

Revelation, Session 3

Seven Seals and 144,000

Revelation 6:1-8:5

In the previous vision of a heavenly reality, John had seen a lamb enthroned, surrounded by “beasts” and “elders” who acclaimed him and declared him worthy to “take the scroll and open its seals” (5:9). He now proceeds to do just that. At the opening of every seal, something disastrous happens on earth. The first four dire events follow in rapid succession, introduced by a cry of “come” from one of the beasts surrounding the throne (6:3–8). With the opening of the fifth seal, the pace slows and another voice chimes in, this one coming from the “souls of those who had been slain” (6:9-11). The opening of the sixth seal, accompanied by a great earthquake and a blackened sun reveals a scene of frightening judgment (6:12-17). The expected seventh seal is delayed and, in the interlude before it is opened, John sees a different vision, not of desolation on earth, but of a more positive reality. An angel arises from the east to put a seal on the “servants of God” (7:1-3). These servants then are counted, 144,000, twelve thousand from each tribe of the people of Israel (7:4–8). The scene then expands to a vision of a “great multitude that no one could count,” coming “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9). Their acclamation is echoed by the angels around the throne (7:11-12). One of the elders standing near the throne then interprets the vision for John, in poetic language that underscores the message of consolation and hope that the vision conveys (7:13-17). Finally the lamb opens the seventh seal and there is a half hour of silence before the next sequence of visions (8:1).

The structure of this set of visions, which will be repeated in an expanded form in the next sequence, is significant. The best known images of the Book of Revelation are those of gloom, doom, and destruction, and indeed such images abound. Yet negative images always stand in balanced tension with images of hope and consolation. This is true of the book as a whole and true even of the sequences that focus on the negative. The first six images of the “seals” sequence are indeed horrific, but move along quickly. John spends almost as much time and effort on the scene that appears after the image of judgment associated with the sixth seal. That scene, framed by the visions associated with the “seals,” reveals a deeper and more encouraging reality.

It is also worth noting that the whole sequence seems to tell a complete story of end time tribulation and judgment. The vision of the sixth seal culminates in “the great day of their wrath” (6:17), which certainly looks like a day of final judgment. This fact is relevant to a question about how the whole book is to be read. Some readers, including modern Dispensationalists, have attempted to find in its list of visions a single blueprint for events of the end time. We have already noted that the book invites a different kind of reading and the sequencing of the visions of gloom and doom points in that direction. In fact, the church father Victorinus of Pettau in the late third century insightfully suggested that the visionary images of the book repeat the same overall story, that there is tale of judgmental woe to be told.

The Four Horsemen and other Woes



The woes of the “seals” sequence include a well-known image of Revelation, the “Four Horsemen,” which has been appropriated in a variety of ways in popular culture, including the “Four Horsemen” of Notre Dame’s 1924 football team. The image itself comes not from athletics, but from the Prophet Zechariah’s vision of four horsemen on variously colored steeds who “patrol the earth” (Zechariah 1:7-11) to keep it at peace. Revelation’s four connote more than running prowess or peaceful vigilance. The first, riding on a white horse with bow and crown (6:2), seems like a victorious general, and anticipates the image of the returning Messiah in 19:11–13. The second rides a red horse, like Zechariah’s peace patrol, but he takes peace from the earth (6:3-4). The third, on a black horse, is engaged in the economics of scarcity, selling wheat and barley for an exorbitant price, while protecting oil and wine. The reference to economic exploitation is hardly unique in Revelation and in its central vision of earthly power in

collaboration with ultimate evil, money will again play a pivotal role (13:15–18). The final rider, on a “pale green” horse, embodies death for more than a quarter of the earth’s inhabitants, “by sword, famine, and pestilence and by the wild animals” (6:7–8). The fact that it is all too easy to match this vision with the realities of war in our day is not an indication that Revelation is talking about our time. That pale green horse and its rider have been doing their work throughout human history.

The opening of the fifth seal offers a brief respite from the visions of doom and destruction, but only long enough for the voices of martyrs to ask how long it will be before their vindication (6:9-11). The opening of the sixth seal is replete with familiar imagery about eschatological disaster. The prophecy of the end time attributed to Jesus in Mark 13 tells, in language drawn from Isaiah 13:10 about the sun and moon being darkened, stars falling from heaven and the heavenly powers shaken. Details of this passage (6:12–14) derive from other sources. The moon being turned to blood echoes Joel 2:31 (3:5 LXX), which is cited in Acts 2:20. The fig tree losing its leaves recalls both Isaiah 34:4 and Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree in Mark 11:12–14. Heaven being rolled up like a scroll echoes Isaiah 34:4.

