

REVELATION

Chapter 6

The Seven Seals

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 people 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?”

6:1-16:21 Excursus – Three prophetic Visions of History – Each from Christ’s Ascension to the End

With chapter 6 the prophecy of Revelation begins. *It consists of three visions of events taking place on earth* (6:1–16:21). These three visions are diagrammed in figure 3. Each vision covers the same time period, from the ascension of Jesus up to the end of this present world upon Christ’s return. In addition to these three visions of earthly events there is a vision of the cosmic war between God and Satan which is interspersed between the second and third visions. After these three visions, there is also a lengthy conclusion which contains visions of the End, the judgment, the resurrection, and the new heaven and earth (17:1–22:5). (CC p. 150-154)

Each of the three visions of earthly events has *seven scenes*, making a total of twenty-one scenes. (See below for a discussion of why there are *three* visions of *seven* scenes each.) The first five scenes of each of the three visions cover the same time period: from Christ’s ascension up to the last great battle (Armageddon, 16:16) just before the End. The sixth scenes in the second and third visions cover this last great battle. In the first vision, the sixth scene (the sixth seal) pictures the end of this world, while in the second and third visions it is the seventh scene (the seventh trumpet and the seventh censer, respectively) that pictures the End. While the three visions cover the same time period and while each depicts events on earth, the three are not repetitious, for each vision displays its own particular events. (CC p. 150-154)

The events displayed in the three visions are not given for the purpose of predicting particular events in human history. Rather, they are presented so as to portray conditions, circumstances, situations, environments, and contexts in which people find themselves during the time period covered. While particular events in human history are to be, and must be, interpreted in view of and by these conditions, circumstances, and so on, no particular historical event or person at any given time exhausts the condition as prophetically revealed, for the conditions revealed in this prophetic message are prevalent throughout all of human history. The end result of the prophetic message, then, is not to give a predictable view of history, but rather to give a predictable view of the human condition in suffering and defeat because of human evil and rebellion against God, and a predictable knowledge of God’s terrible judgment. The purpose is to move all people to repentance and faith before the End, which in turn serves the ultimate purpose of displaying Christ’s majestic sovereignty for the salvation and hope of those who listen, repent, and believe. (CC p. 150-154)

Figure 3

<i>First Vision: Seven Seals</i>	<i>Second Vision: Seven Trumpets</i>	<i>Third Vision: Seven Censers</i>
Scenes 1–5: <i>Seals 1–5</i> (6:1–11)	Scenes 1–5: <i>Trumpets 1–5</i> (8:6–9:12)	Scenes 1–5: <i>Censers 1–5</i> (15:1–16:11)
(no battle scene)	Scene 6: Sixth Trumpet, <i>Great Battle</i> (9:13–21)	Scene 6: Sixth Censer, <i>Battle of Armageddon</i> (16:12–16)
Scene 6: Sixth Seal, <i>End of This World</i> (6:12–17)	Scene 7: Seventh Trumpet, <i>End of This World</i> (11:15–19)	Scene 7: Seventh Censer, <i>End of This World</i> (16:17–21)
Scene 7: Seventh Seal Introduces the Second Vision (8:1–5) (CC p. 150-154)		

Many of the events displayed for the purpose of depicting these conditions, contexts, and so on are dramatized by means of symbols. The circumstantial events are presented by these symbols not only to educate, but also as visual aids to grip the heart and the emotions, as well as the mind, so that the conditions they represent will not so easily be forgotten. On the one hand, the symbols strike fear in the human heart. On the other hand, for those who repent and trust in the slain Lamb, they fill the heart with peace and joy and hope. To accomplish both ends—fear and comfort—different symbols are used. (CC p. 150-154)

This question may be asked: Why are there *three* visions of events on earth, all covering the same time period? Could not all the events, twenty-one in total, be revealed in one sweeping vision instead of in three? It could be suggested that the twenty-one scenes contain too much information for John to digest all at once. Perhaps for that reason, after John had received the first sevenfold vision, he was given time to digest and to record it before the next set of seven scenes was given to him in the second vision. And then after he assimilated that, finally the third and last set of seven scenes was visually displayed before him. That may be true. But there are two other possible answers, the first arising from a consideration of the literary design and structure of Revelation, and the second from the theological thrust of its message. (CC p. 150-154)

The literary structure of Revelation is controlled by *the number seven*. The prophetic message is to be given to seven churches, and the message itself is visually presented in three visions of seven segments each. This sevenfold pattern is modeled after the seven days of creation. It is for that reason that the number seven in biblical literature usually is reserved for God, for his holy and complete presence and for his holy and perfect creative activity, especially when related to the seventh day.⁵ If the contents of the twenty-one scenes were given in a single visual presentation, this sevenfold literary structure would be lost. It was important for John and his audience to receive and understand the message of Revelation by way of this sevenfold pattern, so that they would realize that the message is from God's own holy and perfect presence, and that it is his holy and complete revelation. (CC p. 150-154)

A sevenfold structure, present in the three visions in 6:1–16:21, is a common motif in the Jewish tradition known to John. The number *seven*, the holy number of God, was the chief number in recording the chronology of historical time periods, especially in view of eschatology. This was because all history was seen to be under the providence of God. The use of the number seven in this manner may also have arisen because the solar year of 364 days was divisible by seven, resulting in a year of fifty-two weeks. Seven became the number for interpreting the meaning of history, because God created the world in seven days. For example, the Book of Jubilees (also called the Little Genesis and the Apocalypse of Moses) has a sevenfold literary structure or framework. This sevenfold structure is patterned after the system of jubilees in which each jubilee consists of forty-nine years and in which each year represents a day of the week. (CC p. 150-154)

The ultimate purpose and thrust of the message itself suggests a second possible reason why the twenty-one scenes were given in three visions. While it may be true that it would have been too much for John to assimilate the entire message in one visual presentation, it is also true—and more to the point—that in this scheme John and his hearers have *three opportunities to understand and apply the same message*, one portion at a time. For the message to accomplish its purpose, *time* is needed for the mind to receive each of the three visions in turn. After the first vision of seven scenes has been observed and digested, *then* comes the second, and after that the third. For each of the three visions is complete in and of itself, as structurally indicated by the number of seven scenes in each. And each is to accomplish basically the same purpose. (CC p. 150-154)

The purpose of each vision is to work repentance and give the encouragement of faith and hope. The hearer is meant to receive each vision in such a way that, as he fearfully heeds its sevenfold message, he is moved to repentance and faithful hope in the reigning Christ. If one takes lightly the first warning of the first sevenfold vision, he will be hit harder by the second warning of the second vision, and thus be given another opportunity to repent. Finally there is the dire third warning, in which the reader is impacted even harder. Thus the three sevenfold visions are three warnings by which God endeavors to bring home to his people on earth the seriousness of what he desires his church to hear and heed. God's people are to believe in the reigning Christ and to

hope in his promise to come soon. *Indeed, the ultimate purpose of Revelation is to inspire the church to pray with John* (in response to the Lord's promise in 22:20, "Yes, I am coming quickly"): "Amen, come now, Lord Jesus" (22:20). (CC p. 150-154)

