also Matt 4:16; Luke 1:79; John 1:5; Acts 26:18; 1 John 1:5). This coheres also with Deuteronomy 28:28-29, where darkness is a result of disobedience to the covenant (see Deut 28:15). In Revelation generally the color white is associated with Jesus, the people of God, or the gospel (Rev 1:14; 2:17; 3:4-5; 7:14). I would conclude, therefore, that the horse here is black to symbolize the absence of the gospel.

“And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and the one sitting on it had a **scale for weighing** in his hand.” In the New Testament, the root meaning of the word for scale (Greek: *zupon*) is "yoke," a means to couple things together as in harnessing more than one animal for a task; a yoke of cattle (Num 19:2; Deut 21:3). As such, the word could be used to express unified action in the performance of a task (Zeph 3:9). More often, it is used for the load or burden a person

carries (Matt 11:29-30) or the servitude that a conquering nation imposes on another (LXX 2 Chr 10:1-14; Isa 9:3; 10:27; 14:25, 29; LXX Jer 35:14 [28:14 in Hebrew and English]; Ezek 34:27). It can also refer to slavery at the personal level, where one person is in bondage to another (Gen 27:40; Acts 15:10; 1 Tim 6:1).

But a very common meaning of yoke came to refer to the cross piece of a scale or balances which would be used to weigh items for sale in the market (LXX Prov 20:23; Hos 12:8 [12:7 in Hebrew and English]) or for other purposes (Ezek 5:1). Cheating in such matters was frowned upon (Prov 11:1; 16:1; Ezek 45:10; Amos 8:5).

“And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and the one sitting on it had a **scale for weighing** in his hand.” Ancient scales had a central fulcrum piece, the crossbar (the “yoke” part), and chains attached from each end of the crossbar to a hanging dish. If you put a certified amount of weight into one dish of the scale, you can assess the weight of amounts in the other dish. In this verse, the root word reflects the scale's crossbar, but in connection with weights refers to the entire device.

One meaning of the “scale” (Greek: *zugos*) in biblical times was as an indication of rising prices (Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the NT*). The more an item is worth the more precisely you will measure the amount being bought or sold. Naturally, in times of scarcity, prices rise (Ezek 4:16). Generally, this meaning would not be limited to food items, but in the third seal there is a close association between prices and food. The scale in combination with the next verse expresses famine conditions (Lev 26:26; Ezek 4:16). This is not a catastrophic famine, food is available, it is just relatively scarce and the prices are rising. In the context of covenant curses, the black horse represents the famine portion of the curse, as in sword, famine and pestilence. But scales and weighing can also be used in a spiritual sense, a sense of judgment. Belshazzar was told that he was “weighed in the balances and found wanting” (Daniel 5:27). Job wants his character to be weighed before God (Job 31:6, see also Psalm 62:9).

Rev 6:6—“And I heard, as it were, **a voice in the middle 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 the wine.’” It is not the voice of one of the four living creatures, but as is very often the case in Revelation (Rev 10:4, 8; 11; 11:1; 9:13; 11:12; 12:10; 14:2, etc.), the origin of the voice here is not defined. We only know that the sound comes out from a spot in the midst of the four living creatures (for the relation of the four living creatures to the throne, see comments on Revelation 4:6). So this must be a voice from the throne of Revelation 5. That means it is either the voice of the Lamb or the voice of the one sitting on the throne. Either way, the statement in this verse is a divine command.

“And I heard, as it were, a voice in the middle 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 the **wine**.’” There are two parts to this statement. The first part is a proclamation regarding the price or value of wheat and barley respectively. The second requires that the wine and the oil should not be harmed. Every climate is conducive to certain crops and not hospitable to others. The three main crops of Palestine in ancient times were grains, grapes and olives, often summarized as “grain, new wine, and oil” (Deut 7:13, NIV. See also Deuteronomy 11:14, 28:51,

Psalms 104:14-15, Hosea 2:8, 22 and Joel 1:10). Wheat and barley were the two most common grains. Grapes could be eaten as fruit, but were more commonly processed into juice or wine. Olives could also be eaten directly, used to flavor other foods, or processed into oil for cooking and for flavor.

“A quart of **wheat** for a denarius and three quarts of **barley** for a denarius. . .” The weather in Palestine divides into two major seasons, the dry season that centers on summer (mid-year in northern hemisphere) and the rainy season that centers on winter (beginning of year in northern hemisphere). Because of the climate, grains in Palestine were planted in fall, grown over the winter, and harvested in spring. The Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month (September/October) came at the time of the year when the summer drought is usually ending. It is the time of the early rain, when the grain, which depends on the winter rains for growth and development, is planted. The time of Passover comes at the close of the rainy season, the time of the latter rain which ripens and matures the grain. So the time after Passover is the time to harvest the grain. Grains could be toasted and eaten whole, cooked into porridge or ground into flour for the making of bread and cakes. It was the basic staple of the ancient diet.

“A quart of wheat for a **denarius** and three quarts of barley for a **denarius**. . .” The denarius (Greek: *dénarion*) was a small Roman coin made of silver that in New Testament times was considered the equivalent of a day’s wage for a soldier and somewhat more than a day’s wage for a peasant laborer (In Matthew 20:1-16 the landowner boasts of his generosity). A quart of wheat is about the amount of food a person could eat in a day. So this famine is so bad that it would cost a person their whole day’s wage to buy enough wheat to live on, they could feed themselves but not their family. If a person bought the less desirable grain, barley, they could get three quarts for a day’s wage and feed a total of three people, but larger families would go hungry unless other members of the family could also earn some “bread.” So the text portrays a time of deep scarcity, but not absolute starvation.

According to Mounce, a denarius per quart was about ten times the normal cost of wheat at that time. So the imagery of the third seal is that of famine, a serious shortage of grain. The sequence of “sword, famine and pestilence” (in seals two through four) is the language of a siege. First there is a battle outside a city, then comes the siege, with its accompanying famine inside the city, followed by contagious disease. So the third horse describes the middle stage of the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 and parallels in the Old Testament.

“ . . . do not harm the **oil** and the **wine**.” Palestine is not blessed with an overabundance of rain. In average years, there is barely enough for the needs of farming. Even during the rainy season, it is sunny 50% of the time. Drier years can quickly cause an agricultural crisis. The “early rain” during Tabernacles fills the empty cisterns in Palestine, enabling life to be freed from the constant concern over the shortage of water.

It is also the time to harvest the fruits of vine and tree, whose deep roots enable them to survive the summer drought. Although the summer drought is severe (rarely rains from April through September), dew mitigates the drought sufficiently so that the fruits trees and the grape vines can survive. If the fruit were grown on a winter cycle, the occasional frost in Palestine would damage the fruit, so the summer cycle works fairly well in spite of the dryness.

Grapes and olives are pressed and preserved as wine and olive oil. Since shallow-rooted staples, not the deep-rooted luxuries, would be more affected by a drought, perhaps the imagery of the third seal describes a drought in its initial stages.

In the New Testament, oil is involved in recovery from illness (Mark 6:13; James 5:14). In 2 Kings 4:1-7, an abundance of oil was leveraged to eliminate scarcity in other food items, so the presence of oil here means that the hope of restoration and recovery is still there.

“. . . do not harm the *oil* and the *wine*.” The voice from the throne of God mitigates the earlier judgment, saying, "Though there is a shortage of grain, don't hurt the oil and the wine." The voice limits the power of the black horse to do harm. It underlines the fact that God is not the author of evil and suffering, but He is intimately involved with the affairs of earth, limiting the power of calamity and evil. It is natural for people to blame God whenever things go wrong on this earth, but the reality is that without God's restraint, calamities on this earth would be much worse. Because God respects human freedom, He allows the cumulative consequences of sin and rebellion to wreak their havoc. But His love compels Him to limit those consequences as far as possible within the restraints imposed by the cosmic conflict (see the story of Job as an illustration).

The bread made from grain would be the staple food and the oil and wine are luxuries. Oil helps the bread to slide down better and we still like it on our salads today. Wine and fresh fruits were like a garnish. Back in ancient times, desserts would be fruit and the products of fruit. In this famine, the staples are in short supply but the luxuries are still there.

The area of the seven churches has prime agricultural land for producing grain, wine and oil even to this day. Ironically, in the time of Emperor Domitian (according to David Aune) farmers in the area discovered that they could make more money producing luxury foods (like wine and oil) for export to Rome than staple grains that would be sold locally. So farmers converted their fields from grains to fruits to enhance their bottom lines. The result was that the poorer classes in Asia began to starve because this practice drove up grain prices in the region. The Emperor Domitian himself had to intervene, requiring a balance of food production in Asia for the sake of the people. If the Book of Revelation was written in the time of Domitian, as most scholars believe, this text would be building on a contemporary crisis situation among the seven churches.

Rev 6:5-6—There is evidence in the third seal that we are to understand the imagery of famine and drought in a spiritual or symbolic sense. The Greek for "do not hurt. . ." (*mê adikêsês*) is used elsewhere in Revelation for judgments on evildoers (Rev 7:2-3; 9:4, 10, and 19) or the persecution of God's people (Rev 11:5 or 22:11). Throughout the Bible food in abundance is also used in a spiritual sense (Psa 23:4-5; Luke 10:34). So the words of Amos 8:11-12 (NIV) seem particularly appropriate to the third horse: "'The days are coming,' declares the Sovereign LORD, 'when I will send a famine through the land--not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it.'" In Amos there is a famine for the Word of God.

As is the case of the first two seals, therefore, there is a spiritual tone to the hurting taking place in this seal. If the black horse is seen as the opposite of the white horse, the passage is describing a spiritual famine, a famine for God's word--the bread of life (Matt 4:4; 13:23; Luke 8:11) and also for Jesus Himself (John 6:35). Since the oil (Matthew 25:1-13—perhaps representing the Holy Spirit--the flaming fire of spiritual life) and wine (Matthew 26:27-28; Mark 14:24-25; Luke 22:20—the blood of Christ and the Eucharist) are symbols of God's grace, the famine in the third seal is not spiritually fatal because, serious as the famine is, the symbols of God's grace are still available. This is the early stage of a spiritual famine, but not the final outcome of resistance and rebellion. That would be described in 7:1-3.

The third seal depicts a time when the word of God may be hard to find or poorly understood, yet the gospel, the offer of grace and mercy, is still in place. As I write it seems that we live in just such a time. I can't think of any time in history when people had greater access to the Bible. It is printed in multiplied millions of copies every year, it is available free all over the internet and in free apps for smart phones and tablets. We live at a time when people have more access to the Bible than ever before, but with less actual knowledge of the Bible. As life becomes busier, people spend less and less time wrestling with the word of God. The message of the third seal is both sobering and spiritually encouraging. The third seal is not the final rebellion of the human race against God and His Word. Restraint is still there and the gospel is still available. But without effort to study and understand God's revelation, people will continue in spiritual decline.

Rev 6:7—"And when he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, 'Come!'" The fourth seal is distinguished from the first three in the use of "voice" (Greek: *phônên*) here. The first three living creatures are introduced simply with "I heard one of (the second, the third) living creature(s). . ." (Rev 6:1, 3, 5). But the "voice" of the fourth living creature is specifically noted in the text (Rev 6:7). This seal is distinct in character somehow, perhaps in the fact that the consequences it describes combine the worst features of the first three and more. The word "saying" (Greek: *legontos*) is neuter singular, which agrees with living creature rather than "voice." It is the living creature that is speaking, not a disembodied voice.

"And when he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of **the fourth living creature** saying, 'Come!'" The fourth living creature had the face of an eagle (or a vulture, the Greek *aetos* can apply to either). The northern tribes of Israel, led by Dan, had an eagle/vulture on their standard. If an eagle is in view here, it would lend itself to the image of sudden disaster. An eagle in flight was anciently associated with judgment. The presence of the eagle is not perceived until it is too late to avoid the disaster. On the other hand, an eagle's care for its young can represent God's gentle care for His people (Deut 32:11).

Vultures, in contrast, feed on animal carcasses, especially in drought conditions. They symbolize death even in our society today. The vulture is not the cause of the disaster like the eagle is, but is the outcome and evidence that disaster has occurred. In the context of the fourth seal, the disaster image would point to the more negative side of the eagle or the vulture as the primary image. Those who do not embrace the gospel suffer increasing consequences

until they are finally subject to either the destruction of the eagle or the death that brings the vulture.

Rev 6:8—“And I saw, and behold, **a pale horse**, and the one sitting upon it was named Death, and Hades followed after him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with the sword, with famine, with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth.” The adjective “pale” is an attempt to translate the Greek “*chlôros*” (from which we get the word chlorine). Chlorine is a gas with a sickly, yellow-green color and the word, in ancient times, was used to describe the appearance of a very sick person. In Thucydides, for example, it was used to describe a person stricken with the plague. If you met a person whose face was the color of chlorine today, you would think that they were very sick and probably on the verge of death. The word was also used by Homer to describe a fearful face. On the other hand, there are contexts in which the Greek word *chlôros* denotes the bright greenish-yellow of young plants and so conveys freshness and life (Mark 6:39; Rev 8:7; 9:4). But when applied to human beings, the meaning in the context of young plants is not in view. That, combined with the larger context of covenant curses, makes it clear that the negative meaning of *chlôros* is intended here.

“And I saw, and behold, **a pale horse**. . .” The fourth horse of Zechariah 6:3 is described in the Hebrew both as dappled or speckled (adjective of the Hebrew *barôd*) and flesh-colored (adjective of the Hebrew *amôtz*). In the LXX the two words used to describe this horse mean variegated or diverse (Greek: *tolkiloî*) and dappled or speckled (Greek: *psaroi*). The Greek of the horse in Zechariah does not seem related to the *chlôros* of the fourth seal, but the Hebrew for “flesh-colored” could possibly have been in John’s mind. The Cambridge Bible suggests that *amôtz* could apply to the color of the bare skin of a mangy horse. Regardless, it seems clear that the color of the horse in the fourth seal is intended to indicate a diseased state rather than a healthy one.

