

Introduction:

We need a worldview – we need a grid for interpreting our world (everyone has a worldview whether or not they can delineate it for you – we are all interpreters; we want to make sense of things) Do you have categories in your brain for making sense out certain things that go on in this world?

Do you have categories for interpreting things like Rwanda, the Balkans, Somalia, Iraq, and northern Vietnam? Can you make sense out of the seemingly senseless crimes that go on in S. Africa, or even on the streets of Milwaukee?

Here is the question I begin with this morning:

When Christians hear of nations being conquered in war, of civil unrest, of societal break down and upheaval, of violence in the street, of famine and disease, what should they think? Have you heard of such things happening? Can you give examples? Of course you can. So the real burning question is this: Is the end here?

The real question being addressed throughout Revelation is this: If the Lion-Lamb of chapters 4-5 has conquered, why does the world continue to be a place of evil, of violence and of misery?¹

Understand the Seals in their Context (w/in Revelation)

The seals are directly linked to chapters 4-5 where we first read of the scroll sealed with seven seals. We said there that the scroll symbolizes the complete plan of God for redemption and judgment. When the seals were broken in ancient times, the contents of the scroll could be carried out. Chapter 6-7 describe the breaking of those seven seals so that the scroll may be unrolled and its contents enacted. That means, then, in my opinion, that everything that occurs in the slitting of these seven seals is only preparatory for the final fulfillment of God's plans for redemption and judgment.

Understand the Seals in their Context (w/ prophesy)

Recall the chronology we uncovered two weeks ago when we looked at the parallels with Ezekiel and Revelation. The OT prophecies follow a strict chronology of six phases²:

1. Israel in unfaithful and guilty before God of breaking the covenant. The prophets present a case like a lawyer. (This part has already occurred in Israel's history)
2. God will judge Israel for her part in violating the covenant. God will use the nations to destroy Israel. (This part has already occurred in Israel's history)

¹ This is the central question raised by Dennis Johnson (The Triumph of the Lamb, p.117). I am indebted to Johnson for his interpretation here.

² This chronological order is credited to Steve Lehrer in unpublished notes from In-Depth studies in Mesa, AZ. They are available at his website www.ids.org

3. God will bring judgment on the nations for their part in Israel's destruction. (This has already occurred in Israel's history)
4. God will restore Israel. (This is where a book like Habakkuk ends. This is fulfilled in the New Covenant; cf. Amos 9 quoted in Acts 15)
5. God will bring final judgment on the nations for their treatment of Israel and God. This is often spoken of in terms of a final gathering of the nations for a battle against restored Israel. The Lord fights for Israel and crushes the nations (cf. Ezekiel 38-39; Joel 3:1-16; Zechariah 14:3)
6. God will bring final restoration to Israel. But in some of the accounts, this includes some from the nations who are repentant; it even looks as though Israel takes a minor role in the restoration. In addition, some of the prophets even speak of a restoration of all creation (cf. Ezekiel 40-48 using temple terms; Joel 3:17-21 using creation terms; Zechariah 14:16-21 using creation terms)

The story line of Revelation picks up with # 3 – the judgment God brings on the nations for their part in Israel's destruction and it picks it up with the seven seals. But notice that the judgment that comes to the nations as a part of the six seals is not the final judgment that is coming once the seals are slit, the scroll opened, and the contents carried forth.

Read with me the words of Revelation 6

¹ Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" ² And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" ⁴ And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

⁵ When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶ And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"

⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" ⁸ And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" ¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to

rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

Understand the Seals in Their Format

The first four seals go together (as will the first four of the trumpet and bowl judgments). They are connected by their horses and riders.

The first four seals show the instruments that the Lamb uses to judge the nations who oppose his rule and oppress his people.

The fifth seal opens a window on the rationale that lies behind the release of these horses of judgment – they are the restrained hand of God before final and fulfilled judgment.

The Instruments of Judgment

Four horses – four colors – four riders – four instruments of judgment:

They are “given” or granted the right. The giver is the Lamb. The forces of evil and destruction are instruments of the Lamb.

- **White horse – *Military conquest*** – He is given a victor’s crown (*stephanos*) and a bow. At the time of John’s writing, the *Pax Romana* was being threatened by Parthian hordes who rode powerful steeds armed with bows. They were attacking the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire – all conquering worlds will be conquered. Egypt – Babylon – Persian---Roman, etc.
- **Red Horse – *Social upheaval*** – This rider is granted the right from the Lamb to take peace from the earth so that men slay one another. This could include everything from civil war to simple societal upheaval, what we call “senseless acts of violence.”
- **Black horse – *Famine*** – This rider carries with him a set of scales – balances. In the ancient world, when society completely broke down and money was not worth anything because the government no longer existed to back it, you resorted to the barter system. Warfare always resulted in famine of some kind, whether from bartering or siege. Here there is massive inflation – 800% - an entire day’s wages for enough grain for one man, one meal.

I will make my point here: “As Christians see societies crumble and collapse, our response should not be terrified alarm, as though our security were bound up with a fragile human network of law and order, but anticipation and confidence: the Lamb is now on the throne, with God’s plan for history firmly in his hand.”³

- **Pale horse – *disease and death*** – The ultimate end of warfare, societal upheaval and famine is disease and death. The pale horse is the color of the gravely ill and death follows alongside the rider.

Understand the Seals w/ Ezekiel

Ezekiel 14:12-21, esp. v.21

²¹ “For thus says the Lord GOD: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast!

Conclusion:

The churches of Asia Minor needed to know that through his sovereign rule over all things from kings to bacteria, the triumphant Lamb would send all sorts of limited judgments on the Roman imperial system, exposing the emptiness of its political confidence and religious pretensions.

And all Christians today throughout the world need to know the same thing. How long Lord? The answer comes back, even now your cries are being heard and I am carrying out my judgment on all the nations who oppose my rule and oppress my people. But endure patiently, the end and final fulfillment of judgment is not yet here.

³ See Johnson, p. 122