There are biblical precedents for this structure of *three* warnings and for *sevenfold* warnings. For example, in Leviticus 26, God instructed his people that if they would follow his decrees, he would bless their earthly life (Lev 26:1–13). But if they did not listen and did not carry out his instructions, God first warned that he would strike them with earthly plagues (Lev 26:14–22). If they did not heed *that* warning, then God warned them a second time that he would strike them with the sword of their enemies (Lev 26:23–26). And if they *still* would not listen and repent, then he warned a third time that he would punish them for their sins by destroying their children and bringing them into exile among the pagan nations (Lev 26:27–39). These three warnings aimed to move the people to live in constant repentance, so that they might also live under the grace of God according to his faithful covenant with them (Lev 26:40–45). Four times in Leviticus 26 God says that he would afflict and punish his people "seven times over" if they did not repent (Lev 26:18, 21, 24, 28). (CC p. 150-154)

So also now in Revelation, in *three* successive visions, God urges his people—and the world—to heed the message, the "seven times over" message of warning and hope. This is all for the purpose that they may enjoy the "Sabbath rest" (Heb 4:9) of God's covenant with them in Christ (Lev. 26:42-45; cf. Rev. 2:5-7, 10-11, 16-17, 26-29; 3:5-6, 11-13, 20-22). (CC p. 150-154)

6:1-8:5 The first scene of the end times: Christ opening the seven seals. As each seal is broken, a calamity of the sort Jesus had predicted is unleashed (Mt. 24:3-28). (TLSB)

6:1–17† The list of calamities is a symbolic representation of one aspect of the entire NT era. The events are parallel to the description in Mt 24:5–14; Mk 13:6–13; Lk 21:8–17. (CSB)

6:1-8 The opening of the first four seals of the scroll by the Lamb of God introduces four horsemen who go forth to spread terror and sufferings of one kind or another. Throughout the Middle Ages, and earlier, the four horsemen were used in pictorial art and in literature to symbolize the ravages of war and pestilence, famine and death, especially in times of terrifying woes such as the Black Plague, when famine and death spread throughout Europe—made all the worse when there was also a war. Whatever the four horsemen symbolize and represent, it is quite clear they introduce woes and tribulations of various kinds. The symbolism of the horsemen indicates that the tribulations are of the sort that humans frequently experience in this fallen world; they are common and natural, not of the supernatural. For in apocalyptic literature, whenever an author wanted to portray events or personages common to human experience and senses, he would make use of symbols taken from human, earthly life. But when he wanted to portray supernatural events or personages which were beyond human experience and intelligence, he would create symbols which do not exist in empirical human knowledge. God employs these natural phenomena to express his judgment against human sin. (CC pp. 160-161)

6:1 lamb opened – That means that the Lamb sees to it that the destinies, which are in his hands, are fulfilled. This fulfilling is sure and therefore is communicated to Christendom. Christians are to know what is to happen, and therefore to be well prepared for it. (Stoekhardt p. 23)

The Lamb opens "one of the seven seals" (6:1). Though the exalted Lord Christ opens the seals, it is the four winged creatures who, in turn, invite John to look at the four horsemen. This is in contrast to what happens when the Lamb opens the fifth and sixth seals, for then no mediating angelic figure plays a role. This may be due to the fact that the four horsemen introduce and

represent tribulations and sufferings which are under the sovereign God's permissive will, which is carried out at times through his heavenly angels (e.g., 2 Ki 19:35–37). The Lord Christ controls, for his own purpose, whatever the four horsemen represent, and his purpose is, ultimately, for the benefit of God's saints on earth and the Gospel message they proclaim. The heavenly angels can be used to mediate announcements of such judgments of God as are in the first four seals (see also Gen 19:1–15; cf. Heb 1:14). But when, in the opening of the fifth and sixth seals, there is revealed the souls of the saints before God in heaven and then the End itself, no mediating heavenly angelic figure is used to announce it, *for these two last seals and what they introduce are for the hope and comfort of God's people.* (CC p. 161)

Seven seals. The first of sevenfold numbered series of judgments (cf. the trumpets in chs. 8–9 and the seven bowls in ch. 16). (CSB)

four living creatures – One other time in Revelation one of the four winged creatures fulfills a similar role. In 15:7 one of them gives to the seven angels the bowls or censers of God's wrath, which is to be poured out on the human race as God's judgment. The winged creature acts on behalf of God in giving the censers to the seven angels. Thus also in 6:1–8 the winged creatures act on behalf of God and the victorious Lamb as mediators to John of the vision of the horsemen, which represent tribulations permitted under the will of the sovereign God's judgment. These are the only two instances (6:1–8; 15:7) where the winged creatures carry out any action other than being a part of God's heavenly majesty by standing in his enthroned presence and by singing in his presence the great Te Deum. (CC p. 161)

6:2 white horse.† The imagery of the four horsemen comes from Zec 1:8–17; 6:1–8. The colors in Revelation correspond to the character of the rider; white symbolizes conquest, victory and purity. Major interpretations of the rider on the white horse are: (1) Christ (cf. 19:11), (2) the antichrist and (3) the spirit of conquest (through the preaching of the word of God). The latter establishes a more natural sequence with the other three riders (which symbolize bloodshed, famine and death). (CSB)

Though many are tempted to take the figure on this horse as Christ, this unlikely. Granted, there is another figure on a white horse named “The Word of God” appearing in 19:11-13. Within chapter 6, there are four horsemen described, and everyone wreaks havoc. Moreover, Jesus already appears in this scene as the one breaking open the seals. Accordingly, the rider on this white horse should be taken as symbol of mankind's insatiable hunger for power and its penchant for aggression. (TLSB)

The first horse is white. Its rider has a battle bow and wears a crown. He comes forth for the purpose of conquering. He exists solely to conquer and be victorious in his effort. *The bow is the symbol of intention to conquer by military might and prowess.* “The only mounted archers in the ancient world were the Parthians,” who were so fierce that Rome could never completely subject them. The Parthian military leaders also were said to ride white horses into battle. The crown that the rider of the white horse wears proclaims that in his conquering role he will be victorious. The white color of the horse indicates that the horseman believes it is his divine right so to conquer and be victorious. White is the color of God's majesty and wisdom, holiness and righteousness (See Dan. 7:9; Mt. 17:2; Rev. 1:14; 14:14; 19:11; 20:11), and those who act on God's behalf can wear white Mt. 28:2-3; Acts 1:10; Rev. 19:14). White is also the color of victory, for Christians who are victorious over sin and death can wear white (Rev. 3:5; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14). Thus the rider of the white horse claims that his conquering ability and his victories are by the authority and majesty of God. (CC pp. 161-165)

Who is this horseman and what does he represent? The earliest commentators on 6:2 identify him with Jesus Christ. Some modern commentators have also identified the horseman with Christ and/or the Gospel together with the church which proclaims it. However, many modern commentators reject this identification and propose others. (CC pp. 161-165)

No matter how one identifies the rider of the white horse, intriguing possibilities and difficulties abound. The fact that the rider wears a crown and rides a white horse would certainly suggest that the rider might be Jesus Christ himself. In 19:11–16 Jesus Christ, at the End, comes forth wearing a diadem and on a white horse as a warlike conqueror to execute the judgment of God. Is the rider of the white horse of 6:2 this victorious, warrior-like Christ? That is, is this a preview of the Christ of 19:11? While the identification is attractive, there are serious problems that in the end inhibit one from making such an interpretation. (CC pp. 161-165)