Since the color red more naturally symbolizes the death that comes from violence or war, the pale color more naturally symbolizes the death that comes from famine and contagious disease, as seems to be the context here.

“And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and the one sitting upon it **was named Death**. . .” The fourth horseman is the only one that is named. As it says in verse eight, “(the rider’s) name is ‘Death’” (Greek: *onoma autô ho thanatos*). He is death personified, a not infrequent feature in the Bible (Psa 49:14; Isa 28:15; Jer 9:21; Rom 5:14; 1 Cor 15:25-26). Gill speculates that from this one name, we can determine the names of the other three riders. He suggests that the first is Truth, the second War, and the third Famine. The name “Death” would include the previous two. Be that as it may, the word for “death” appears twice in this verse. The second time it a part of the trio; sword, famine, and “death” (KJV-- Greek: *thanatô*—translated as “pestilence” in the ESV, NASB, RSV and NRSV and “plague” in the NIV). So in some contexts the Greek for death can also be translated as plague or pestilence (Exod 5:3; 9:3; 1 Kings 8:37; 2 Chr 20:9; Jer 18:21; Ezek 5:17; 28:23), things that result in death. In the Old Testament, pestilence is frequently associated with sword and famine (Jer 14:12; 21:7; 24:10; 44:13; Ezek 6:11, 12; 5:12) as is the case here. In Ezekiel 14:21, wild beasts are added to the list. Of the first four seals, the

fourth is the darkest and most terrible, it gathers up into one the awfulness of the previous seals.

"Hades followed after him. . ." Hades (Greek: *hadês*) is the Greek equivalent of Sheol (Hebrew: *she'ol*), the place where the dead are buried (compare the Hebrew and LXX of Job 17:13; 26:6; Prov 1:12; 15:11; 27:20; 30:16; Isa 5:14; 14:9). In the Hebrew world view *Sheol*, the Hebrew equivalent of Hades (Hebrew: *she'ol*, LXX: *hadês*) is the underworld, the dwelling place of the dead. That makes it the rough equivalent of the grave, it is not in itself understood as a place of punishment. In the Old Testament world, with a couple of clear exceptions (Isaiah 26:19; Dan 12:2-3), those who go down into *Sheol* do not return from there (Job 7:7-10; 14:7-12). Sheol is at times, however, personified in the Old Testament (Prov 27:20; Isa 5:14; 14:9).

Naturally, in human experience, after death comes the grave. The English word "hell" is not grounded in the Hebrew concept of Hades, but rather Gehenna, the place of burning outside Jerusalem. The grave in the fourth seal is personified just as much as death is. Personifying Hades recalls the Greek god Hades, who had the key of the grave and prevented all from leaving. In other Greek traditions it was the goddess Hekate (see comments on Rev 1:18) who had the key to the gates of Hades. Christians in the first century would, likely, see personified death and Hades as demonic powers seeking to destroy the human race. This personified pair appears in two other places in the book of Revelation to describe the very extinction of life (Rev 1:18; 20:14).

This horse depicts plague or pestilence--the contagious, deadly disease that destroys people in large quantities. Fortunately, this horse is not described as "going out" (Greek: *exêlthen*), as were the first and the second horses (Rev 6:2, 4). The rider is not roaming around the world spreading death and pestilence everywhere. It is placed here as more of a threat. The Greek for ". . .was following close behind him. . ." (*êkolouthei*), which some understand in terms of motion, is not so much describing Hades as going anyplace, it is more like "accompanying." Death and Hades are not in motion, they are being seen together. Hades is presented as ready to collect the victims of the fourth rider and imprison them in the grave, more like an undertaker than an executioner. The fourth horse intensifies the activity of the two previous horses, but their activity is more anticipated than a reality in the context of the fourth seal.

Looking at the other two contexts where death and Hades are mentioned together, we note first the words of Jesus: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." Rev 1:18, NIV. The message of Revelation 1:18 is that Jesus, not a Greek deity like Hades or Hekate, is in control of death and Hades. That means that Jesus has the power of resurrection. Those who go into the grave, He is able to bring out.

This text is very compatible with Revelation 6 if you understand the four riders as representing different roles of Jesus or as controlled by Jesus. Jesus is directly engaged in the opening of each seal and the things that occur as a result. He allows Death and Hades to assert their power on those in rebellion against God, but He also has the power to end their reign in the "second death." "Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death." Revelation 20:14. At the end of the millennium there will be a death for

death! Death itself will die! And along with death, the place of the dead will be thrown into the lake of fire.

As severe as the plagues of the fourth seal appear, the reader of Revelation comes to know that death and the grave are not the ultimate reality. They are under Jesus' control and will someday be abolished. All the images of the four horsemen; persecution, martyrdom, hardship; are portrayed as real in this life, but are nevertheless under His control and temporary. Revelation describes life as it is, but gives us hope in that reality. Those who believe in God will end up in a better world than the one we live in today.

“And they (Death and Hades) were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with the sword, with famine, with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth.” The phrase “they were given” (*edothê autois*) is a divine passive. The ancient Jews were reluctant to speak the name of God out of reverence. One way to avoid doing so was to use the passive to describe something God is doing. Jesus uses similar divine passives frequently in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:4, 6-7, 9). The assumption is that the agent of the passive action is God. God is portrayed as giving Death and Hades permission to do their work.

In the ultimate sense this means that God is not the author of death and suffering and does not desire that the human race suffer them. But out of respect for human freedom He allows human beings both choice and the consequences of their choices.

In the first four seals there is a strong focus on the consequences of human rebellion against God. These are the so-called curses of the covenant.

“And they (Death and Hades) were given **authority** over a fourth of the earth, to kill with the sword, with famine, with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth.” The ancient Greek word for authority (*exousia*) is sometimes translated as “power” (KJV, NIV, RSV), but most recent versions translate it as “authority” (ESV, NASB, NRSV). The word does not express ability so much as permission, or the right to act, which better fits what God is actually doing in these plagues. The core meaning of the word implies freedom of choice, the right to take action (John 10:18; Acts 5:4; Rom 9:21; 1 Cor 9:4-12; 2 Thess 3:9; Heb 13:10; Rev 13:5; 22:14). In an extended sense, the right to act implies also the power to act (Luke 10:19; Acts 8:19; Rev 9:19; 20:6), as in “governing authorities” (Luke 12:11; Rom 13:1-3). God created human beings with the power and freedom to think and act. But with that freedom comes the consequences of freedom. These plagues are not things that God desires nor are they things that He actually does. But out of respect for human freedom, God steps back and allows the human race to reap the consequences of its own decisions and actions.

“And they (Death and Hades) were given authority **over a fourth of the earth**, to kill with the sword, with famine, with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth.” Earth here does not represent the physical planet, it is focused on the world of human beings. The rider on the pale horse was given authority over a quarter of the earth’s people by God. This is a very large, but not majority, portion. While it is not stated in the previous three seals, the parallel with the “four winds at the four corners of the earth” of Revelation 7:1-3 suggests that each of the four horses has authority over a quarter of the earth. The significance of this comes into focus when we realize that the entities in the seven trumpets affect thirds of the earth, a theme we will explore in more detail later. For now it is enough to note that in Revelation Satan’s kingdom is

made up of three parts (Rev 16:19). That would suggest that the plagues of the trumpets affect portions (thirds) of Satan's kingdom on earth. While the phrase "those who live on the earth" is always negative in the book of Revelation (Rev 6:10; 8:13; 12:12; 13:8, etc.), earth by itself can have a positive role in the book (Rev 11:4; 12:16).

"And they (Death and Hades) were given authority **over a fourth of the earth**, to kill with the sword, with famine, with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth." The four horsemen are portrayed as affecting the whole human race in fourths, they divide it up among themselves. A fourth of the earth is the purview of the rider on the white horse. This is the domain of Christ's kingdom, an expression of the gospel going forth into the world. Horses two through four would then represent Satan's kingdom and the consequences experienced by those aligned with Satan's kingdom. Satan's kingdom is made up of people who have neglected or rejected the gospel (second seal), people who have lost all knowledge of God and His Word (third seal), and people who have become so much like Satan that nearly all hope seems extinguished (fourth seal). Seals two through four represent the escalating consequences of rejection of the gospel. These troubles are not a complete list of these consequences, they are a representative list based on the Old Testament curses of the covenant.

"And they (Death and Hades) were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to **kill with sword, with famine, with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth**." This seal sums up all the main covenant curses in the Old Testament (Ezek 14:12-21) and gathers together all the plagues of the four horsemen into one. As with the Old Testament (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 32, and Ezekiel 14), the judgments of God are here progressive, starting as wake-up calls that got more and more strident and severe as disobedience continues. In the fourth horse, everything that went wrong in the second and third horses is now intensified. The sword, famine, plague--and now even the beasts of the earth--are an intensification of the activities of the second and third horses. As noted earlier, this is the language of a siege, where loss in battle (the sword), leads to a siege with its accompanying famine, and finally death by contagious disease (pestilence). When the city is eventually destroyed, wild beasts take over and "clean up" the mess.

The fourth seal is the most serious threat of all--permanent exclusion from mercy. This portrays the worst spiritual condition in the whole book until you come to the description of Babylon in Revelation 18:1-3. It is a frightful time of consequence for people who have chosen to exclude themselves from God's presence. They are suffering spiritual pestilence--a disease of the soul.

"And they (Death and Hades) were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with famine, with **pestilence** and by the beasts of the earth." The word translated "pestilence" here (Greek: *thanatō*) is the same as the name of the rider on the pale horse. As noted earlier, in some contexts of the Greek Old Testament the Hebrew word for pestilence (*deber*) is translated with the Greek word for death (*thanatos*-- Exod 5:3; 9:3; 1 Kings 8:37; 2 Chr 20:9; Jer 18:21; Ezek 5:17; 28:23) more often than not (according to Barnes, some thirty out of fifty occurrences). With that meaning, therefore, it refers to contagious diseases that result in mass casualties, death. So while the same Greek word is used twice in this verse, its meaning

is different and it needs to be translated differently, as is the case with most recent translations (NASB, ESV, RSV, NIV, etc.).

“And they (Death and Hades) were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to **kill with sword, with famine, with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth.**” An interesting feature of this series is that the four agents of destruction are listed in the Greek without the article (*en romphaia kai en limô kai en thanatô kai hupo tôn theriôn tês gês*). Death and Hades do not kill with **the** sword, famine, pestilence and beasts. They kill “with sword, famine, etc.,” a general, abstract reference rather than specifically focused on these agents. They represent destructive power in general. The one difference within this series is that the first three express killing “with” (Greek: *en*), while the fourth uses killing “by” (Greek: *hupo*). One possibility is that the author of Revelation is using these prepositions interchangeably. His general lack of skill in the Greek language would support that. But if a distinction is intended, the “with” would represent association. Death occurs in the context of war, famine and pestilence. On the other hand, “by” suggests agency, the beasts of the earth are the actual agents of death.

“And they (Death and Hades) were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to **kill with sword, with famine, with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth.**” It is possible that this four part series was not only intended to point the readers to Old Testament covenant curses (Ezek 14:12-21), but also to Jesus’ Olivet Discourse, where he speaks of war, famine and earthquakes (Matt 24:6-13; Mark 13:7-8). In the Majority text of Matthew (basis for the KJV), the word “pestilence” (Greek: *loimoi*) is added, but it does not appear in the earliest and best manuscripts of Matthew. The word does appear in Luke 21:11, however, so readers of the four horsemen might well recall Luke’s listing here.

Rev 6:1-8 (Summary and Conclusion)—We have noticed a progression and escalation throughout the first four seals. The imagery is grounded in the blessings and curses of the Old Testament covenant, particularly the negative consequences of disobedience. We have understood the first horse to represent the gospel and the going forth of the kingdom of Christ. This is followed by division in relation to the gospel, where those who reject the gospel end up fighting each other, spiritually if not literally. Then you have a loss of attention to the Biblical text, to the point where people are no longer aware of its guidance; they go through life without the manual God gave to guide them. Finally there is decline, disease, and death. As you go from seal to seal the consequences get worse and worse. But there is evidence that the consequences listed here are not the ultimate end. This is not the close of human probation. These curses are not final, but are still intended to evoke repentance. But the condition is so serious that the ultimate outcome is clearly in view. It is a foretaste of the final close of probation but it is not the final thing.

How are the four horsemen as a whole intended to be read? How do we pull together the multiple strands of imagery and make coherent sense of it? We have concluded that the rider on the first (white) horse portrays the victorious gospel or the faithful church. By extension the white horse represents the spread of the gospel message throughout the world as a result of the Lamb breaking the seals and preparing to open the book he received in chapter five. The second (red) horse portrays opposition to that gospel and to Christ resulting in

dissent, division, strife, and persecution. The third (black) horse represents a spiritual famine for the Word of God and the fourth (pale) horse, spiritual pestilence and death. We will now summarize some of the main background concepts that seem to be in play as one reads the first four seals.

The images of the four horsemen are drawn from the Old Testament. War, famine and pestilence are often seen as a unit in the Old Testament, but they are not necessarily chronological there. The parts of the phrase "war, famine, and pestilence" are interchangeable in the OT and are not always listed in exactly that order. So while they could represent a chronological sequence in description of a siege, one or more in various orders could represent the whole as an expression of destruction. While "wild beasts" are an integral part of the sequence in Ezekiel 14:12-21, they are often missing in other parts of the OT. So one, two or three of these words can represent the whole and are often not in a particular order.

In the synoptic apocalypse as well, Jesus used these words interchangeably. He added earthquakes most of the time and usually left one or more of the items out. The OT and NT data leaves the impression that the four horsemen were not intended to present a fixed historical sequence as many commentators of the past have thought. The white horse is extremely continuous and on-going (Rev 6:2). The four horsemen represent a process as much as they represent a sequence. As noted earlier, the language of time passing is absent in the seals, while it is very present in the seven trumpets that follow.