First, the three other horsemen are presented as equals to the first horseman as each follows the other. The fourth and last rider may even be the dominant one of the four, for death and the grave follow in his train, thus suggesting that the effects of the first three all end with the fourth horseman. However this may be, it is quite clear that all four are of equal stature, though with different tasks. For example, all four are introduced by one of the winged creatures, thus giving them equal standing as each seal is opened. Though John sees each horseman one at a time and in order, the picture implied by the whole chapter is not that they ride behind each other but that all four ride together side by side, carrying out their assigned tasks. None is ahead or behind the others. They ride as equals, as partners in their roles as they ride forth throughout the earth. Thus no single one of the four horsemen dominates the others, but all act as equals. (CC pp. 161-165)

That is not the case in 19:11–16, for there the Lord Christ has *in his train* the hosts of heaven, which clearly are not his equal but rather his serving attendants. Nowhere in Revelation is any heavenly or earthly personage ever presented as on equal footing with Jesus Christ. In relationship to the one on the throne, the heavenly Father, Christ has a position as coregent; he is seated upon the Father's throne (3:21) and indeed it is called "the throne of God and of the Lamb" (22:1, 3). While those in Christ will share in his victory and in his enthronement (3:21), no one else dare claim such equality with the Father. And when Christ Jesus rides forth from heaven, he comes as *the* Lord who dominates everyone and everything (see 14:1–5, 14–20; cf. 19:11–16). (CC pp. 161-165)

In addition, it is difficult to imagine bloodshed and famine and death, with the grave following, in the train of the rider of the white horse if he were Jesus Christ. It is true that wherever Christ is proclaimed by the church, persecutions and suffering for his name's sake follow the Christians as they witness. However, what follows in the train of such Gospel proclamation is not bloodshed, famine, and death, but just the opposite. For what results from the proclamation of Christ's victory is faith and peace and victory over evil and over death for those who believe. (CC pp. 161-165)

Another item that counters the identification of the rider of the white horse with Christ is the battle bow that the horseman carries. Nowhere in Revelation—or in the entire NT—does Jesus Christ carry a bow. Twice in Revelation (1:16; 19:15, 21) he is pictured with a sword. A third time he refers to himself as the one who has the sword (2:12, 16). In Revelation the *sword* is an identifying symbol which marks out the one who will execute the judgment of God. The *battle bow*, on the other hand, is a symbol of earthly warfare and the destruction of an enemy (1 Sam 31:3; 2 Sam 1:22). It is never used as a symbol of God's judgment. In a rare instance it is a metaphor for the way God will use Judah to punish the enemies of Israel (Zech 9:13–14); it symbolizes God's wrath as it is exercised by people under God's permissive will (Cf. 2 KI.13:15-

18; Is. 5:28; Jer. 51:11; Lam 2:4; 3:12). This metaphorical use of the bow is applicable here in Rev 6:2 and thus the bow given to him indicates that the horseman, under God's sovereignty, will be permitted to carry out his conquering role by means of earthly warfare. This is a role that Christ is never associated with or pictured as fulfilling. (CC pp. 161-165)

Another possible interpretation is that this first rider represents the Antichrist. The white horse would suggest that the Antichrist, as the archenemy of Christ and his church on earth, not only uses deceptive spiritual powers and influence that imitate God's (hence the white color; cf. 2Cor 11:14), but also earthly power and force in his warfare against the church (hence the bow). While this interpretation is plausible, the fact that the rider wears a crown works against such an identification and interpretation. For the crown would suggest victory over the church on earth, but Christ's promise is that not even the gates of hell will prevail over his church (Mt 16:18). It is true that the church will suffer, even to the point of death, and will appear defeated to the human eye (Rev 11:7; 13:7), but that does not signify a victory of the demonic forces and of the Antichrist over the church. Rather, it is a demonstration and a picture of Christ's death on the cross, and also a picture of the church's victory over death and hell through faith in Christ (Rev. 11:7-13; 15:2-4; cf. 2 Cor. 4:7-15) and through participation in his suffering (Cf. Mt. 20:22-23; Acts 9:16; 14:22; Gal. 6:17; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24). (CC pp. 161-165)

That the forces of evil will harm the church, and even conquer it (11:7; 13:7), on an earthly plane is demonstrated and symbolized in 9:7 with the demons from hell wearing golden crowns and in 12:3 with the dragon's seven heads bearing seven diadems. But those are something different from the rider of the white horse wearing the crown which symbolizes total victory through conquering. For the crowns of the demons and of the dragon symbolize a delusive victory—the *claim* to victory over the church that in reality is no triumph at all. On the other hand, the crown of the rider of the white horse is not a symbol of a deceptive victory but of a real one here on earth among the human race. In Revelation, in the *spiritual* sphere of evil, only the dragon—Satan, the devil (12:9)—and the demons wear crowns. (The rider of the white horse belongs in this category.) The *human* archenemy of God's people on earth, the so-called Antichrist (the harlot of Revelation 17–18), never wears a crown. Moreover, in Revelation the human archenemy of Christ's church on earth is pictured not by a horseman but by the harlot. For in Revelation, this harlot is the opposite of the woman in chapter 12, who symbolizes the church on earth, while the dragon (not the rider of the white horse) is antithetical to Christ. All this suggests that the rider of the white horse is not the Antichrist. (CC pp. 161-165)

The interpretation that best fits the description of this first horseman and his role is that of a spiritual evil that causes military, tyrannical dominance. *That is, the rider of the white horse symbolizes and represents every form of tyranny which is won and acquired by power and force, usually warfare or forms of it, and which then by a dictatorial rule exploits, enslaves, dominates, and terrorizes.* It can take the classical form of a “triumphant militarism” and the “lust of conquest which makes great Empires.” However, it also refers to *any* human entity—institutional or individual, lawful or unlawful—which misuses its authority to exert tyranny over its subjects. It can be a governmental, educational, or economic system; a spouse, parent, or any person or agency in authority in any sphere of life. Such tyranny often justifies its dominance by a claim of divine or quasi-divine authority, hence the horse's color of white. It will use force—of arms, of mind, of wealth, or of any other resource—to establish its authority and the exercise of it; hence the bow. And it will be victorious. *The picture presented by this rider on the white horse is one of a tyranny that will dominate and be the rule, not the exception, throughout the time period from the ascension of Christ up to the end of history.* It gives a terrifying depiction of how human beings treat each other: *people's inhumanity to other people through fear and exploitation.*

Human freedoms will be the exception. Human tyrannical slavery in all its fearful forms will be the rule. (CC pp. 161-165)

While his description is similar to that of Christ in 19:15, he is but an imitation, allowed for a time to set himself up as a ruler of this world – hence, an Antichrist, that most blatant symbol of human pride, who seeks to be honored as God. That he comes into the world should be no surprise, since Christ Himself warned of the coming of false Christ’s (Matt 24:4-5). (LL p. 46)

bow. A battle weapon. (CSB)

6:3 *he opened* – The Lamb (Christ) is opening the seals (v. 1). (TLSB)

6:4 *another horse ... bright red..* Symbolizing bloodshed and war (cf. Zec 1:8; 6:2). (CSB)

This horse is the same color as a bloodthirsty dragon that later appears (12:3). This rider represents the toll of violence, especially that which is undertaken in the name of conquest. (TLSB)

The following three horsemen come in succession in the wake of the conqueror on the white horse. *That is, what follows as the result of tyranny is bloodshed, which in turn is followed and accompanied by scarcity of goods and famine, and finally in the end the result is death and the grave.* While each follows in the wake of the other as they are introduced to John, once they have all been introduced, they accompany each other as they ravage the earth. That is, when tyranny is present, there is also bloodshed, famine, and death. (CC p. 165-166)

While the first horseman may evoke questions as to his identity, there is no problem in identifying the following three. When the second seal is opened by the Lamb, at the voice of invitation of the second winged creature, John sees a second horseman ravaging humankind. The horse is red, perhaps blood red, and the one sitting on it has permission to take peace from the earth by human beings slaughtering one another. The “great sword” (μάχαιρα μεγάλη, 6:4) that was given to him symbolizes this role of destroyer of peace. (CC p. 165-166)

The fact that the “great sword” is *given* to him indicates that he is acting under someone’s permission. It is not stated by whose permissive will he is thus acting, but the fact that it is the Lamb who ushers in the rider on the red horse with the opening of the second seal suggests that it is by the permissive will of the exalted Lord Christ. And the invitation of the second winged creature to John to look at the horseman supports this suggestion since the angelic creatures too are wholly under God’s will. The third sevenfold vision of events on earth (15:1–16:21) indicates that everything that is portrayed in the visions as taking place on earth is under the permissive will of God (see especially 15:1). (CC p. 165-166)

Clearly the rider of the red horse symbolizes warfare, but in addition he represents any sort of unlawful killing and murder. Throughout the time period covered by the prophetic message of Revelation, from the victory of the Lord Christ up to his second coming, peace and tranquillity will be the exception. The general rule will be wars and rumors of war, violence, murders, insurrections, and the like (see Mk 13:7–9). It is for this reason that Paul urged his fellow Christians to pray for peace and for an orderly and quiet life (1 Tim 2:1–2), for he knew that only God could grant such. (CC p. 165-166)

people should slay one another.† The sad fact of warfare. Not a reference to a specific war (as millennialists would interpret) but to every war and rumor of war (Mt 24:6). (CSB)

sword. The fact that the “great sword” is given to him indicates that is acting under someone’s permission. (CC p. 166)

6:5 black horse.† Symbolizing famine (cf. Zec 6:2, 6). (CSB)

The rider of this horse will bring famine upon the earth. (TLSB)

The opening of the third seal introduces the next horseman. His steed is black, the color of death, which in the ancient world often resulted from famine (cf. Jer 14:1–2; Lam 5:10). He has in his hand a “weighing scale” (Rev 6:5), a balance scale, that is, a pair of scales attached and suspended from a beam or yoke (hence the scale is designated by the Greek word for “yoke,” ζυγός). Here in 6:5–6 the scale is used to measure out foodstuffs according to a measured quantity of volume, which is then given a monetary value. As John views the rider with the scales, he hears a voice which comes from “the midst of the four winged creatures” (6:6). The voice is not identified. (CC pp. 166-168)

Several times throughout Revelation John hears an unidentified voice. Sometimes it comes from a horn of the golden incense altar (9:13); sometimes from heaven or in heaven (10:4, 8; 11:12, 15; 12:10; 14:13; 18:4); sometimes from the temple, or sanctuary, in heaven (16:1); sometimes from the throne in heaven (19:5; 21:3); and once from both the temple and the throne in heaven (16:17). And here in 6:6 the voice comes from within the midst of the winged creatures. Of the thirteen times that John hears such an unidentified voice, it seems that most (if not all) of the times they are voices of individual angels. In some of the instances, though, it may be the voice of God himself. For example, the voice from heaven in 18:4 seems to be that of God, for it says, “Come out from her, O my people” (ἐξέλθατε ὁ λαός μου ἐξ αὐτῆς). God is calling his people to come out of the accursed Babylon. But most of the time the voice seems to be that of an angel, in a deferential relationship to God (e.g., 16:1). However that may be, in each instance the voice is certainly speaking for God *under his authority* and glory. (CC pp. 166-168)

Here in 6:6 the voice comes from the midst of the winged creatures. It is described as ὡς φωνήν, “like a voice,” most likely meaning that it resembles a human voice. It *could* be the voice of God, but then we might expect it to be a “great voice” (φωνὴ μεγάλη) as in 11:12. *Probably* here in 6:6 it is a voice of *an angel speaking on behalf of God*, for what the voice says concerns God’s providential care of the earth’s bounty in the midst of scarcity, which care the angelic voice sounds. (CC pp. 166-168)

The picture given in 6:6 is one of imbalance and scarcity of foodstuffs in the market. The “measuring quart” (χοῖνιξ) could represent the Hebrew קָב (e.g., Ezek 45:10), equivalent to around twenty-two liters (almost six gallons), or the Greek measure of almost a quart. Most likely here it is the Greek measure. It took a worker’s daily wage, “a denarius” (Rev 6:6), to purchase just one “measuring quart of wheat” or “three measuring quarts of barley.” Both the wheat and barley were costly, but at least a worker and his family could subsist—though barely. The announcement that the two grains were set at a certain price suggests that price-control measures were being taken to counter the runaway inflation that comes when vital goods are scarce. Without such a set price, purchasing daily sustenance would have become impossible. Such attempts at price control were usually made in times of famine. For example, in A.D. 92 a decree was made during the reign of Domitian when there was a severe scarcity of grains but a plentiful grape harvest. The decree instructed that half of the vineyards were to be destroyed to stabilize the price of the fruit of the vine. A surplus would result in a low selling price, and then farmers and merchants may not make enough profit to enable them to afford the expensive grain

necessary for their sustenance. So unpopular was this decree that it was later rescinded. The voice that John hears also commands that the olive oil and wine were not to be harmed, probably meaning that they were to be kept from being spoiled or soured. When there was an overabundance of the juice of the vine, if it remained unsold or unused for any length of time, it would spoil. If the overabundance resulted in a cheap price, farmers might dispose of part of the crop in order to raise the selling price. (CC pp. 166-168)

Whatever the details may be, the overall picture presented in 6:5–6 is a condition of *both scarcity and plenty*, that is, *an economic imbalance in the supply of food and the daily necessities of life*. And despite human attempts to adjust this imbalance economically, the end result, from place to place, will be hunger and even at times starvation. In such situations famine begins to stalk large portions of the human population. The horseman on the black horse, then, suggests that *throughout the entire period from the Lord’s ascension until the End, there will always be present, at various times and places, hunger and famine*. (CC pp. 166-168)

pair of scales. A balance beam with scales hung from either end. Weights were originally stones. (CSB)

Ezekiel had warned that the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem’s food supply and then the Israelites would “eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and...drink water by measure and in dismay” (Ezek. 4:16). (TLSB)

He carries a pair of scales, indicating the care with which the precious remaining food is doled out among the people. (LL p. 46)

6:6 *wheat ... barley*. One quart of wheat would be enough for only one person. Three quarts of the less nutritious barley would be barely enough for a small family. Famine had inflated prices to at least ten times their normal level. (CSB)

The cost given here for grain is quite high, since a denarius represented a full day’s wage. (TLSB)

oil and the wine. Sets limits on the destruction by the rider of the black horse. The roots of the olive and vine go deeper and would not be immediately affected by a limited drought. (CSB)

The prices of these commodities are comparatively less affected by the famine. This at first seems strange, since wine and olive are typically more valuable than grain. Yet this depiction makes sense if one considers that wine and oil were produced throughout most of the Greco-Roman world (including Asia Minor, where John wrote) while vast areas of the empire were dependent upon imported grain. (TLSB)

6:8 *pale horse*. Describes the ashen appearance of the dead; it symbolizes death. (CSB)