It seems, therefore, that you can read these horses in an individual and spiritual sense as general realities in connection with the gospel. Wherever the gospel is preached, there is division between those who accept and those who reject it. Among those who continue to reject the gospel, there is famine for the Word of God and ultimately, spiritual pestilence. Read in this way, it is an ongoing process that can be observed in any age and in daily experience. In response to the gospel, people experience either increasing spiritual blessing or increasing spiritual decline. So the continuous, interchangeable nature of the imagery points to the general realities of the Christian age. Such a reading is very compatible with the rest of the New Testament and has particular affinity with the Olivet discourse of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21.

If the four horsemen represent the general realities of the Christian age, is there any room for a more traditional, historical reading of them? There appears to be evidence for such a reading as well. The four living creatures that surround the throne are never separated elsewhere in the book of Revelation. But here they act in sequence, one after the other. There is also the sense that they are not only fulfilled in the context of the first four seals, but that they have a renewed application at the end of time (Rev 7:1-3). The seals are not just a general description of the whole Christian age, they are heading somewhere. This calls for reading the four horsemen also in a chronological way, where the seals are opened one after another as if in a historical sequence.

The imagery of the four horsemen has some interesting parallels with the trend of history in the early centuries of Christian expansion. In the first century, there was an initial surge of the gospel throughout the world by the ministries of Paul, Peter and the other disciples of Jesus. In the centuries that followed, as the religion became more and more entangled with

political power and favored with social support, there was a progressive spiritual decline. Then in the Middle Ages, the faith was more about control of political power and accumulation of wealth than adherence to the gospel and the Scriptures. There was general ignorance of the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament. Those who loved the Scriptures were even persecuted in the name of Jesus. So the trend of Christian history would seem to fit fairly well with the imagery of these four horses as we have come to understand them.

If the seven seals are seen as a sequence of history, there is evidence in the text that the judgments of the four horses are preliminary and partial rather than final. As we have seen, the first two horses go out into the world but the last two do not, they are simply seen. They are more of a threat than a reality. The ultimate threat, the full-blown final outworking of the realities described in the horses is seen as yet future in the text (Rev 7:1). It is in chapter seven that we see the great final proclamation of the gospel to the world. When the work of the gospel is complete and God's people are sealed on their foreheads, the world experiences the final unleashing of the four horses including the close of human probation and the gathering of God's end-time people, represented by the 144,000 (Rev 7:4-8) and the Great Multitude (Rev 7:9-14). So there is a clear sense of sequence in the seven seals, qualified by the sense that the sequence is also applicable in a general way. Just as the Olivet discourse calls for a dual fulfillment in the course of history, so also the seven seals should not be limited to a single apocalyptic line of fulfillment.

Rev 6:1-8 (Spiritual Lessons)—A spiritual lesson or two emerges from the study of the four horsemen. First of all, the passage suggests that spiritual health depends on regular engagement with God's word. Famine for the word of God brings about everything that is unhealthy in a spiritual life. What we noted in the seals is also detectable in human experience. When the Word of God is neglected, spiritual life declines. Over time, one's very capacity to understand and benefit from a reading of the Scriptures diminishes. There is a "hermeneutical circle" in which ignorance of the Word leads to lessening presence of the Holy Spirit and lessening presence of the Spirit reduces interest in the Word. The two declines feed off each other until famine in the midst of plenty (wide availability of the Bible) becomes a reality. Unless feeding on God's word is a central reality of our lives, its meaning and value will tend to diminish.

A second spiritual lesson from the four horses resides in the overall picture of Revelation five and six. The gospel is not about human striving, but about a generous gift that comes to us from the throne in heaven. The gospel does not come to us on the basis of human effort or worthiness, it is a free gift from a powerful but gracious God. It is not a reward to be earned but a gift to be received.

One of the clearest signs of the absence of the gospel can be seen in today's world; low self-esteem (when people feel that they are not worth much). The gospel tells us that we are worth a great deal because Jesus not only loves us but was willing to die for us. As the Creator His value is equal to the whole universe, yet He would have died for just one. That means everyone "for whom Christ died" (Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11) is worth the whole universe to God. The value human beings perceive in their possessions, performance and human relationships

pales in comparison. We are accepted in the work that Christ has done and this acceptance from One who is entirely worthy has a tremendous effect on our self-esteem. We are valued by God and will never be forsaken.

In contrast with the value human beings have as a result of the gospel are the consequences of ignoring God's word and rejecting the gospel. There is decline, pestilence, and famine--all graphic images of everyday life that have spiritual implications. The implication is that our own choices can increasingly remove us from spiritual influence until we reach a state where we can no longer perceive it. Even if Jesus does not return in our lifetimes, the gospel appeal will not be available forever and death and Hades will follow after. It will eventually be too late to respond. If the message of the four horsemen is appealing today, this is the best time to respond to it.

A student went to a rabbi and asked, "When should I get right with God?"

The rabbi answered, "You need to get right with God the day before you die."

The student then asked, "When will I die?"

The rabbi wisely replied, "No one knows. Therefore, the Scriptures say, "Today if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts."

Rev 6:9-11 (Introduction)—We might expect that the fifth seal would continue along the lines of the previous four. But instead there are significant differences. There are three major aspects of the first four seals that are completely missing in the fifth. 1) The most dramatic aspect of the first four seals is the use of horses and riders. 2) There is use of personification, as in the role of Death and Hades. 3) The four living creatures play an important role, inviting the horses and their riders to “come.” The absence of these three characteristics in the fifth seal is striking and signals a shift of emphasis. Furthermore, the voices heard in the first four seals are heavenly ones; the voices of the four living creatures and a voice from the “midst of the throne” (Rev 6:6). The voices heard in the fifth and sixth seals are the voices of suffering humanity; the cries of the persecuted saints (Rev 6:10) and the anguish of the wicked as they contemplate the approaching wrath of the Lamb (Rev 6:16-17). There are no voices at all in the seventh seal (Rev 8:1).

What is added in the fifth seal, in contrast with the first four, is a strong sense of future judgment. The souls under the altar are encouraged to wait. The fulfillment of their cry for judgment and vengeance is not at the time of the fifth seal but reserved for a time in the future. The first four seals were more descriptive, although the fact that the third and fourth horses did not go out indicates that they will have a second, more final fulfillment in association with the events of chapter seven. The first four seals, as we have seen, portray the general realities of the whole Christian age, seals five through seven clearly anticipate the End. This underlines the sense that while many of the seals can apply to any age, there is an overall progression in the time.

In the words of Bengel, the fifth seal concerns those who have died well, namely the martyrs. The sixth seal, in contrast, concerns those who have died or will die badly. Like the four horsemen, there is a natural contrast between the two outcomes that encourages the reader to commit to the side that will win in the end.

The first four seals, therefore, are distinguished from the seals that follow. The 4-3 sequence is parallel to the seven trumpets, where the first four trumpets are shorter and affect nature while the last three trumpets are longer and affect the human race. In a sense, the appropriate description is a 4-2-1 sequence, since in both the seals and the trumpets there is an interlude after the sixth element (Rev 7:1-17; 10:1 – 11:14). The sixth seal and trumpet focuses on the experience of those in rebellion against God, while the interludes focus on the people of God. The seventh seal is distinguished from the first six by its extreme brevity and the total absence of voices (“silence in heaven”—Rev 8:1). The first six trumpets focus on earth, but the seventh trumpet is located in heaven (Rev 11:15-18).

While the seven churches are divided into a 4-3 grouping through the traditional chapter divisions, in actuality, the seven churches are divided into a 3-4 sequence. In the first three churches the promises to the overcomer follow the “he who has an ear” statement (Rev 2:7, 11, 17) while in the last four churches the order of these two elements is reversed, the last four messages end with a “he who has an ear” statement (Rev 2:26-29; 3:5-6, 12-13, 21-22). Since the original Greek texts of the New Testament do not include chapter and verse divisions, the text itself must be allowed to indicate its own structure.

Why the shift after the third church? In the first three churches the faithful ones are in the majority, in the last four the faithful ones are in the minority. In the first three churches, the call to listen to the Spirit was directed to the whole church and followed by a promise to the overcomer. But in churches four to seven, the call follows the promise and is directed only to the faithful who remain. In other words, the main body is considered incapable of repentance, as was the case with Jezebel. See comments on Rev 2:29.

Rev 6:9—“And when he opened the fifth seal, *I saw under the altar* the souls of those who had been slaughtered on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony which they had maintained.” Clearly this is symbolic imagery. First of all, souls “under the altar.” There were two altars in the sanctuary: 1) the altar of burnt offering was outside the temple in the center of the courtyard, where the smoke and incense from the sacrifices would rise over the city and 2) the altar of incense was inside the temple structure and priests would take incense from the altar of burnt offering inside to minister with it there. Both altars were involved with the daily service (Hebrew: *tamid*) in the temple complex.

The temple and tabernacle buildings were models of heavenly realities. The altar of incense was, therefore, located in the heavenly portion of the sanctuary. The outer court, on the other hand, represents activities on earth (like the cross and the baptism of Jesus). Which altar is in view here? The answer helps determine whether the “souls” being portrayed here are in heaven or on earth.

The identity of the second altar of Revelation 8:3-4 is obvious. It is the incense altar in the Holy Place of the sanctuary. The altar in this verse is less obvious, at least on a first reading. The crucial element in determining the identity of the altar is the fact that the “souls” are “under” or “beneath” (Greek: *hupokatô*) the altar in the text. Of the two biblical options, only the burnt offering altar has anything significant taking place at its base. The blood of the animal sacrifices was drained into a basin and poured out at the base of the Altar of Burnt Offering

(Exod 29:12—LXX: *ekcheeis*; Lev 9:9—LXX: *execheen*, see also Exod 39:39; 40:29; Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 10, 34, etc.).

Since the Altar of Burnt Offering was the place where sins were forgiven, it makes sense that the souls would be depicted as taking refuge there. Through the “pouring out” the death of the martyrs is here equated with the sacrifices in the sanctuary. As the Altar of Burnt Offering represents the sacrifice of Christ at the cross, the death of the martyrs, by this image, is elevated to a very high status. While their blood is not yet avenged, their sacrifice is hereby vindicated in advance of the End. The Jews of the time had a saying that everyone who is buried in the land of Israel is as if he were buried under the altar. So this image would be understood as reflecting burial on earth rather than some kind of spirit existence in heaven.

In Revelation 16:6 the same word for “pouring out” is used to describe the martyrdom of the saints and prophets. “For they have poured out (Greek: *exechean*) the blood of saints and prophets, so you have given them blood to drink, for they are worthy.” Many modern translations use the English “shed” instead of “poured out” (ESV, NIV, RSV, NRSV), which masks the connection Greek readers would have readily made between the fifth seal and Revelation 16:6. Ancients considered blood to be the source of life (Lev 17:11), since they noticed that when the blood is poured out, the animal or person containing that blood dies. The blood of Abel is also described as crying out to God from the ground (Gen 4:10). So the images of “blood crying out” and “souls under the altar” are symbols of martyrdom. This passage assures the reader that while martyrdom may seem a total loss in earthly terms, it is seen from the heavenly perspective as a triumph, a sacrificial offering made to God.

Why is martyrdom connected with the sanctuary service here? It is perhaps an echo of the language of Jesus in John 16:2, NIV: “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service (Greek: *latreian*) to God.” The Greek word *latreian* was applied originally to the Passover sacrifices (Exod 12:21-27—the word *latreian* is used in the LXX in verses 25 and 26, often translated “service” or “rite”) and by extension to the sacrificial worship activities of the priests in the Hebrew sanctuary and temple (Josh 22:27). According to Jesus, those who will martyr the disciples and their followers will think that this act of murder is as pleasing to God as the sacrifices in the sanctuary, when they were rightly performed. So connecting martyrdom with the sanctuary has a place in New Testament thought. Paul echoes this idea with a different Greek word in 2 Timothy 4:6, where he describes his impending death as being poured out (Greek: *spendomai*) like a drink offering (see also Philippians 2:17).

“I saw under the altar **the souls**. . .” A casual reading of this text could lead to the impression that the souls under the altar were disembodied souls literally crying out to God from some repository in heaven. The text may even have contributed to the popular belief that a person goes to heaven in a bodiless state when they die. But in light of the above, the martyred souls are not in heaven. The Altar of Burnt Offering represents events in the life of Jesus that happened on the earth. This is the language of symbolism. The souls under the altar crying out to God represent God’s consciousness of the martyrdom of His saints, just as He was fully conscious of the meaning of Abel’s blood on the ground when He was talking with Cain (Gen 4:1-15). Persecution and martyrdom of people who have been faithful to God is unfair and

that injustice is stored up in the consciousness of God for exposure and appropriate compensation in the judgment.

"I saw under the altar **the souls**. . ." God's judgment in favor of the souls under the altar is further portrayed in Revelation 20:4, when the martyrs come to life at the beginning of the thousand years. "And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded **because of the testimony of Jesus and the word of God**. These did not worship the beast or his image, neither did they receive the mark upon their forehead or upon their hand. And they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." Revelation 20:4 echoes the language of Revelation 6:9-10. The faithful dead of the fifth seal are in God's care but unconscious of the events going on around them. God notes that the injustices cry out for both a judgment and an avenging of that judgment. This judgment is carried out in Revelation 20:4 where the martyrs are resurrected and vindicated. It is also reflected in Revelation 19:1-2.

"I saw under the altar **the souls**. . ." John is described as seeing "souls" (Greek: *psuchas*) under the altar. How could he "see" the souls? In Revelation things are described for the ear more than the eye. Artists have always had great difficulty drawing or painting the images of Revelation. These images were designed to be heard more than seen. John does not see with his physical eye here, he is seeing in the Spirit with a prophetic, visionary eye.

In Greek philosophy, human beings were bi-partite, made up of a physical body and an immaterial soul. In their view, when a person dies, it is the body that dies and disintegrates into nothing. The soul lives on in a disembodied state. But in the biblical context the human being is a unity. The soul is the living combination of God's breath, or life principle and the material body (Gen 2:7). In other words, human beings do not **have** souls, they **are** souls. In light of the biblical context, therefore, this passage is not attempting to depict disembodied souls in the Greek sense, but portraying in symbol God's remembrance of whole persons who died for their faith. The identity of these whole persons is being reserved in His plan for the resurrection day, when God's memory of a person will be re-united with a real body, resulting once again in a living soul.