The fourth rider personifies death. Hades follows, since the latter is the abode of the dead. (TLSB)

This word for light, yellowish green of plants is also used for the pale color of a person who is ill or dead. (CC p. 156)

At the end of the day or at the end of an era of such hardship, the only victor visible to the human eye is death, attended by the grave. So when the fourth seal is opened, John sees the “ghostly green horse, and the one sitting upon it,” whose “name was Death” (6:8). This grim reaper fells his harvest, and as he is followed by his attendant, the grave receives the gleanings of this horseman and of the three preceding. The rider on the ghostly green horse symbolically demonstrates that death is the result of the tyranny, the bloodshed, and the famine of the first three horsemen, and that death together with the grave reigns on this earth. Throughout the whole time period covered by this first sevenfold vision, at any given moment a fourth of the earth’s population may be dying because of the sword, famine, diseases, and the wild animals of the earth. (CC pp. 168-169)

John sees first one horseman and then the other three, following one after the other. But when all four are finally present, he sees them all together—side by side—ravaging the human race throughout the whole period of history. Certainly also in the twentieth century the human race has witnessed the horrors depicted by the four horsemen, in deadly scene after deadly scene. Millions upon millions have perished through wars and famine and bloodshed and diseases. How long is this to go on? *Until the end of time!* History continues to unfold, in particular in all the sufferings of God’s own people here on earth, of which John is reminded when the fifth seal is opened (6:9–11). (CC pp. 168-169)

After John saw the four horsemen and as he considered their meaning, he may have remembered and related what he had seen to two visions seen by Zechariah—one of a horseman and horses (Zech 1:7–17) and one of four chariots (Zech 6:1–8). The horseman in Zech 1:8 rode a red horse, and he was followed by other horses of red, sorrel, and white. When the prophet asked what these might mean (Zech 1:9), he was told that Yahweh had sent them throughout all the earth (Zech 1:10), where they discovered that the whole world was at rest and in peace (Zech 1:11). Jerusalem and Zion had suffered while the world was at peace, but God announced that he was going to judge and punish the peoples of the world while comforting Jerusalem (Zech 1:12–17). (CC pp. 168-169)

In another vision Zechariah saw four chariots, whose horses were also colored (Zech 6:1–8). The horses pulling the first chariot were red, those pulling the second black, those pulling the third white, and those pulling the fourth dappled-gray (Zech 6:2–3). When asked by the prophet what these chariots and horses meant, an angel replied that they were the four spirits or the four winds (תִּרְגָּל, “spirits, winds”; LXX: ἄνεμοι, “winds”) of heaven sent out from the presence of God to the four corners of the earth (Zech 6:5–8). While no purpose for their going forth is stated, those that went north apparently established peace there (Zech 6:8). The purpose then of the four chariots was similar to that of the horseman and horses of Zech 1:8: to patrol the earth and report back to God. From place to place and from time to time, God would establish or abolish peace.³⁴ While John in his vision of the four horsemen did not see God’s anger, he may well have made the connection between the horsemen ravaging the earth and God’s anger, because in the OT God often meted out his anger through disease, warfare, and famine (E.g., Num.12:; Judg. 6:1; 1 Ki. 16:30-17:1; Jer. 14). (CC pp. 168-169)

Hades. Equivalent to Hebrew *Sheol*. (CSB)

ᾍδης—In classical Greek, this referred to the underworld. The word was first used as a name of the god of the underworld and then as a synonym for the underworld itself. The word means “The Unseen.” As the synonym or name for the underworld, it had a twofold meaning: (1) death and the grave in general and (2) the place of judgment and punishment. With regard to the latter Bently says, “Hades presided in grim-faced majesty over his underworld domain, where dead

mortals were judged and possibly punished.” In the LXX the word is used to translate *לִישָׁץ*, which in the Hebrew OT could have either of two meanings: (1) death and the grave, where believers too go (e.g., Ps 89:48 [MT 89:49; LXX 88:49]; Is 38:10), or (2) the place of punishment, that is, hell (e.g., Deut 32:22; Is 14:9–15). Concerning this latter usage, Jeremias says that eventually, especially in Judaism, “the term *ἄδης/λίσηץ* came to be used only of the ‘place of punishment’ for ungodly souls in the underworld.” In the NT *ἄδης* is also used with both of the above meanings (see Acts 2:27–31; Lk 16:23). Its particular meaning in biblical literature is determined by the context. (CC p. 156)

In Revelation it appears four times (1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14) and is always associated with *θάνατος*. Its meaning here in 6:8, as well as elsewhere in Revelation, is the “grave.” For example in 20:13–14 *ἄδης* at the resurrection gives up its dead and then, together with *θάνατος*, is cast into *τὴν λίμνην τοῦ πυρός*, “the lake of fire,” that is, hell. In addition to “the lake of fire,” the other expression in Revelation that is used for hell is *ἄβυσσος*, “abyss,” the dwelling place of demons and evil spirits (e.g., 9:1, 11; 20:1, 3). In classical Greek the word *τάρταρος* was used for hell more frequently than *ἄδης*. *τάρταρος* was an underworld lower than *ἄδης*. The noun *τάρταρος* does not appear in the NT, though the verb *ταρταρώω*, “to be cast into hell,” is used once, in 2 Pet 2:4. *τάρταρος* appears three times in the LXX (Job 40:20; 41:24; Prov 30:16). In Job 41:24 it is used in conjunction with *ἄβυσσος*, and in Prov 30:16 it is used in conjunction with *ἄδης*. (CC pp. 156-157)

they were given authority – God not only knows about this scourge beforehand, but indeed allows it. Although some may judge this as out of character for a gracious God, Christians nonetheless believe that the Lord has reasons for allowing tragedies to afflict the world. (TLSB)

over a fourth of the earth – Extensive, but still only the beginning. By 8:9-12 and 9:15, the end-times calamities have intensified to the point of destroying a third of the earth. By 16:1-4, calamities cover the globe. (TLSB)

by wild beasts – A violent death particularly associated with the early Christians and among the torments inflicted by Nero. (TLSB)

6:9 under the altar.† In OT ritual the blood of the slaughtered animal was poured out at the base of the altar (Ex 29:12; Lev 4:7). Since both the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple at Jerusalem had been destroyed, the reference probably is to God’s house in heaven, which Revelation regularly describes in terms of the wilderness tabernacle. (CSB)

Place of sacrifice throughout the OT. Note the rich symbolism – the martyrs are those who offer their very selves in sacrifice to the Lord. (TLSB)

The fifth seal reveals the souls of the martyred saints under the altar. Judgment day had not yet arrived, but the souls of those who died for their faith were already in heaven. This coincides with what Jesus told the dying thief: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). The souls of believers go to heaven the instant they pass out of this life. (PBC)

John says he saw the souls of martyrs under “the altar.” He is not talking about a particular altar. The altar is a part of the symbolism of the sacrifice the martyrs made when they were put to death for what they believed. (PBC)

Although in heaven, they were not yet in eternity, so they could sense the passing of time. They did not know the future, and they were not able to see exactly what was happening to those left

behind. Yet they knew that the faithful would continue to suffer persecution and death until the Lamb administered final justice. (PBC)

In Revelation θυσιαστήριον occurs eight times. In 8:3, 5 it definitely refers to an incense altar because of the incense and censer mentioned. How is θυσιαστήριον used here in 6:9? The fact that the souls beneath this altar are those of the *martyred* (“slain”) saints could suggest that it is a *sacrificial altar*. The “sacrifice” of these saints thus would reflect the sacrifice of Christ on the altar of the cross. However, the fact that the saints beneath the altar are *praying* could suggest that it is an *incense altar*, as it is in 8:3, 5, where incense and prayers are mentioned. Swete understands it to be a sacrificial altar with the martyrs as the sacrifice, the heavenly counterpart to the earthly altar of burnt offering and sacrifice. Charles says that “according to Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic, there was only one altar in heaven”⁶ and that the heavenly altar “has the characteristics of the earthly altar of incense, and in part those of the earthly altar of burnt-offering; for the souls of the martyrs, as later the souls of the righteous generally, were conceived as being offered thereon—but as a living sacrifice.” Most likely here in 6:9 the altar is an altar of incense (as it certainly is in 8:3, 5). There does seem to be only one altar before God in heaven (see Is 6:6), and even though this one altar could refer to both a sacrificial and an incense altar, most probably it refers to an incense altar. A chief argument for this is that Jesus, the Lamb, has already been sacrificed and is himself a constant reminder of *the* sacrificial altar, that is, his cross. There thus would be no need for a sacrificial altar *in heaven* (see Heb 9:11–14; 10:11–18). But there would still be a need for an incense altar, because the prayers of saints in heaven and on earth are continually rising to God as incense (cf. Rev 8:3). (CC p. 158)

At the opening of the fifth seal John sees underneath the incense altar the souls of God’s people who had been martyred because of their witness to the Word of God. And he hears them crying out loud to God, asking him how long it would be until he avenges their blood from those who had put them to death (cf. Heb 12:24). They did not avenge their own blood, nor did their Christian brothers avenge them, but now these in glory are asking God to do so, to judge and punish those who had slain them because of their faithfulness to him. Christians are not to exact vengeance (see Lev 19:18; Rom 12:19). But *God’s own* vindication of his people is a common note in the OT. Their blood itself cries out for retribution (Gen 4:10). In Ps 79:10 God avenges the shed blood of his people, and God often does so in answer to the praying of his people. In Ps 94:1–6 the psalmist prays to God, asking how long it would be before God avenged his people who had been murdered by the wicked, *thus vindicating his inheritance which had been oppressed*. (CC pp. 169-170)

The souls of the saints of God are *underneath the incense altar* that is before God’s heavenly throne. Because the incense altar is a symbolic reminder of the prayers of all God’s people, on earth and in heaven, it is underneath and before the altar that John sees the souls of God’s heavenly saints praying (cf. Rev 5:8; 8:3–4). In the OT the priest would pray and offer up incense on the altar in the temple for the people of God as they stood outside and also prayed (Ex 30:7–8; 40:26–28; cf. Lk 1:8–10). So now the souls of God’s saints, as his priests (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) in God’s heavenly temple, pray while God’s people on earth, who are also priests (1:6), are still in their suffering and are praying for deliverance (15:2–4). (CC p. 170)

had been slain – εσφαγμενον – A primary verb; to *butcher* (especially an animal for food or in sacrifice) or (generally) to *slaughter*, or (specifically) to *maim* (violently):—kill, slay, wound. (QV)

Best taken as referring to the martyrs of all ages. By the time this prophecy was written in the first century, relatively few Christians had been martyred in comparison with the carnage that was to come during regional and imperial persecutions. (TLSB)

Christians are people who are persecuted by the devil and the world and who are willing to die for the faith; they may be called upon to die a martyr's death, or they may die from other causes (e.g. illness or old age). (CC p. 158)

witness – From this word we get the English word “martyr.” A witness was someone who had witnessed something and then in public or in a court of law gave a testimony of what he had seen and heard. If called upon to do so, the witness would have to back – substantiate – his testimony with his good name and reputation, and even at times with his property and wealth. In the NT *marturia* is used of Christians because they were to be witnesses of Jesus Christ and what he had done to save the human race. As they gave their witness, their testimony about Jesus Christ, they were to confirm the truth of it by the way they lived, by the way they loved each other, by the way they sacrificed and suffered for the name of Christ and even at times by the way they died. At John's time the word “martyr (*dom*)” referred to the whole life of the Christian. (CC pp. 158-159)

6:10 *before you will judge* – While Christians pronounce the judgment of God upon the wicked who are unrepentant, they do not execute that judgment. That is for God alone. But it is proper for Christians to pray for justice in God's own time and manner, for God still desires every sinner to repent and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:1–4), and that is the reason for the delay of God's vengeance (cf. 2 Pet 3:3–10). “This request does not rise from a personal desire for revenge, but out of concern for the reputation of God.” It is for the honor of the exalted Christ and for the confirmation of the truthfulness of his Word, to which they gave witness and for which they gave their lives, that the Christians in glory thus pray for God to avenge their blood. (CC p. 170)

These souls cry out to God just like the blood of Abel, the prototypical innocent sufferer (Gen. 4:10). Not even a privileged position with the heavenly temples keeps the martyrs from fervently seeking retribution. “The angels in heaven pray for us, as does Christ Himself (Romans 8:34). So do the saints on earth and perhaps in heaven (Revelation 6:9-10). It does not follow, though, that we should invoke and adore the angels and saints (Rev. 22:8-9)” (SA II II 26). Luther: “We must look, as He does, upon the total number (of martyrs), which is not yet complete, but is daily in the process of being completed, until we have been brought together. Meanwhile we must comfort ourselves that we have this King seated as our Lord, who has already subdued many of these enemies under His feet and continues to overthrow one after another. Ultimately He will destroy them all at once. And though we die, oppressed and trampled by them, as it appears, we have the comfort that He will not forget us but fetch us when His times comes, and seat us above, so that they must forever lie under our feet” (AE 13:260). (TLSB)

those who dwell on the earth. A regular designation in Revelation for mankind in its hostility to God (see 3:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12; 17:2, 8). (CSB)

6:11 *given.*† A reminder that their righteousness before God (symbolized by the white robes) is a gracious gift of God's love. (CSB)

white robe. Symbol of blessedness and purity (see 3:5, 18; 4:4; 7:9, 13; 19:14). (CSB)

The white robe mentioned in 3:4 is more closely associated with the Christian righteousness bestowed through Baptism. Here, it seems to represent eternal life. That said, Baptism into Christ Jesus results in “newness of life” through the power of His resurrection (Rom. 6:4). (TLSB)

In answer to their prayer there is given to each a “white robe” (6:11). The white robe symbolizes the salvation garments of Christ which now cover them so that they are righteous before God’s holy presence (3:18). They were clothed with Christ in Baptism (Gal. 3:27; cf. Is.61:10; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10, 14). They are reminded that, because they have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb (7:14), they thus stand pure and holy and righteous before God. Here in 6:11 the white robes also remind the martyred Christians, the people of God who had suffered, that just as God’s righteousness (justice) mercifully covers them because of Christ, God’s righteous judgment (justice) will also come upon those who had put them to death. That is, the white robes they wear are also a vindication of their trust in and faithfulness to God, and of God’s faithfulness to them—faithfulness that includes God’s judgment of those who had slain his people. (CC pp. 170-171)

rest a little longer – pauo – Be restrained.