"I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been **slaughtered on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony** which they had maintained." The word for slain or slaughtered here (Greek: *esphagmenôn*) is used elsewhere in the Book of Revelation for the death of Christ (Rev 5:6; 13:8). In the Greek Old Testament (LXX) it is the primary verb used in connection with sacrifice and the sanctuary service (several dozen times: Exod 29:11, 16, 20; 34:25; Lev 1:5, 11; 3:2, 8, 11; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33, etc.). The choice of this word here further underlines the connection between the martyred saints, the sanctuary and the death of Christ.

The terms "word of God" and "the testimony which they had maintained" indicate that the souls under the altar died because they were faithful to the gospel proclamation. These terms are used earlier in relation to the revelation John received (Rev 1:2) and the reason John himself was on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9). Like John, the souls under the altar were persecuted for their testimony.

Rev 6:10--"And they *cried out with a loud voice* saying, "How long, O Lord, the Holy and True One, do you not judge and avenge our blood on those who live on the earth?" The loud voice clearly comes from the souls under the altar ("they"), rather than from heaven, as was the case with the voices in the first four seals. They cry out to God (Greek: ekraxan). In Genesis it was not Abel, but Abel's blood that cried out, making it clear that Abel himself was not conscious. While the blood of Abel did not cry out audibly (Gen 4:10), and a different Greek word is used for the "crying out" (LXX: *boa*—see also Matt 3:3; Mark 15:34; Luke 18:7; John 1:23), the Abel story would still seem a helpful thematic connection. The souls under the altar do not need to be conscious in order to "cry out" in a figurative manner. In both Genesis and Revelation murder has occurred, God reads the situation, and responds accordingly.

"And they cried out with a loud voice saying, "How long, O Lord, . . ." The phrase "How long, O Lord" is a cry that has a long history in the Old Testament. It was used repeatedly around the time of the first destruction of Jerusalem (586 BC). For example (all quotations from the NIV):

"How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? How long will your jealousy burn like fire? Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the kingdoms that do not call on your name. . . . Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Before our eyes, make known among the nations that you avenge the out poured blood of your servants." Psalm 79:5-6 and 10. And another Psalm: "How long will the wicked, O LORD, how long will the wicked be jubilant?" Psalm 94:3.

Perhaps the classic example can be found in Habakkuk 1:2: "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?"

A slightly different formulation of the "how long" phrase can be found in apocalyptic prophecy: "How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled-- the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?" Dan 8:13. Consider also Daniel 12:6-7: "How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled-- the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?"

A passage that may be especially relevant to Revelation 6 is Zechariah 1:12: "Then the angel of the LORD said, 'LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?'" The Zechariah passage not only contains the "how long" formula, but it also includes four colored horses, making it the most likely candidate for a direct allusion in the fifth seal. Not only so, but in verse 13 of Zechariah 1 Yahweh responds with "comforting words," much as is implied in the fifth seal where the souls under the altar are given white robes and encouraged to rest a little longer.

Jesus tells a rather humorous parable that may also be relevant to the cry of the souls under the altar. In Luke 18:2-5 He says, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering

me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming." The context of this parable is prayer, as is the case in the fifth seal. In both cases there is a persistent outcry for justice that is answered eventually.

"How long, O Lord, . . ." The phrase "how long?" (Greek: *eôs pote*) actually means "until when." Until when, Lord, will You be not judging and not avenging? According to Revelation 6, the same cry that has often been repeated in Old Testament times will be appropriate again sometime in John's future. "How long?" is a cry of protest over persecution. It's a trial like the O.J. Simpson trial where he was acquitted (fair or unfair) but they are innocent and not acquitted. They are innocent but counted as guilty. So, they cry out, "how long?" The wrongs of the past that were seemingly forgotten or ignored by God are here brought loudly to attention. This passage is filled with figures of speech, but it is not fiction. It addressed one of the most painful realities of human existence. People suffer and God seems to be silent. But it will not always be so.

"How long, O Lord, . . ." The term "Lord" in this text is not the usual one (Greek: *kurios*) applied to Yahweh in the Old Testament and to both God the Father and Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The Greek word here, instead, is the one from which we get the English word "despot" (Greek: *despotês*). In biblical times it meant master or owner, the "lord" of the manor. This is the only time the word is used in the book of Revelation. The use of this word with reference to God focuses more on His power than on His right to rule or style of leadership. See, for example, the references to God in Luke 2:29 and Acts 4:24 and of Christ in 2 Peter 2:1.

It is not clear in this text whether the statement is addressed to God (the One sitting on the throne) or to Christ (the Lamb). In the four horsemen, it is the Lamb that is primarily in view. In the sixth seal, the cries of the lost are directed to both the One sitting on the throne and the Lamb. The voice from the midst of the throne in the third seal is likewise ambiguous.

Elsewhere in Revelation references to God or Christ as "Lord" always use the Greek *kurios*, which is so often used for Yahweh in the LXX (Greek OT). The use of *despotês* here is the natural counterpart to "fellow servants" (Greek: *sundouloi*—Rev 6:11). But while the language of servants is frequently used for the people of God elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6), this is the only place where "Master" (*despotês*) is used, so the sense of lord and master is particularly in view here. The word *despotês* may be parallel to the Hebrew term *Adonai*, which Jews often use in place of Yahweh, even today.

"How long, O Lord, *the Holy and True One*. . ." This combination of "holy" (Greek: *hagios*) and "true" (Greek: *alênthinos*) recalls Jesus' self-introduction to the church at Philadelphia (Rev 3:7). This may indicate that the Lamb is the one to whom this cry is directed rather than the one sitting on the throne. Now that the Davidic Messiah (Rev 5:5) has come and has restored to Himself the throne of earth that Satan had usurped, God's people naturally assume that things on earth will change as a result. So the cry is particularly poignant if directed toward Jesus Christ.

Christ is called holy in Acts 2:27, 13:35 and in Hebrews 7:26, although a different word is used (Greek: *hosios*). That word when applied to humans means devout or pleasing to God (1 Tim 2:8; Tit 1:8), but in Revelation it is applied directly to God in Revelation 15:4 and 16:5. God is truly "set apart" or different from all else. The word in Revelation 6:10, on the other hand, is

hagios, which means set apart by God, and is thus a bit surprising in this context, but a more appropriate choice for Christ than the Father. Nevertheless, other evidence suggests the phrase could be a reference to God the Father. See comments on Revelation 3:7.

“How long, O Lord, **the Holy and True One**. . .” The word for true (Greek: *alēthinos*) means genuine, representing the perfect realization of an idea. In this there is a strong contrast between God and the creatures He has made. God represents the genuine and perfect reflection of the ideal that is only imperfectly represented in humans. For example, while Moses gave the Israelites bread, Jesus is the **true** bread (John 6:31-32). While Israel was the vine of God’s planting (Psa 80:8; Isa 5:1-7) Christ is the **true** vine (John 15:1). In the New Testament this word is mostly found in the writings of John.

“How long, O Lord, the Holy and True One, do you not **judge and avenge**. . .” The word translated “avenge” here (Greek: *ekdikeis*) does not necessarily have the violent overtones of the English word vengeance. It is a law court term that means legal protection, which can sometimes involve incarceration or execution for oppressors. It is not so much about revenge as it is about legal justice. In the parable of Luke 18, the widow is asking the judge for legal protection (Luke 18:3-5, see also Rev 19:2). The souls under the altar did not get legal protection while they were alive, they were bewildered by God’s silence in the face of injustice, so they are depicted as seeking this wrong to be made right in the judgment. They have been judged guilty in a lower court and now seek vindication in a higher court. Unspoken here is the fact that the martyrdom of the saints calls God’s character into question as well (see Job 1 and 2). The judgment will not only vindicate the saints but also the character of God Himself (Rev 15:3-4).

“Vengeance” in the most negative sense is appropriate only to God (Isa 63:4; Rom 12:19) because He is far more likely than humans to understand the full context in which a crime has been committed and to act not in the way that human passion might dictate, but in a way that redeems rather than exacerbates a situation, that brings about the most beneficial solution for all concerned.

“How long, O Lord, the Holy and True One, do you not judge and avenge **our blood on those who live on the earth?**” Consistently in the book of Revelation “those who live on the earth” represents those in opposition to God and His faithful saints (Rev 1:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:2). They are not only hostile to God but are often found persecuting those in relationship with God. Of the other uses of this phrase in Revelation, 8:13 stands out in this context. The seven trumpets fall on “those who live on the earth,” which indicates that the trumpets are, in some sense, a response to the prayers of the souls under the altar for judgment and vengeance. In contrast with this phrase, the faithful saints of God are depicted as “those who live in heaven” (Rev 13:6) and serve in royal and priestly roles (Rev 1:6; 5:9-10).

Rev 6:10 (Excursus on The Problem of Vengeance)-- Many are troubled by the implication that here the people of God in some sense are calling on God for vengeance, seemingly contrary to the example of Stephen (Acts 7:60) and Jesus Christ Himself (Luke 23:34). But the reader needs to keep in mind that it is not the slain ones themselves who are calling for vengeance, any more than it was Abel himself who cried out to God from the ground (Gen 4:10). In both cases these

are figures of speech, intended to communicate that neither God nor the universe sits idly by in the face of abuse, genocide or oppression.

As with the story of Job, suffering on this earth often occurs in the context of God's seeming silence and the people of God are not encouraged by Scripture to be silent, but to ask the hard questions just as Job did. Readers of the New Testament have the example of Christ, who suffered deeply and died in the face of God's silence (Matt 27:46). There is no indication in the text that Christ received any answer to his question of why God had "forsaken" Him. But His answer was received at the resurrection, when God's silence ended and the full stance of God was revealed. God's silence in the face of the injustice of the cross was not an indication that God did not care, but as with Job, there were larger issues that mandated that silence for a time.

The martyrdoms of the souls under the altar are here also met with relative silence. The martyrs don't receive a clear answer to their question of how long or until when God will confront their injustice with silence, nor do they learn what God will do when the time is past. They are simply told to wait, to rest where they are until God acts to vindicate them. These figures of speech communicate that even though God seems silent in the face of injustice, injustice is never overlooked in heaven. Injustice and oppression tear a hole in the fabric of the universe and they tear a hole in the heart of God. The silence and the waiting are as costly to God as they are to the faithful ones on earth. And the lesson of Revelation 6 is that God's silence will not last forever. The fifth seal is not the end of the story. God can be trusted to set things right on the judgment day if not sooner.

It is important for the reader of the fifth seal to know that the cries of the martyrs receive a further answer in the book in at least three different places, 8:3-4, 19:1-2 and 20:4. The first of these places is in the introduction to the seven trumpets. Revelation 8:3-4 depicts the "prayers of the saints" rising up before God like incense. There are two altars in that passage. Verse three says that "another angel" (other than the seven trumpet angels of 8:2) stood "upon the altar" (Greek: *epi tou thusiasteriou*) holding a golden censer for which much incense is given to him. The fact that a definite article is used here indicates that the reader has seen this altar before and that would be in 6:9-11. The only altar in the Hebrew sanctuary or temple that one could stand on ("upon"—Greek: *epi*) was the Altar of Burnt Offering. So the first altar in 8:3 refers the reader back to the altar in the fifth seal.

The second altar in Revelation 8:3 is the golden altar that is before the throne (the Ark of the Covenant in the earthly model of the sanctuary). The "altar of incense" was located near the curtain that separated the Holy and Most Holy places of the tabernacle. So of all the elements of the tabernacle outside the Most Holy Place the Altar of Incense was closest to the "throne." This was the place where the prayers of the saints and the accompanying incense were ministered (8:4). So Revelation 8:3-4 are reminiscent of the daily service (Hebrew: *tamid*) in the sanctuary, which involved a sacrifice at the outer altar, incense mingled with coals from that altar are placed in a censer (firepan), and then the priest carries the censer into the sanctuary/temple to minister that incense on the Altar of Incense before the Ark. The final act of the daily service is when the priest throws down the censer to the floor of the outer court. In

chapter eight, the incense offering is followed by the throwing down of the censer, which results in dramatic events on earth in the context of the seven trumpets being blown (8:5-6).

Revelation 8:13 indicates that the seven trumpets involve a response from God to the prayers of the saints for vengeance against “those who live on the earth” (8:13, cf. 6:10), the very ones who martyred the “soul under the altar” in the fifth seal. In other words, the seven trumpets are judgments of God on those who have been oppressing and abusing His people. The seven trumpets indicate that God is not silent forever in the face of His peoples’ suffering. He is acting already in the course of human history. See comments on Rev 8:3-4 and on the seven trumpets as a whole for elaboration of these points.

A second extended answer to the cries of the souls under the altar is found in Revelation 19:1-2. There are at least a half dozen major words in common between Revelation 6:9-11 and 19:1-2. One could say that there is a clear allusion to the fifth seal in 19:1-2. That passage is in the context of the Fall of Babylon (chapter 18—see the similar wording in verse 20—God has judged Babylon for the way she treated the saints) and the wedding banquet of the Lamb (19:7-8). So the response of 19:1-2 to the prayers of the saints in the fifth seal has to do with the dethroning of Babylon and the vindication of the saints in the context of the end of earth’s history. The souls under the altar are encouraged to rest a little longer until everything is made right at the end.