Also in answer to their prayer they are told “that they should rest yet a little time, until their fellow slaves and their brothers,” who are going to be martyred even as they were, “should also be fulfilled” (6:11). They “should rest,” be at peace, until all their fellow Christians on earth have been martyred and have joined their glorious company before God in heaven. The rest that they experience and enjoy can be identified with the rest that the Lord Christ gives to all who “labor and are heavy laden” and who come to him (Mt 11:28). It is the rest that was promised in the OT, the eternal Sabbath rest which the Messiah himself would bring about (Heb 4:9–11, 14–16). It is the rest that God’s people on earth experience in faith, and the completion of which they long to receive before God in heaven and at the resurrection (Rev 14:13). The moment the souls of the saints were ushered before God’s heavenly throne, they received and possessed this heavenly rest (cf. Lk 23:43). But now they are reminded to rest their prayer in that rest which they have. That is, just assuredly as they have this rest now, they should in that rest confidently place their prayer that in God’s justice and in his time he will avenge their blood. In other words, God says to them, “Be patient in your peaceful rest, for I will act on your behalf.” (CC p. 171)

should be complete – God in effect asks the martyrs to continue waiting patiently while He gathers all the elect. We are in a similar situation, awaiting His return. (TLSB)

They are to rest, to be at peace and patiently wait, until all their fellow Christians on earth have joined them. Whether one understands, “should be fulfilled,” πληρωθῶσιν, numerically, that is, until the full number of their fellow believers is filled up and completed (cf. ὅσοι, “as many as,” in Acts 13:48), or whether it refers to the completion of the mission of their fellow Christians, that is, until the mission of their fellow Christians on earth is fulfilled and completed by their martyrdom, it refers to the time when God would avenge their blood in the great judgment at the end of this world’s existence and history. Perhaps it is best to receive both interpretations. When the mission that the Lord Christ has given to his followers on earth is complete, then the full number of the elect chosen by God will have entered his kingdom, and then at that time God will avenge their blood (see Mt 22:1–10; Rom 8:28–30; Rev 19:1–9). If one is to choose only one interpretation, that of the mission of the church is preferable, for it is in keeping with the mission of the church as pictured elsewhere in Revelation (e.g., 11:7). (CC p. 171)

However one understands πληρωθῶσιν, here in 6:11 the emphasis is on completion, for then the vengeful judgment will take place. God will avenge his people; he will vindicate their trust and faith in the Gospel of Christ's salvation; he will openly display his church in his glory; and he will judge and destroy her enemies once and for all. All this is for his glory and that of the exalted Christ, which redounds for the benefit of his holy people. This divine vindication will appear at the End, not before (see Dan 7:21–22). And while God's people will participate in his judgment (see 1 Cor 6:2–3), they do not execute such judgment now on earth nor in the judgment at the End. The execution of judgment has been given by God only to his Son, Jesus Christ (Jn 5:22–23, 27; Acts 10:40–42; 17:31). But this is the peace and comfort in which God's saints can rest: God will avenge their blood when all is finished (cf. Rev 21:5–6). (CC pp. 171-172)

The *martyred* saints in heaven—and those to be martyred who are still here on earth—represent and illustrate the persecutions and the suffering of the entire people of God, the church of Jesus Christ. “*With the fifth seal the Church comes into sight, in its persecuted, suffering, state.*” While the earthly powers that be and the human race go their own way, pursuing their ambitions and goals—and suffering in the process (as illustrated by the four horsemen)—“the Church follow[s] the steps of ‘the Lamb that was slain.’”³⁸ And because she does so, she also suffers persecution and shame and death like that on a cross (11:7–8; 13:7). The *martyred* saints of God, then, portray a picture of the suffering church all during the time period that the four horsemen are ravaging the earth, from the time of the ascension of Christ to the End. For *all* Christians are martyrs in the sense that they *all* give witness by their faith, their mouths, and their lives to the victorious Lamb, who died and rose again. And because all Christians give that testimony, they all suffer because of it. They are all martyrs, holding to their faith, even to death. It is a glorious witness and song they give, and a part of that song is to pray for each other, all to the glory of the One on the throne and to the exalted Lamb (15:2–4; 19:6–8). For this is the glorious role of the church as she witnesses in her martyrdom, for “martyrdom is not simply the church's deliverance from the world, but the culmination of the church's witness to the world.” *It is her glory to complete her mission in martyrdom and thus glorify the cross and resurrection of Christ and his exaltation at the right hand of the heavenly Father.* (CC pp. 171-172)

6:12–17† The first three verses (12–14) depict the passing away of the present world on the day of judgment; the last three describe the punishment of those who are enemies of God and of his church. (CSB)

With the opening of the sixth seal John receives a visionary scene in which is depicted the end of all things, together with the preceding and accompanying cosmic disturbances. The prophecy of Hag 2:6–7 might have entered John's mind as he viewed the great shaking of the cosmos, for the prophet declared that once more God would shake the heavens and earth as well as all nations. According to the author of Hebrews this once-more shaking of the earth and heaven would make evident that which would be destroyed and would also demonstrate that that “which could not be shaken” would remain, namely, the kingdom of God (Heb 12:26–28). John sees the heavenly bodies—the sun, moon, and stars—shaken and disturbed. The imagery of Joel 2:30–31 (MT/LXX 3:3–4) comes to mind, where the prophet says that the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood. In Joel 3:15 (MT/LXX 4:15) the sun and moon will be darkened and the stars will no longer show their light. In Is 34:1–4, when all the nations are judged, the stars of the heavens will be destroyed and the heavenly sky will be rolled up like a scroll as the stars fall out of their places like withered leaves from a vine and like dried up figs from a fig tree (Is 34:4). Joel speaks of this cosmic shaking taking place just before the coming of the great and terrible (terrifying) day of the Lord (Joel 2:31). In John's prophetic scene in Rev 6:12–17, this cosmic shaking and these disturbances happen just before and at the great day of the wrath of the One sitting on the throne and of the Lamb (6:16–17). In the gospel of Mark Jesus says that all these

cosmic disturbances will precede and attend his coming at the end of this world (Mk 13:24–27; cf. Mt 24:29–31; Lk 21:25–28). Jesus also used the example of a fig tree and its leaves to teach about recognizing the nearness of the End (Mk 13:28–31). (CC pp. 172-173)

6:12 earthquake. A regular feature of divine visitation (see Ex 19:18; Isa 2:19; Hag 2:6). (CSB)

Terrestrial upheavals and celestial disturbances fulfill Jesus' prophecies about the end times. (TLSB)

The suddenness of this cosmic, earthquake-like shaking is graphically portrayed by the heavens being split open and rolled up, as if a scroll were split and each half rapidly rolled up around its spindle. The apostle Peter speaks of how the heavens will be destroyed by fire and the elements (στοιχεῖα) will be dissolved, melted, in a tremendous heat. And all this will happen so that a new heaven and earth can take their place (2 Pet 3:12–13; cf. Is 65:17). (CC p. 173)

sackcloth – Symbol of mourning and repentance, often worn by those covering themselves with ashes (cf. Mt. 11:21). (TLSB)

moon became like blood. See Joel 2:31, quoted by Peter in his Pentecost sermon (Ac 2:20). (CSB)

6:13 stars ... fell. One of the signs immediately preceding the coming of the Son of Man (Mk 13:25–26). (CSB)

as the fig tree shed its winter fruit. Green figs appearing in the winter and easily blown from the tree, which at that season has no leaves. (CSB)

On the season for figs. (TLSB)

shaken by a gale – Emphasizes how insignificant even the majestic heavenly bodies are when compared to the power of God's judgment. (TLSB)