In the fifth seal the souls under the altar are asking, “How long, O Lord will you be *not* judging (Greek: *ou krineis*) and *not* avenging (Greek: *ou ekdikeis*) our blood on those who live on the earth?” A direct answer to this question is given in Revelation 19:1-2. A great multitude is praising God because He “has judged” (Greek: *ekrinen*) the Great Prostitute and “has avenged” (Greek: *exedikêsen*) the blood of His servants at her hand. In the fifth seal the souls under the altar complain that God is “not judging” and “not avenging” (present tense) their blood. But in Revelation 19:2 God “has judged” and “has avenged” (aorist indicative) their blood. In the fifth seal the judging and avenging haven’t happened yet. In chapter 19 the judging and avenging are already in the past (probably referring to chapters 17 and 18). So what the souls under the altar call for in the fifth seal has already occurred in chapter 19. God’s relative silence in the fifth seal is replaced with a loud shout of triumph on the part of those who have witnessed the Fall of Babylon and the vindication of the blood of God’s servants. See comments on Revelation 19:1-2 for details about the verbal, thematic and structural parallels that connect the fifth seal with chapter 19. God’s active response to the prayers of the saints occurs between the fifth seal and the song of chapter 19. That song celebrates the outcome of the many events in the latter part of the book of Revelation.

A third extended answer to the cries of the souls under the altar in the fifth seal is found in Revelation 20:4. There the “souls” of those who had been beheaded because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus are resurrected (“came back to life”—Greek: *ezêsan*—see comments on Revelation 20:4) at the beginning of the millennium. The language of 20:4 clearly alludes back to the language of the fifth seal. While the language of 20:4 is limited to those “beheaded” in the context of the Mark of the Beast (end-time), the connection with the fifth seal shows that this limited group is representative of the martyrs throughout history, just as the souls under the altar are connected to the martyrs which follow. The ultimate vindication of

the martyrs occurs at the resurrection of the righteous, who then join in the reign of Christ for a thousand years (cf. Rev 3:21).

The studies in this Excursus have shown that the cry of the martyrs in the fifth seal must not be read in isolation. God does not maintain relative silence toward their questions throughout the book of Revelation. Instead, He answers these cries at least four times: in the passage itself, in the seven trumpets (8:3-4, 13), at the Fall of Babylon (19:1-2) and at the resurrection of the righteous (20:4). The relative silence of God occurs in specific contexts in the course of human history. But in the larger picture God answers all the questions and does so in a way that meets the approval of the very ones who suffered (Rev 19:1-3, cf. 15:3-4). If anything, their response indicates that in the End God will even exceed their expectations.

If God were to answer the souls' prayers for vengeance in this text, what would that vengeance look like when exercised by God? How does God's vengeance square with a text like Matthew 5:44, ESV ("Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you")? Is God saying in Matthew 5:44, "Do as I say, not as I do?" It seems to me that the case can be made that God acts with judgment and vengeance for two reasons and two reasons only. One, to get the attention of people who are in rebellion or extreme forgetfulness, and two, to deliver His people from unjust treatment. God's response to the cry in this verse would be the second category. God's vengeance would not arise out of "an impatient thirst for blood revenge" (Expositor's Greek New Testament), but in order to limit the power that evil humans and systems have to hurt His faithful people on earth. And the best part about God's vengeance is that it is like the "coals of fire" in Romans 12, it can lead to the transformation of person upon whom God takes vengeance. God knows the full history and motivation of oppressors and deals with them in the most constructive way possible.

Rev 6:11—"And each of them was given **a white robe** and was told that they should rest yet a little while, until their fellow servants and brothers, who are about to be killed as they were, should be made complete." A white robe (singular—Greek: *leukê stolê*) was given to "each of them" (Greek: *ekastô*). The *stolê* is a long, flowing robe (Luke 15:22; 20:46) which is also worn by angels in the New Testament (Mark 16:5). The giving of a white robe is not a collective process, it is given to each martyr individually. Since a white robe in Scripture represents acceptance with God (just as sealing often does—Eph 1:13; 4:30; 2 Tim 2:19), this image reflects something that occurs after each person's death but before the resurrection of the righteous at the end of history. The martyrs were judged negatively in earthly courts, but after their death they are vindicated in a higher court. Though the cry of verse ten for judgment and vindication is not fulfilled on earth immediately, they are assured that their cries will be answered in God's timing.

"And each of them was given **a white robe** . . ." The white robes given to each of these martyrs is the assurance that they will be accepted in the judgment at the end of time (Matt 22:11-12; Rev 3:4-5; 7:9; 19:7-8; 20:4-6). It is the robe of righteousness (Rev 19:7-8; Isa 61:10). Regarding the color white, see comments on Revelation 6:2. While earthly courts have judged them negatively, no further negative judgment awaits them in the heavenly court. While the redeemed are saved by grace, they are nevertheless judged by their works. The actions of the

righteous (Rev 19:7-8) are the evidence that they have truly grasped the gospel and their lives have been changed. They are safe to include in the joyous fellowship of the unfallen universe. A major reason for the final judgment is to provide such assurance to those who have never fallen away from God (see below).

“And each of them was given a white robe and was told that they should **rest yet a little while. . .**” The word translated “rest” here (Greek: *anapausôntai*) is a verbal noun (Greek participle). In the middle form (between active and passive) it means to stop or cease whatever you are doing, to relax or in this case become and then remain quiet. The participle is future, which means that at the time of the vision the souls are not quiet, they are actively crying out. So the future indicative here functions like an imperative. They are commanded or encouraged to relax and become quiet. The use of “rest” here is in stark contrast to Revelation 4:8, where the four living creatures do not “rest” (Greek: *anapausin*) day or night in their crying out, “holy, holy, holy.” It is also paralleled in chapter 14, where those who have died in the Lord “rest” (Greek: *anapausôntai*) from their labors (see also Isaiah 57:1-2), while the worshipers of the beast have no rest (Greek: *anapausin*) day nor night.

While resting a little while implies the assurance of salvation (as in Rev 14:13), in this context it also means to cease their cries for vengeance. Whether or not God seems to be listening, in the earthly sense, they are assured that God is very much paying attention to their concerns, there is no further need to get His attention to the injustices. While it may appear that God is not listening or acting, the book of Revelation reveals that God is already dealing with these issues within history (seven trumpets) and will deal with them decisively at the end of history (Rev 19:1-2; 20:4). See Rev 6:10 (Excursus on the Problem of Vengeance) for more detail on the previous sentence. The phrase “little while” (Greek: *chronon mikron*) occurs again in Revelation 20:3, where Satan is loosed from his chains in the Abyss at the end of the millennium for a short time (Greek: *mikron chronon*). The period before the Second Coming is always described as short in Revelation (1:1, 3 and 12:12, see also Hag 2:6-7 and Dan 12:13, where Daniel is told to rest—LXX: *anapauou*). The time on this earth is considered “little” in comparison with eternity. While the message here is addressed to the martyrs, it is given for the encouragement of readers who may yet be facing the opposition and cruelty of “those who live on the earth” (6:10).

“And each of them was given a white robe and was told that they should rest yet a little while, **until their fellow servants and brothers, who are about to be killed as they were, should be made complete.**” What are the souls under the altar supposed to be waiting for? Many translations add the word “number” to the verse, although it is missing in the Greek text of Revelation 6:11 (ESV, NIV, NASB, RSV, NRSV). The KJV does not do this and the NASB helpfully puts “the number of” in italics, acknowledging that it is adding something to the original. There are two reasons that translations do this. First, the Greek of verse 11 is somewhat awkward without the addition. Second, this translation is supported by the Jewish apocalyptic tradition that history will continue until a set number of martyrs is attained. The delay of the Messiah’s advent is due to the fact that the full number of martyrs has not yet occurred. But, in fact, the addition has no basis in the text itself. It is not the number to be killed that was to be made complete, but the fellow servants and brothers themselves, who were to be made complete. So

the text, as it stands, is puzzling. An Excursus follows, briefly exploring parallel texts to this one in Jewish apocalyptic.

Rev 6:11 (Excursus on the Number of Martyrs in Jewish Apocalyptic)-- A brief survey of relevant texts in Jewish apocalyptic will help us understand why so many translators add “the number of” to the text. The most relevant parallel is probably the one in 1 Enoch (often called Ethiopic Enoch) 47:1-4, where the prayer of the righteous and the blood of the righteous ascend from the earth to the “Lord of the Spirits” (47:1). The holy ones in heaven praise God because “the blood of the righteous has been poured out” (47:2). This strange reason for rejoicing is later explained: “the Holy Ones were full of joy that the number of righteousness had been reached, and the prayer of the righteous had been heard” (47:4). All this occurs in the context of the final judgment (47:3). So the Enoch account mentions prayers and blood of the martyrs ascending to heaven at the time of judgment. Now that “the number of righteousness” has been reached, the time has come for justice to happen to the martyrs (47:2). This idea is echoed in 4 Ezra 2:39-41, where God is waiting for a certain number of faithful ones before the End. The similarities with Revelation 6:9-11 are obvious. If Revelation is simply repeating a Jewish concept here, adding “the number of” to the text completes the meaning.

4 Ezra, written around the time of Revelation, speaks of “evil seed” that was sown in the heart of Adam and resulted in a harvest of great wickedness “without number” (4:30-32). When Ezra asks how and when the full harvest of evil will happen (4:33-35) he is told: “Even when the number of seeds is filled in you: for he hath weighed the world in the balance” (4:36) and “he doth not move nor stir them, until the said measure be fulfilled” (4:37). The implication is that a certain amount of evil is anticipated in the course of history and when that amount of evil is fulfilled God will intervene. Applying this idea to the fifth seal, God would be waiting for a certain amount of evil, namely the killing of the saints, before intervening.

In the Ascension of Isaiah, chapter 9, the prophet is raised to the seventh heaven and sees all the righteous from the time of Adam (9:6-7). They were wearing the garments of heaven but were not sitting on thrones or wearing crowns (9:9-10), which the seer had expected. It is explained to him that they will not receive crowns or thrones until the Messiah comes down, is crucified on a tree, is raised on the third day, and ascends to heaven (9:13-17). While the latter verses are clearly a Christian rewriting of a Jewish book, the current form of the writing preserves the ancient idea of a middle state where rewards are determined for the dead, but not yet awarded in reality. This seems quite parallel with the fifth seal.

In the Apocalypse of Baruch (23:4-5) it says that after sin and death came into the world through Adam, the total number of those who would be born was determined. Those who died before that number is reached would not live again until the full number is completed. The dead would be kept and guarded in Sheol until that time would come. Later on in the book (30:2), those who have “fallen asleep” in the hope of the Messiah arise from the “treasuries” where they were preserved until Messiah’s coming. This reinforces the idea of a middle state

where the righteous dead are assured of resurrection but have not yet experienced it. But the idea of a fixed number of births (rather than evil or martyrs) is not reflected in the fifth seal.

Rev 6:11--While Jewish apocalyptic speaks of a number of the righteous or a number of those to be born, Revelation uses many of these ideas to speak about the Christian martyrs. Since many aspects of these apocalyptic traditions are adopted in the fifth seal, translators have often assumed that the idea of a "full number" of martyrs is also intended in this text. But it seems odd for John to have meant that without actually writing it out. He goes on in Revelation 7:9-14 to indicate that no one will be able to number those who come through the great tribulation, so the number does not seem to be important to him. And it seems also a strange picture of God as someone who arbitrarily decrees that there will be a fixed number of martyrs in the course of history and refuses to intervene in history until that number of martyrs has been completed. While this was Ezra's explanation of why the end had been delayed, it is not a satisfying explanation and seems to diminish the character of God. So while the text of Revelation 6:11 is clearly awkward without "the number of" being added, there is another way to read the text that doesn't put God in a bad light.

"Until their fellow servants and brothers, who are about to be killed as they were, should be made complete. . ." Are the "fellow servants" and "brothers" two different groups or two different ways of describing the same group? It depends on the meaning of the word "and" (Greek: *kai*). It can mean "in addition to," distinguishing the servants from the brothers, or it can mean "namely," the two designations refer to the same group under different names. The grammar of the Greek can go either way. Servants and brothers are mentioned together again in Revelation 19:10 and 22:9. There they refer to John and his fellow prophets, distinct for the purpose of the angel and yet essentially part of the same group. So these later references do not settle the matter either.

"Until their fellow servants and brothers, who are about to be killed as they were, should be made complete. . ." Here the fellow servants and brothers can refer to the same persons but in two aspects. The faithful followers of the Lamb are often described in Revelation as servants (Rev 1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 10:7; 11:18, etc.), but they are also part of His family. So the same individuals can be described in both ways. In such a reading, both the servants and the brothers are about to be killed as the souls under the altar had been. The other possibility is that "fellow servants" refers to all the faithful followers of the Lamb, but the brothers refers specifically to those who will be killed like those martyrs who had preceded them. Either way the meaning of the text is essentially the same. The use of "servants" here, of course, relates back to the word "master" (Rev 6:10—"Lord"—Greek: *despotês*) in the previous verse.

"Until their fellow servants and brothers, who are about to be killed as they were, **should be made complete.** . ." The key to the meaning of verse 11, then, seems to be in the main verb, translated above as "made complete" (Greek: *plêrôthôsin*). The answer to the "how long" question (6:10) awaits a making complete. Other ways that *plêroô* (dictionary form of

plêrôthôsin) could be translated are “to fulfill,” “to make full,” “to fill up,” or “to bring to completion.” In the New Testament people can be filled with powers or qualities (as in filled with the Spirit—Acts 2:4; Eph 5:18) or a period of time can be fulfilled (Mark 1:15, etc.). The word also implies “finishing the course” (Acts 13:25). In applying the word to this text, the question needs to be answered: Is it the number of martyrs that needs to be completed or should we simply take the text as it reads? Taken as the text reads, the souls under the altar are told to rest or wait until their fellow servants and brothers are “made complete.” In the latter case, what needs to be completed is not their death, but their life.

“Until their fellow servants and brothers, who are about to be killed as they were, **should be made complete**. . .” The Greek word translated “should be made complete” (*plêrôthôsin*) is an aorist passive subjunctive, so the servants and brothers are not completing something themselves, rather something in or about them is completed by an outside agent, presumably God. The aorist subjunctive can function like a future tense, indicating that the action of the verb has not happened at the time indicated in the sentence. As noted above, it could mean that the fellow servants and brothers have finished or completed the course that God set out for them, as in Acts 13:25, where John the Baptist is described as “finishing his race or course” (Greek: *eplêrou ton dromon*), which would be an athletic metaphor. The absence of the word “race” or “course” (Greek: *ho dromos*) in Revelation 6:11 makes this meaning unlikely here. Some commentators suggest that the servants and brothers must “finish their testimony” (Rev 6:9), but that would work best with the active form of *plêroô* (to complete, rather than to be completed or to be made complete) rather than the passive.