6:14 like a scroll that is being rolled up. See Isa 34:4. (CSB)

Cf. Is. 334:4. Depicts the firmament itself disappearing. (TLSB)

hilisso – Like coil or wrap that is rolled together. (QV)

This is a picture of rapid rolling up of papyrus sheets in a scroll. That is, heaven is split open and removed suddenly like a scroll is rapidly and unexpectedly rolled up and removed. Perhaps it could be likened to a sudden, unexpected, and rapid rolling up of a window shade or blind. The moment before, the window blind was drawn, and then suddenly it is rolled up and disappears. (CC p. 160)

every mountain and island was removed. Perhaps suggested by Jer 4:24 or Na 1:5; (CSB)

The earth likewise will dissolve on this fearsome day. (TLSB)

6:15 generals. A general was a Roman officer who commanded a cohort, i.e., about 1,000 men. (CSB)

hid themselves in the caves. See Jer 4:29. (CSB)

Cf. Is. 2:10. Plainly, this day will bring dread to all who witness it. (TLSB)

6:16 *fall on us* – Evokes the reaction of Israel, as that nation was experiencing divine judgment. On that day, the people will prefer to be caught in an avalanche rather than come face-to-face with divine judgment. Cf. Num. 16. (TLSB)

When this cosmic, earthquake-like shaking hits the earth as the mountains and islands begin to move and disappear, the peoples of the earth will be struck with a terror and a hopelessness that staggers the imagination and surpasses any horror yet experienced by humanity. Calling upon the rocks and hills will be to no avail, for they cannot hide the people who thus cry out in fear from the anger and judgment of God and of his Christ (see Is 2:10–22; Hos 10:8; Lk 23:29–31). Even the rocks are under the command of God (Lk 19:40), and if anything, they will testify to the Lamb and his victory (Mt 27:51–53; 28:2), but they certainly will not hide those people from the fearful judgment of God. These cries of fear and anguish are misplaced and too late, for now is the time of reckoning and judgment. All peoples of the earth—king and subject, free and slave, rich and poor—all who did not heed the call to repentance and the invitation of the Gospel of the victorious Lamb will attempt to flee in terror. But there is no place to hide from the presence of the almighty God (cf. Gen 3:8–10). (CC pp. 173-175)

It is “from the face of the One sitting on the throne and *from the wrath of the Lamb*” (Rev 6:16) that they would attempt to flee. While mercy and forgiveness might be expected from “the Lamb,” here there is only “wrath”—anger and judgment. The fact that God has given the execution of his judgment to Jesus Christ is usually expressed with reference to Christ as “the Son of Man” (e.g., Jn 5:27; cf. Mt 26:64) and not as “the Lamb.” However, it is because Jesus was the Lamb of God that he not only earned the right to save God’s people from God’s judgment against their sin, he also earned the right to judge those who do not repent of their sins. While it is as the Son of Man that he will execute the judgment of God, *he will do this precisely because he was the Lamb who died in that judgment on the cross.* In Rev 14:1–20, in the first picture in Revelation of Christ’s second coming, he is portrayed both as “the Lamb” (14:1) and as “the Son of Man” (14:14), thus emphasizing his dual role of both savior and judge. But even more to the point for understanding “the wrath of the Lamb” here in 6:16 is the second picture in Revelation of Christ’s second coming, 19:11–16, where only his role of judge is described and where he is pictured only as the Son of Man. There too John is reminded that Jesus is this judge because of his suffering and atoning death, signified by the “garment that had been dipped in blood” which he wears (19:13). Therefore he alone “treads the winepress of the wine of the fury of the wrath of God” (19:15). He alone has the right and the authority to carry out the judgment of God. (CC pp. 173-175)

All this cosmic shaking happens because “*the great day*” (6:17) of God’s wrath, and that of the Lamb, has come. In the OT, similar designations, such as “the (great) day of Yahweh,” appear as references to the time when the Lord God will execute his judgment on the human race (Joel 2:11 {MT 3:4} Zeph. 1:14; Mal. 4:5 {MT 3:23}). While this “day of the Lord” is *dies irae*, “a day of wrath,” to the world (Zeph 1:15, 18; 2:3), it is to the people of God a day of vindication and deliverance (Mal. 4:5-6 {MT 3:23-24}; 2 Tim. 1:12; Heb. 10:25). Nonetheless, it is still called a “day of wrath” for its purpose is the judgment of God. In 2 Pet 3:10 “the day of the Lord” will come suddenly as a thief, and it is the day in which the present heaven and earth will be destroyed (cf. 1 Thess 5:2). In Rom 2:5 Paul calls it the “day of wrath,” and in Jude 6 it is called “the great day.” (CC pp. 173-175)

The opening of the sixth seal introduces to John and the reader the first view in Revelation of the end of this world, and thus it concludes the first vision of events taking place on earth (the seals, Revelation 6; see figure 3). The first sevenfold vision is one of horror, tribulation, suffering, and fear, from the time of the Lord's resurrection and ascension up to the End. The whole vision is nothing but woe and lament, even for God's own people. One can imagine that as John mystically experienced the horrors and sufferings depicted and saw at their conclusion only death and the grave and then finally the terrifying judgment of God, he might have been tempted to fall into a hopeless despair. "Oh, Lord, is this all that there is from now to the End? Even your own people will suffer all this?" (CC pp. 173-175)

John of course knew, from his own experience and that of his congregation, that suffering and finally death would be their lot. The Lord Christ while still on earth had told him as much (. 10:35-45; cf. Acts 9:15-16; 12:1-4; 2 Cor. 11:16-29). To see it so graphically and fearfully portrayed before his eyes, however, must have stirred John's heart to the very depths and core of his being. But he must have kept in mind what he had seen previously—the glory of God in heaven and the coronation of the exalted Jesus Christ (Revelation 4–5), with the twenty-four elders (representing the church) enthroned around him (4:4). The Lord says, in effect, "Yes, John, there is suffering now. But remember, what you have just seen and will experience—all that tribulation and horror—is not and will not be *your* end. Your end is to share in my exalted glory (cf. Rom 8:18). You are my prophet who, in the midst of your sufferings, speaks of my glory as the victorious Lamb. And no matter what you suffer for my name's sake, I will defend you and keep you until I take you to myself." (CC pp. 173-175)

As the prophetic message of Revelation continues, the Lord Christ will now lift up John to see something beautiful and full of hope and comfort (Revelation 7, an interlude). *He and the reader* will be lifted up and encouraged before being given the second sevenfold vision of terrifying events on earth (Rev 8:6–9:21; 11:15–19). (CC pp. 173-175)

wrath of the Lamb.† God's wrath is a theme that permeates NT theology. It is both present and future (see 19:15). It is prophesied in the OT (Zep 1:14–18; Na 1:6; Mal 3:2). The day of God's wrath is also the day of the Lamb's (Jesus') wrath. (CSB)

6:17 *who can stand* – Rhetorical question that expects the answer "No one!" (cf. Ps. 130:3). (TLSB)

Ch 6 John describes in symbolic language the calamities God will unleash upon the earth in the end times. The ferocity and totality of these predicted calamities move reflective people to shudder and repent. When people sincerely turn to God, the Lamb who has taken away the sins of the world stands ready to forgive them and restore them. His second coming is for the final deliverance of His people, not their destruction. • Give us strength to endure the end-times upheavals, gracious Father, so that by faith we persevere and then enter into eternal life with Christ, our Redeemer. Amen