There is another possibility for understanding this text that is hinted at in the KJV translation: “Until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.” Stefanovic suggests that this reading of the text is a reference to character. Faithfulness even in the face of death (Rev 12:11) encourages and reflects deep development of character. This is supported by other texts in Revelation. In Revelation 7:13-14 those dressed in white robes (Greek: *tas stolas tas leukas*) have washed them and made them white in the context of great tribulation. In Revelation 19:7-8 the attire of the Lamb’s bride is defined as the “righteous actions of the saints.” The saints need to be made complete in character, just as the previous martyrs had been made complete in character (cf. Rev 12:11). So the ultimate answer to the prayers of the saints is joyous presence with God and with the fellow servants and brothers in eternity.

In this reading of the verse, God tolerates the suffering of His saints, not because of some arbitrary number He “pulled out of a hat,” but because suffering is the context in which important things happen in their character. God is looking for a people who will be willingly loyal “though the heavens fall.” Such individuals may not be perfect in an absolute, mathematical sense, but they are completely loyal to God as David apparently was in spite of his many flaws (1 Kings 11:4-6). God chooses to win the cosmic conflict not through force but through persuasion. The end-time saints are loyal to God not because they have to be, but

because they truly want to be. In the context of the cosmic conflict, such individuals would be “safe to save” for eternity. They will help ensure that Lucifer’s rebellion will not arise a second time (Nah 1:9).

In this passage, Revelation builds on a popular understanding within the Judaism of the time. But Revelation does not echo that understanding, it transforms that understanding in a Christian context with a different picture of God. The God of the New Testament is not arbitrary, cruel, judgmental and severe, as was the picture of paganism and some Jews. The God of the New Testament is, in the words of Graham Maxwell, “Infinitely powerful, yet equally gracious.” This is manifest particularly at the cross, where God takes non-violence to the extreme of allowing His own creatures to nail Him to a cross, without exercising His power to defend Himself. This is a God who prizes freedom above arbitrary rules and decrees, a God whose ways ultimately prove to be both fair and true (Rev 15:3-4). God answers the cry for vengeance, not with more violence, but with redeeming displays of His character, inviting the free response of His creatures. To the degree that God has employed violence in the course of history, it is either to wake people up or to save His faithful ones from harm.

Rev 6:9-11 (Conclusion)—As noted earlier, Revelation 6 has a strong structural parallel to the Synoptic Apocalypse (Matt 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21). In Jesus’ Olivet Discourse, the description of persecution follows the description of natural disasters (for example, Matt 24:6-8, followed by 24:9-13, 21-22), in Revelation 6 it precedes them (the fifth seal before the sixth seal). This supports the idea that the first five seals are not limited to events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, but cover the whole Christian era. The fifth seal comes at a later point in time than the four horsemen. But, it is also before the final time of earth’s history--the pre-advent judgment is just beginning.

If the dead know nothing (Eccl 9:5), what is the point of the imagery of giving white robes to the dead? It is a symbolic representation of the pre-advent judgment where God will judge the cases of everyone who ever lived before the End to ratify the appropriate reward. The giving of white robes portrays the verdict regarding the cases of the martyrs in the pre-advent judgment. In the sequence of Revelation 6, that judgment happens a little before the End. In the biblical context it makes no sense to suggest that the righteous dead go directly to heaven or the wicked dead go directly to hell, because the judgment has not yet taken place at that time. It is at the time of the pre-advent judgment that the saved condition of the righteous dead is verified and their loyalty to God vindicated.

The cries of the souls under the altar are featured as the beginning of a pre-advent judgement. This is a later point in time than that of the four horsemen. But, it is also before the final era of earth’s history, with its cosmic signs (6:12-14), so when the fifth seal begins, the final judgment has not yet begun. But that final judgment does not begin at the Second Coming, it commences before that time, it is a pre-advent judgment. At the time of the pre-advent judgment, decisions are made in heaven in relation to the dead, but the full execution of judgment, both positive and negative, is yet in the future.

In Adventist parlance, this verse describes the “judgment of the dead” that occurs before the Second Advent of Christ beginning in the year 1844 (based on calculations related to

Daniel 8 and 9, a specific date is implied in Acts 17:31). The primary purpose of this “investigative judgment” is not to satisfy God as to the final status of the dead (such accounting is already clear to Him), but to accomplish two other things. One is to allow the unfallen beings in the heavenly realm to examine how God dealt with each human being on earth and thus vindicate His character against satanic charges that God is arbitrary, judgmental or severe. The second purpose is to vindicate the character of the saved, so that the unfallen beings can rest assured that the neighborhood won’t be ruined when the saved of earth move in (John 14:1-3). While the judgment of the dead, therefore, covers a significant period of time, the judgment of the living is fairly brief, paralleling the final proclamation of the gospel to the world (Matt 24:14; Rev 14:6-7), leading up to the close of human probation just before the return of Jesus.

One thing the fifth seal does not address is a final “judgment of the living.” That is an emphasis in the second half of the book of Revelation. The final judgment of the living would, by definition, occur in the context of the final proclamation of the gospel to the world (Matt 24:14; Rev 10:6-7), “the hour of God’s judgment” (Rev 14:6-7). As the end-time gospel proclamation goes forth, people on earth are making their decisions for or against. The heavenly judgment ratifies those decisions in real time. This final judgment is not an arbitrary action on God’s part. The judgment does not render a different decision than the ones made by the final hearers of the gospel. It ratifies decisions as they are made on earth (John 12:48). In the context of the seals, the judgment of the living would be at the time of the sixth seal, and its negative outcome is featured in 6:15-17. The positive outcome is portrayed in 7:1-3 and following. These two groups of people on the earth can be seen also in the first five seals. In the four horses, we see a gathering of people who more and more resist the gospel, and in the fifth seal we see a gathering of those who are faithful to God no matter the circumstances.

To summarize from a historical perspective, there are two stages in the fifth seal. The early part of the seal is after the time of the four horses but before the time of the final judgment. The fifth seal opens after the pestilence of the fourth horse is seen and moves to the time when judgment would begin. The giving of the white robes portrays the beginning of the pre-advent judgment, but comes before the judgment of the living (Rev 14:6-7; 18:1-8). If the fourth seal portrays the darkest time of the Middle Ages, the fifth seal falls between the Middle Ages and the pre-advent judgment. The pre-advent judgment ushers in the final period of earth’s history, which is outlined in symbol in the sixth seal, to which we now turn.

Rev 6:12-17 (Introduction)— The sixth seal is double the length of the fifth, which is the second longest of the seven seals. There is the immediate sense in the passage that it does not concern ordinary events in the course of human history, it rather describes events that approach the end of earth's history. So the sixth seal is the climax of a progression that begins with the proclamation of the gospel after the ascension of Jesus and ends with the dramatic events of the end-time.

The passage divides naturally into two parts (Rev 6:12-14 and 15-17). The first part (6:12-14) focuses on dramatic natural events, both on earth and in the heavens. The second part (6:15-17) focuses on both the leaders and followers of the human race who are in opposition to God. The climax of the seal is the great day of wrath. It appears to those in

opposition to God that few if any will be able to “stand” (Greek: *stathênai*) in that day, in other words, to be justified or acquitted in the great heavenly law court. See comments on Rev 6:17.

Everything in this seal is part of a vision, thus we should not assume that it is a literal description of detailed events on earth, any more than the four horses or the souls under the altar should be taken as a literal description. Certainly if stars, as we know them scientifically today, were to fall to earth, life as we know it on earth would no longer be possible, yet people in the latter part of the seal are still very much alive.

Neither should we assume that the images in the seal have no direct relationship to reality. For example, there are many strong parallels here with Jesus’ Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24. Jesus there speaks about wars, rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes in various places (Matt 24:6-7), without any hint that these are not to be taken literally. As we will see when we get to the exegesis of the verses themselves, there is evidence in the grammar of the Greek that parts, at least, of this seal are to be taken literally.

In Matthew 24 earthquakes follow on after wars and famines, they do so in the seven seals as well. And the description of the sixth seal bears a striking resemblance to Matthew 24:29-30. “Immediately after the distress of those days “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”” Matthew 24:29, NIV.

That sixth seal ends with verse 17 and does not include chapter 7 is evidenced by the first verse of chapter 7, “after this I saw” (Greek: *meta touto eidon*). This phrase, when it appears, always introduces a new section in the book (see also Rev 4:1; 7:9; 15:5; 18:1). So chapter 7 is often described as an “interlude” between the sixth and the seventh seal. Instead of focusing on opponents of God and His people (as in 6:15-17), chapter 7 addresses the people of God in the end-time in the form of two groups, the 144,000 and the great multitude. On the other hand, chapter 7 is not totally disconnected from the sixth seal, the two groups in it are the natural answer to the question at the end of chapter 6, “Who shall be able to stand?” So there is a sense in which chapter 7 is part of the sixth seal and a sense in which it is not.

Rev 6:12-14 (Introduction)—The sixth seal begins with a series of images based on the Old Testament. There are multiple allusions to passages describing “the Day of the Lord,” the great final judgment of earth’s history. Day of the Lord imagery is particularly centered in the prophets (Isaiah to Malachi) and can be found in relation to the Exodus (Ezekiel 32), the fall of Israel (Amos 8), the fall of Judah (Jer 4:23-27), and the destruction of the enemies of God’s people (Isa 34:4; 13:10-13; Nah 3:12; Ezek 38:19-20). The images contained in these and other passages help build the picture of cosmic catastrophe painted in Revelation 6. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Day of the Lord imagery is used in relation to the cross of Christ and at Pentecost, where Peter preaches from a day of the Lord passage, Joel 2 (in Acts 2). Day of the Lord language also occurs frequently in passages related to the second coming of Jesus. The presence of Day of the Lord language in the sixth seal is supportive of the sense that with this seal the reader is approaching the end of earth’s history.

Day of the Lord imagery is not unrelated to the curses of the covenant that played such a prominent role in the first four seals. One of the consequences of rejecting or ignoring God is

that in the End people face the results of the final executive judgment described in these Day of the Lord passages. The Day of the Lord is the full and final expression of the curses of the covenant. Even nature itself begins to disintegrate under the weight of human rebellion.

Are the heavenly signs in verses 12-14 a single event or a series of events that occur one after another? The answer to this question is important in Seventh-day Adventist thought, because the Adventist pioneers understood many of these things as events in their past that could be described and dated. For them the “great earthquake” at the beginning of verse 12 was fulfilled by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which awakened in the Western world a desire to study the prophecies of Scripture. The darkening of the sun and the moon turning to blood (latter half of verse 12) were fulfilled in the Dark Day of May 19, 1780, wherein much of New England and eastern Canada experienced nighttime levels of darkness in the middle of the day followed by a blood-red moon that night (likely due to massive forest fires in Western Canada). The falling of the stars in verse 13 was understood to be fulfilled in the massive Leonid shower on the night of November 12-13, 1833. The Adventist pioneers understood the catastrophic events of verse 14 to be in their future, associated with the very final events of earth’s history. Such a reading of this text would place nearly 200 years (at the time I am writing) into the period at the end of verse 13. Is there anything in this passage (6:12-14) that allows for such a sequential reading?

The two earthquakes in the text of Revelation 6:12-14 offer evidence that the heavenly events of this passage are in sequence, they do not occur all at once. The first earthquake is specifically called “a great earthquake” (Greek: *seismos megas*). There is a parallel to this earthquake in Revelation 11:13. The earthquake that strikes the great city is an exact parallel; “a great earthquake” (Greek: *seismos megas*). While this event occurs toward the end of history, in the timeline of the book, it is before the close of probation, which comes at the sounding of the seventh trumpet (Rev 11:15, cf. 10:7). So this earthquake is a great one, but it is before the End, it is not the final cataclysm of history.

The second earthquake in the sixth seal is so great that “every mountain and island was removed from its place” (Rev 6:14, ESV—Greek: *pan oros kai nêsos ek tôn topôn autôn ekinêthêsan*). This earthquake has its parallel in Revelation 16:18, which is the greatest in all history, and during which “every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found” (Rev 16:20, ESV—Greek: *pasa nêsos ephugen kai orê oux eurethêsan*). The parallel between 6:14 and 16:18-20 is extensive and self-evident. The passage of Revelation 6:12-14 begins with a great earthquake and ends with a far greater earthquake that completely alters the surface of the earth. So Revelation 6:12-14 is sequential, beginning before the close of human probation and ending with the final cataclysm described in the seven bowl-plague. So the heavenly signs of this passage are sequential and they are not all in the context of the end of history the way they are with Matthew 24:29-31. So the Adventist pioneers understanding of Revelation 6:12-13 as applying to a series of events from 1755 to 1833, does not contradict the language of the text in its larger context.

One further question needs to be answered before we get into the details of the passage. Are the sun, moon and stars of this passage to be taken literally or are they symbols of spiritual realities? The evidence of the first five seals would suggest that the primary meaning of

the text is found in symbols, like the four living creatures and the four horses. This is in harmony with the opening declaration of the book in 1:1, that the vision was “signified” (Greek: *esêmanen*), a symbolic description of things that would happen in John’s future. But there is a grammatical feature of Revelation 6:12-14 that points to a more literal reading of sun, moon and stars.

The two earthquakes in this passage are separated by four heavenly signs: the sun turns black, the moon turns red, the stars fall, and heaven itself splits up. Each of these images is described with a grammatical indicator that these heavenly signs are intended to be literal here. In the Greek, there is a repeated use of the Greek simile *hôs* (usually translated into English with “as” or “like”—see ESV and NIV). The sun became black “as” or “like” (Greek: *hôs*) sackcloth. The moon became “like” (*hôs*) blood, the stars fell to the earth like (*hôs*) figs fall from a tree blown by the wind, the heavens split “like” (*hôs*) a rolled up scroll. In typical Greek the word *hôs* compares something literal with something figurative. That suggests that in this passage the sun, moon, stars, and sky are to be taken literally, but something happens to them that can be described figuratively. This observation is compatible with the pioneer Adventist understanding of this passage. If their observations are taken seriously, the events of verses 12 and 13 have already occurred in our past, and the events of verse 14 are still future.

Rev 6:12-- “And I saw, when he opened the sixth seal, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black like sackcloth of hair, and the whole moon became like blood. . .” The phrase “and I saw” (Greek: *kai eidon*) generally indicates a new section in the book of Revelation (Rev 5:1; 6:1; 8:2; 10:1). In Judaism at that time, earthquakes were frequently listed as among the “messianic woes,” signs of the imminent coming of the Messiah. In Matthew 24:7 earthquakes are listed after famines and pestilences (pestilences are listed in many manuscripts but may not be original). In Luke 21:9-11 they are listed after wars, but before famines and pestilences. So these “signs” generally seem interchangeable in terms of their order. In the seven seals, the earthquakes of the sixth seal come after war, famine, pestilence and persecution. The chronology of these events in the seven seals seems more intentionally sequential. Here earthquakes are associated with signs in the sun, moon and stars, which are eschatological in Matthew 24 and parallels (Matt 24:29-31 and Luke 21:25-28). But in the Synoptic Gospels, the wars, famines and earthquakes are not listed with the end-time events (Matt 24:6-8; Luke 21:7-11).

“There was a great earthquake. . .” In the Old Testament, earthquakes are often associated with God’s presence (Exod 19:20) or the special dealings of God with human beings (Joel 2:10; Nah 1:5). Earthquakes can also be metaphors for God’s spiritual activity in the future or in the past (Isa 29:6; Hab 2:6-7; Heb 12:26-28). Earthquakes are associated with God’s activity at the End (Isa 24:19-21). At least three literal earthquakes are referenced in the Bible. An earthquake was experienced by Elijah on the mountain (1 Kings 19:11). An earthquake during the reign of Uzziah is mentioned in Amos 1:1 and Zechariah 14:5. And the third earthquake is mentioned in relation to the death of Jesus Christ (Matt 27:51-53). So earthquakes in the Bible can be literal or they can have spiritual significance. The grammar of

the sixth seal suggests taking the language of earthquake here literally along with the references to the sun, moon and stars.

“There was a great earthquake. . .” The specific wording in this verse, “a great earthquake” (Greek: *seismos megas*), is repeated in Revelation 11:13, where the Great City (later on Babylon—Rev 14:8; 16:19; 18:1-19) is devastated by a great earthquake that kills a tenth of the inhabitants, resulting in the rest of the population giving glory to God. See comments on Rev 11:13. Thus, this first earthquake in the sixth seal is not the overwhelming final earthquake of 6:14 and 16:18-20, but a more typical earthquake prior to the consummation.

This observation offers a biblical basis for the Adventist association of this earthquake with the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755. That earthquake is estimated to have been in the 8.5 – 9.0 range on the Richter scale and killed as many as a 100,000 people in Lisbon alone. Shocks from the earthquake were reported as far away as Finland and the Caribbean and tsunamis as high as twenty meters were experienced in North Africa and the Americas. The widespread impact of this earthquake played a role in revived interest in prophecy which led eventually to the Millerite movement of the 1830s and 1840s. It also made a deep impact on Enlightenment philosophy, being featured in the writings of Voltaire, Rousseau and Kant, among others. So while more deadly and damaging earthquakes have occurred in the course of history, the timing and impact of Lisbon caused it to be tied to this text in ways none of the others achieved.

“The sun became black like sackcloth of hair. . .” The first earthquake is followed by a series of heavenly signs in the sun, moon and stars. Such a package of signs is found frequently in the Old Testament (Isa 13:10; 34:4; Ezek 32:7-8; Joel 2:30-31; 3:15; Amos 8:9-10 and Micah 3:6), usually associated with the Day of the Lord, the great, final Old Testament day of judgment. The concept may have originated in creation, with the idea that the completion of the first week (the Sabbath of the Lord) foreshadows the end of days. In the Old Testament, the Day of the Lord is often associated with battle imagery, indicating God’s final victory over evil; the day when He judges His opponents and delivers His people. The concept is frequently adopted in the New Testament as the “day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8) or the “day of God” (2 Pet 3:12). It is not surprising, therefore, that Day of the Lord imagery appears in the book of Revelation and the language is reflected in Revelation 6:17 (“the great day of their wrath”) and 16:14 (“the great day of God almighty”). Wherever it appears, the concept is consistently associated with the future.

The reference to “sun” here should be taken literally, since it precedes the word “like” (Greek: *hōs*), which introduces a simile. The sun became black (Greek: *melas*). In the parallel text of Matthew 24:29 a verb was used instead; the sun was darkened (Greek: *skotisthēsetai*—see also Mark 13:24 and Luke 21:25, the latter mentions only “signs” in the sun). Both the blackness and the darkening of the sun are experienced during total eclipses. An Old Testament parallel to this text is Isaiah 50:3, where the sky is made dark (LXX: *skotos*) being covered by sackcloth (LXX: *sakkon*). In that context it is an expression of the power of God to deliver the prophet, who is undergoing persecution for delivering God’s message (Isa 40:4ff.). While the language is different, a darkening of the sky is placed in the context of an earthquake in

Jeremiah 4:23, which in the initial context refers to the Exile to Babylon, when the land of Israel is made desolate. Sackcloth was a coarse, black cloth often, but not always, made of hair. It could be used in the making of tents. The wearing of sackcloth is often associated with mourning (Gen 37:34; 2 Sam 3:31; 21:10; 1 Kings 21:27; 2 Kings 19:1-3, etc.). Sackcloth (Heb: *saq*) is one of the few words in the English language drawn directly from the Hebrew (“camel” is another). The image in this verse is as if the sun itself were in mourning, which would signify great calamity. Since in paganism the sun was widely worshiped as a god, even the chief god, the darkening of the sun would represent the impotence of such gods in the face of the Almighty.

While the darkening of the sun image is closely associated with the Second Coming of Jesus in Matthew 24 and Mark 13, we have noticed on the basis of the two earthquakes that these heavenly signs of verses 12 and 13 are not the final cataclysm of earth’s history. So the Adventist pioneer connection of this verse with the Dark Day of May 19, 1780 does not contradict the text. On that day in the New England states and eastern Canada the sky darkened like a solar eclipse in the middle of the day, but there was no solar eclipse. It was dark enough that people had to light candles and lanterns at noon and the darkness lasted the rest of the day. Animals behaved as if night had fallen and many notables remarked on its potential significance. There is evidence of a large forest fire in Canada around that time and the fire is thought to have been the cause of the darkness further east. Many at the time felt that this unexpected darkness signaled judgment day. In *The Great Controversy* (pages 306-308) Ellen White points to the location, timing and uniqueness of this experience as evidence that it fulfills the prophecy of this verse.

“And **the whole moon became like blood**. . .” The Greek word for blood is *haima*, from which English gets words like “hematology.” There is, therefore, no linguistic connection between the color red (Greek: *purros*) of the second seal and the blood-like moon of the sixth seal. So it should not be assumed that the “moon like blood” is a reference to bloodshed. As noted in the translation, it was specifically the “whole” (Greek: *hōlē*—two syllables) moon that became like blood. This is likely a way of describing the full moon. The full orb of the moon becomes like blood, not just a crescent. Use of the word “like” (Greek: *hōs*) indicates that it is only metaphorically that the moon becomes blood, it is the appearance of the moon that causes people to use the metaphor to describe it.

The moon turning into blood is drawn from the eschatological picture of Joel 2:31 (same word in LXX as in Rev: *haima*). The picture of Joel 2:28-32 was thought by Peter to have been fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). But the word “whole,” implying a full moon, is added by the Revelator to the pictures of Joel and Peter. The focus of this imagery at Pentecost was clearly spiritual, but Revelation 6:12 expresses a more literal fulfillment toward the End.

In Seventh-day Adventist traditional understanding, the fulfillment of this clause occurred on the evening after the Dark Day of May 19, 1780, when the moon appeared blood-red in color. This event was part of a series of occurrences that people tied to this text and which caused a great deal of interest in Bible prophecy, particularly in the fledgling United States of America.

Rev 6:13-- “**And the stars of heaven fell to the earth**, like a fig tree drops its unripe figs having been shaken by a mighty wind.” The concept of stars falling from heaven to earth is associated with the second coming of Christ in Matthew 24:29. The image of “stars” can be associated with rulers in the Bible (Numbers 24:17; Revelation 9:1; and probably Daniel 8:10 and Isaiah 14:13). It is also associated with angels in Revelation 1:20. Some scholars feel that the ancients understood the sky to be a solid dome to which the stars were affixed and from which they could be dislodged and fall to the earth. Other scholars deny that the ancients held such a view of the sky. The one thing we know for sure is that the ancients did not have the concept of stars as big balls of flaming gas massive distances away. So some idea like the above would explain the language here. The fact that the sky in this passage can roll up like a scroll (6:14) suggest that the visionary concept of the sky is more like a curtain than a solid dome. If the sky rolls up the stars would fall, having no support to stay up any longer. This is not an ancient attempt at scientific accuracy.

“And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, **like a fig tree drops its unripe figs having been shaken by a mighty wind.**” In Matthew 24 the parable of the fig tree (24:32) follows closely after the falling of the stars (24:29), which may be a significant parallel. This vision may be intentionally alluding to the words of Jesus in the Synoptic Apocalypse. But in Matthew 24 the parable of the fig tree anticipates the nearness of the End, while the falling of the stars is in the context of the End itself. So the parallels with Matthew 24 are not necessarily relevant to the timing of Revelation 6.

The reference to “unripe figs” probably refers to “winter figs,” figs that grow under the leaves and do not ripen at the appropriate time but hang on the trees during the winter. These fruits rarely mature and are easily cast off by the wind, especially when spring comes. The point of the comparison is how easily the stars of heaven fall down at the time appointed by God. If believers are represented by ripe figs, the untimely figs here would represent the fate of unbelievers in the catastrophies of the end-time.

Rev 6:14-- “**And the sky was split open like a scroll being rolled up** and every mountain and island was moved out of its place.” This clause is the best evidence that the word “book” (Greek: *biblion*) in Revelation refers to a scroll, not a codex (the format of most books since the advent of printing). The shift from the scroll form to the codex as the primary format seems to have happened around the time of Revelation. All New Testament manuscripts (written after Revelation) are in the codex format, earlier literature (like the Dead Sea Scrolls) was in the scroll format. See Rev 5:1 (Excursus on the Identity and Contents of the Sealed Scroll) for more detail.

The Greek word for “split open” (Greek: *apechôristhê*) has been variously translated as “departed” (KJV), “vanished” (ESV, RSV, NRSV), “split apart” (NASB), and “receded” (NIV), so the meaning is clearly hard to determine. It is a compound word based on the Greek words for “from” (*apo*) and “separate” (*chôrizô*), hence “split apart,” as I have chosen to translate it, comes close to the core meaning. In Matthew 19:6, the main word (Greek: *chôrizetô*) is used by Jesus: “What God has joined together let no man **separate.**” In Acts 15:39 the compound (*apochôristhênai*) is used of the separation between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark.

The text, however, clarifies that the heavens split apart like a scroll being “rolled up” (Greek: *elissomenon*, from *elissô*). This echoes the language of Isaiah 34:4, a judgment against ancient Edom, where the heavens are also rolled together (LXX: *eligêsetai*, also from *elissô*) like a scroll. The expression suggests that the sky rips apart at the zenith and rolls up in both directions. Here that event is after the falling of the stars, in Isaiah the falling of the stars comes after the rolling up of the heavens. So while there is evidence for a sequential reading of Revelation 6:14, the imagery used here is somewhat interchangeable. The heavens are here described as being like a scroll rolled out for reading. In the final cataclysm, the sky vanishes by being rolled up. We know today that the sky cannot literally roll up, but this is being described, not as it is scientifically, but as it appears to human beings from an earthly vantage point. The KJV translation of “split open” (Greek: *apechôristhê*) as “departed” can be explained by the rolling up of the heavens, just as a scroll is rolled up and put away. By that reading, the heavens roll up and are no longer there.

“Every mountain and island was moved out of its place.” “Every” mountain and island makes clear the worldwide nature of the judgments in this verse. Mountains and islands are normally immovable, so the cataclysm of this verse truly transcends all past experience. The language of mountains and islands being moved out of place is echoed in Revelation 16:20. That description is associated with the greatest earthquake of all time (Rev 16:18) and the fall of Babylon (Rev 16:19). An even more severe event is described after the millennium in Revelation 20:11. There the earth and sky themselves flee away. So as catastrophic as the events of this verse are, they are not as severe as what happens after the millennium. Here the earth and sky are devastated, there they no longer exist. They vaporize in the awesome presence of the One sitting on the great, white throne.

Mountains and hills are sometimes looked to as substitutes for the strength that can only come from God (Psa 121:1-2; Jer 3:23), they were frequently places of idolatrous worship in Old Testament times. Massive changes in the mountains are part of the eschatological picture in Isaiah 40:4, Jeremiah 4:24 and Nahum 1:5. But in the Old Testament prophets the changes are associated with the exile to Babylon and the Return from there after the seventy years. So these Old Testament texts were either unfulfilled or were fulfilled in a more spiritual manner. See my book *What the Bible Says About the End-Time*, pages 55-64 and the SDA Bible Commentary, volume four, pages 25-38 for the larger picture behind these kinds of prophecies.

Rev 6:12-14 (Conclusion)-- This passage begins with a series of images based on the Old Testament “Day of the Lord,” the great final judgment of earth's history. The Day of the Lord concept can be found in relation to the Exodus (Ezekiel 32), the fall of Israel (Amos 8), the fall of Judah (Jeremiah 4:23-27), and the destruction of the enemies of God's people (Isaiah 34:4; 13:10-13; Nahum 3:12; Ezekiel 38:19-20). The images used in the sixth seal are strongly based on these Day of the Lord passages. The imagery is also related to the curses of the covenant, as noted strongly in the four horsemen. The full and final consequence of choosing a life of rebellion and separation from God is facing the final executive judgment described in these Day of the Lord passages.

In the New Testament, Old Testament Day of the Lord imagery is applied to the cross of Jesus Christ and also to Pentecost, where Peter preaches from a Day of the Lord passage, Joel 2:28-32 (Acts 2:16-21). Day of the Lord language is also used in relation to the events surrounding the end-time and the Second Coming of Jesus. So in the sixth seal, the Day of the Lord imagery indicates events close to the end of earth's history. Six objects come under judgment; the sun, moon, stars, sky, mountains and islands. The seventh object of judgment is the rebellious elements of the human race, which are featured in the last three verses of the chapter.

Events reminiscent of this passage have taken place in history and led many people to feel that the sixth seal was in the process of fulfillment. In 1755 was the massive Lisbon earthquake that was widely understood to relate to this prophecy and call attention to Bible prophecy in general. This was followed in 1780 by an incredibly dark day in which animals came home thinking that the day was over and roosters were crowing at odd hours. At the end of this day the moon turned to dark red in color. Then in 1833 there was a meteor shower so spectacular that many leading people came to believe it was a sign that the end was at hand. Whether or not these were the primary fulfillments of this passage, God used these natural events to stimulate a tremendous interest in the prophecies of the Bible. This resulted in a movement that ended up in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Exegesis indicates that the Adventist reading of these events is defensible and should not be discarded. But verse 14 and Matthew 24 alert us to the fact that these past events are but an opening glimpse of the catastrophic events that will accompany the Second Coming itself. The full and final fulfillment is yet to come.

Rev 6:12-14 (Spiritual Lesson)-- If there is a spiritual message to be found in the cataclysmic events of Revelation 6:12-14 it is in the Old Testament assurance that when the Day of the Lord comes, God will take care of His people. "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed." Isaiah 54:10. God will never forsake His people. "The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before Him. The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness." Nahum 1:5-8.

Rev 6:15-17 (Introduction)-- The judgments of Revelation 6:12-17 affect seven entities (sun, moon, stars, sky, mountains, islands, human race). This seven-fold list suggests the completeness of these judgments. Taken all together, they would lead to the end of history.

The seventh of these objects of judgment is the human race. And it too is described in a seven-fold manner. The human race is made up of kings, great men, rich men, chief captains, mighty men, slaves and free. The climax of all these judgments is the impact that they will have on those who have chosen to reject the gospel and live in rebellion against the ways of God. Their desire to hide is reminiscent of Adam and Eve hiding in the Garden after they sinned (Gen

3:8). Sin causes people to run away from God and that will be demonstrated on a world-wide basis at the End.

The time when the human race calls for the rocks and mountains to fall on them is the Second Coming of Christ. At that time, the entire human race comes face to face with the one sitting on the throne and the Lamb in their glorious form seen earlier in chapter five. The scene of this passage is described in other words elsewhere. The tribes of the earth mourn when they see the Son of Man coming (Matt 24:29-30; Rev 1:7, see also Luke 23:30). That mourning is portrayed in greater detail here. The scene is brought to completion in Revelation 19:18, where the final fate of those crying out here is portrayed.

The climax of the chapter is the question raised at the end. "When the great day of God's wrath comes, who will be able to stand?" The answer to that question is two-fold, the 144,000 and the Great Multitude of chapter seven. The sixth seals ends up with a focus on those who have rejected God and the gospel, while chapter seven shines the light on two expressions of the end-time people of God.

Rev 6:15—"And *the kings of the earth, the great ones, the captains of thousands, the rich and the strong, and every slave and free person* hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains." While these seven categories function as a collective for humanity in rebellion against God (see a similar listing in Isaiah 3:2-3), it may be helpful to look at the individual categories to see what can be learned about them in Scripture. The first of the seven classes or categories of human beings is "the kings of the earth" (Greek: *hoi basileis tês gês*). This, of course, refers to the top leadership category throughout the ancient world. It sums up all who sit on thrones, probably including the emperor of Rome, who at the time was a "king of kings" and "lord of lords" (Rev 17:14; 19:16). Those whom the world has feared now become very afraid themselves. The second category is "the great ones" (Greek: *hoi megistanes*). This is sometimes translated "princes" (NIV) or "nobles" (Mark 6:21, ESV) and refers to the royal courtiers, statesmen, diplomats, senators, governors and advisors who serve the king exclusive of the military leaders, who are represented by the following category. "Great ones" would also include the governors of provinces and cities.

The third category in this verse is "the captains of thousands" (Greek: *hoi chiliarchoi*). This is a military category, in contrast to the courtiers of the previous category (see also John 18:12). The Greek term here is based on the Greek word for thousand, so in context it means the one in charge of a thousand, something like a military battalion in today's terms. The term is the equivalent of the Latin *tribunus* or "tribune" (see translations in RSV and ESV of Acts 21:31, 37; 22:26 and 23:15). The second and third categories of this text are also combined in Mark 6:21. The first and third categories are combined in Psalm 33:16. The fourth category is "the rich" (Greek: *hoi plousioi*). People use wealth to shelter themselves from crime, hunger, discomfort and loneliness, but when Jesus returns the wealthy will be no better off than the poorest of the poor.

The fifth category in this verse is "the strong" (Greek: *hoi ischuroi*). This generally references physical strength, with a secondary meaning of emotional or moral strength (Mark 3:27; 1 Cor 1:25; 4:10; 10:10, 22). It certainly takes a lot of emotional strength, in human terms,

to try to live in this universe independent of God. In early Judaism, however, the ones considered truly strong were the ones who confess and give praise to God (Psalms of Solomon 15:3-4). The sixth category is “every slave” (Greek *pas doulos*). The seventh category is “(every) free person” (Greek: *eleutheros*). Slave and free together sum up the totality of the “common people” in the empire, including those bound to others as indentured servants, and those free of such bonds who made their way at the bottom end of the social scale. The distinction between slave and free is typically a pagan one, as in the Christian ideal all are equal at the foot of the cross (Gal 3:28-29).

It is ironic that this sum total of the “wicked” numbers seven groups instead of six. In the book of Revelation the number seven is associated with the things of God while the number six (prominently in Revelation 13:18) represents those who fall short of that perfect number. So consistency would suggest six groups to represent humanity in rebellion against God. Perhaps the use of seven groups here simply indicates that these represent the totality of opposition to God in this world. These seven groups sum up those “whose portion is in this life” (Psa 17:14). This life is all they have to enjoy and this passage portrays a moment in which all that they have and all that they hope for comes to an end.

“And the kings of the earth, the great ones, the captains of thousands, the rich and the strong, and every slave and free person **hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains.**” The word for “caves” here (Greek: *spêlaia*) is the root of the English word “spelunking”—which is the act of exploring caves. Hiding in the rocks and caves is reminiscent of Isaiah 2:19-21. The cry of the wicked here also reminds the educated reader of Jeremiah 8:1-3, where the descendants of the wicked leaders of Judah prefer death to life as they observe the shame of how their ancestors’ bones were treated. This scene is also reminiscent of the reaction of the “mighty” and the kings in 1 Enoch 62 and 63, who at the sight of the Messiah seek repentance in vain (see also the Apocalypse of Baruch 25). They seek to hide in the very places they had forced Christians to hide on account of the persecutions of John’s day and after.

Rev 6:16—“And they said to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one sitting on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.” The language here is clearly based on Hosea 10:8, where it was predicted that the idolaters of Samaria would one day “say to the mountains, ‘Cover us,’ and to the hills, ‘Fall on us’” (ESV). It is also echoed in Luke 23:30. The reference in Luke seems to refer primarily to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but the language is here applied to the Second Coming itself. It is the cry of those who realize that there is no escape from a dreadful fate. They are persuaded of both the overwhelming power deity and their own overwhelming weakness (Isa 14:27). So their only hope is a rapid end to their existence.

As mentioned earlier, the desire to hide from God echoes the actions of Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen 3:8). For Paul, Adam in some sense represented the entire human race (Rom 5:12-21). Here in Revelation we see the entire human race acting the way Adam did at the beginning.

“And they said to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us **from the face of the one sitting on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.**’” Regarding the wrath of God, see comments on Revelation 14:10-11, particularly the “Thoughts on Violence.” While John 5:22 asserts that the Father has given all judgment to the Son, this text suggests that the Father is very much involved in the judgments surrounding the Second Coming. This also seems to be the picture in Matthew 16:27 and its parallels. More ambiguous is Titus 2:13, where it speaks of the coming of the Great God and our savior Jesus Christ. But the best Greek scholarship on Titus leans toward both terms applying to Jesus Christ in the form of a *hendyadis*. While the Lamb joining the Father on the throne is implied in Revelation 5 (see Rev 3:21), the throne clearly belongs to both together in Revelation 22:3.

The concept “wrath of the Lamb” is certainly paradoxical. In Revelation 21:8 the wrath of the Lamb is summed up as the second death. The only example of second death in history is the cross of Christ, and several things become clear there. At the cross the Father was not killing Christ, neither actually were the Romans. Christ would have died already in Gethsemane, had angels not sustained Him. What caused the second death in His case was the burden of sin that had been placed upon Him. Sin causes separation from God and sin turns the life-giving glory of God into a consuming fire. Second death is separation from God, the source of life. Sin itself pulls the plug that turns off the light of life. So the wrath of the Lamb is not some sort of violent rage, it is the sad acceptance that another has chosen to separate themselves from the life-giving presence of God. The face of God is a positive force in behalf of those who receive him, but that positive force becomes negative in relation to those who don’t want it because they are bent on evil (Psa 34:15-16, see also John 3:20).

Rev 6:17—“For the great day of **his wrath** has come, and who is able to stand?” While one might get the impression that the reference to wrath in verse 16 applies to both the Father and the Lamb, the singular “his” (Greek: *autôn*) in this verse makes it clear that the wrath of the Second Coming is exercised exclusively by the Lamb (some manuscripts do have the plural, but it is not likely the original reading). This is a startling assertion to those who manage the violence of the Old Testament by applying it to the Father in a more primitive era but seeing the New Testament as a fresh, wrathless perspective on God. In Revelation, the Lamb is deeply involved in whatever the term “wrath” means (here and Rev 14:10-11). John 14:9 suggests that there is no difference in character between the God of the Old Testament and that of the New. While it is important to emphasize the long-suffering graciousness of God, it is also important to emphasize that God is not to be trifled with. He is infinitely powerful and equally gracious. See the Thoughts on Violence section in the comments on Revelation 14:10-11.

“For **the great day** of his wrath has come, and **who is able to stand?**” That day is called the “day of Christ” in Philippians 1:6, 10 and the “day of judgment” in 1 John 2:28 and 4:17. The question, “who will be able to stand?” seems based on Malachi 3:2. Malachi looks forward to a coming of Yahweh that will test the faithfulness of Israel. This coming was fulfilled in the first advent of the Messiah, but here has a second application to the Second Advent. The sentiment is also found less directly in Nahum 1:6. In Luke 21:36 standing is the positive outcome of those who escape the judgments accompanying the return of the Son of Man. Such standing is the

outcome of “watching” and prayer. It is to have confidence and not be ashamed in the presence of the Son (1 John 2:28). It is to stand justified and not condemned before the judge of all the earth. Standing at the end is the outcome of consistent “standing” against the wiles of the devil in this life (Eph 6:13).

The question at the end of this chapter is left dangling, to be answered in chapter seven. Who will be able to stand when He appears? The 144,000 and the great multitude. Before we see the fate of the wicked, we need to see the fate of the righteous.

Rev 6:15-17 (Spiritual Lesson)—Regarding this passage Ellicott writes, “Neither royalty, nor rank, nor force of arms, nor opulence, nor talent, nor strength, either of intellect or frame, avail in that crisis. . . . Men who have relied upon wealth, rank, or power, have prepared themselves against one form of trial, but find themselves unarmed in the day of spiritual testing.” It is easy to feel self-sufficient in one’s own strength when one places the eye solely on the things of this world. But the eye of faith recognizes that a day is coming when that which is hidden will be made plain and all the delusions of this life will be exposed. That’s what this passage is all about.

Rev 6:12-17 (Conclusion)—The sixth seal does not give us a completed picture. We are brought to the brink of the Second Advent. The wicked cry for the rocks and mountains to fall on them, but we do not actually see it described. The great day of wrath has come but we do not see the wrath actually poured out. In the seventh seal the End seems to come less with a bang and more with a whimper. It is as if the author of the vision is reluctant to describe the absolutely final events of the End until the reader has gained a picture of the fate of the righteous. Thus an actual description of the Second Coming does not appear until the latter part of chapter 14, well after the appearance of the 144,000 (Rev 7:4-8; 14:1-5), the great multitude (7:9-13), the remnant (12:17) and the saints (14:12). The Lamb is well able to deliver all who respond to the invitation of the gospel and that must be made clear before the full destructions of the End are portrayed. It is only after God has exhausted His ordinary judgments; sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts, and humans are still unrepentant; that the “great day” itself comes.

While Babylon is not mentioned in the book of Revelation until chapter 14 and the “great city” is first mentioned in chapter 11, the reader with strong knowledge of the Old Testament will perceive the first reference to Babylon here in the sixth seal. In Isaiah 13:9-13, the Day of the Lord falls on Babylon, utilizing all the elements that are central to the sixth seal. The Day of the Lord falls on Babylon with great wrath and the destruction of sinners (Isa 13:9). The sun and the stars go dark and the moon does not shed its light (13:10). The wicked are punished, the proud are brought to an end and the insolence of Babylon’s tyrants is laid low (13:11). The heavens tremble and the earth is shaken out of its place when the wrath of God is poured out on Babylon (13:13). While there is no record of this occurring in literal fashion in Old Testament times, this prophecy is taken up and refined in the outline of the sixth seal.