All of these signs drive rulers to flight, a scene which will be repeated in later passages that tell of the judgment and destruction of the earthly minions of the power of evil (18:1–3; 19:19–21). A verse from the prophet Hosea 10:8 gives voice to the dismay of these rulers, who ask the hills to cover them from the divine wrath (6:16). Hosea attributed these words to sinners within Israel and Samaria facing the aggressive policies of the Assyrian empire. Whatever he believes about divine judgment in the end time, it may be that our seer, John, envisions something similar happening in his own day, that is, a political and military event that will destroy the political powers that cause the slaying of the martyrs of (v 9).

[Illustrated Manuscript by Beatus of Liébana (730-800)]



[Albrecht Dürer, 1471-1528]



Some modern efforts.



horsemen of the apocalypse

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The Ones Preserved from Wrath

The visionary intermission between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals falls into three parts, the vision of the 144,000 (7:1-8); the crowds from every nation that hail them and elicit a response (7:9–11); and the interpretation of the whole vision by an “elder” (7:13-17). The whole scene verbally sketched here, and the acclamations of the people in it, mimic a public pageant in the cities familiar to John. Heroes, as if returning from a grand Olympic context, are assembled; a large crowd of spectators’ shouts out an acclamation to the ruler, echoes by those attending him. An official gives a speech celebrating both the contestants and the ruler. That John engages in a parody of forms of the civil religion of his day is hardly surprising and we encounter more parody of this sort in chapters 12–14.

The composition of the groups involved here is significant for understanding John’s assessment of his audience. The 144,000 from every tribe of Israel certainly attest to his belief that he and his community are the authentic heirs of the people of Israel. This is the kind of claim that was increasingly made by followers of Jesus, whatever their ethnic background, in the late first century and beyond. The number of 144,000 is certainly symbolic: $12^2 \times 1,000$. It is a

large but limited number, a “remnant” of ancient Israel. John’s image, in other words, performs somewhat the same function performed by Paul’s reflections in Romans 9-12. Paul, confronted with the distressing fact that his gospel had been largely rejected by his fellow Jews. This, he argued, was part of the divine plan. Some Jews had accepted his gospel, like the “remnant” of Israel through whom God had worked in the past (Romans 11:1–10).

The 144,000 have been “sealed,” like the people of Jerusalem in the vision of Ezekiel 9, in which an angel is directed to go through the city and “put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it” (Ezekiel 9:4). Other angels were directed to cut down the rest of the inhabitants of the city, sparing only those with the mark. The “seal” that John has in mind is probably something more than a random mark on the forehead, since “sealing” by the Holy Spirit, probably symbolized by anointing with oil, was one image used for the ritual of initiation into the Christian community (see Eph 1:13; 4:30).

What the voice of the “elder” tells the visionary is that the image that he sees of the 144,000 and the myriads that surround them, symbolizes the divine promise to protect those “who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,” yet another reference to baptism. The imagery of paradoxical, even surreal, laundering, of whitening with red blood, functions refers to the same reality of Christian experience to which Paul appeals in Romans 6:3–4. Through the ritual of baptism, followers of Christ identify themselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus, accepting the gracious forgiveness of their sins that God offers to them. Through that baptism they are enabled to participate in the reality of “worship . . . day and night” depicted as a heavenly reality in chapter 4. The baptized also receive assurance that, whatever they experience, including death for their testimony (6:9), God is with them. The language used to describe that divine protection, relief from hunger and thirst, and protection

from the harsh sun (7:16), evokes the promise of Isaiah 49:10, who describes a hoped for day of liberation of prisoners. That God will “wipe away every tear” (7:17) recalls another powerful image from Isaiah, of a banquet that the Lord, the refuge of the poor and needy (Isaiah 25:4) will provide for “all peoples, a fest of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines” (Isaiah 25:6). The prophet also promises that God will “swallow up death forever...”wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth” (Isaiah 25:8). John will allude to the same prophetic passage in his concluding vision of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:4). Here as there, the temporal horizon between present and future is blurred, as John suggests that believers hoping for a dramatic transformation of the human condition can have a foretaste of that now as they participate in the worship of God and of the Lamb. The embrace of that worshipping community trumps whatever travails they may experience.

Focus Texts: Rev 6:9-17; 7:11-17

Questions for reflection:

1. How do you react to the scenes of doom and destruction that accompany the opening of the seven seals?
2. How do you perceive the balance between the visions associated with the seals and the vision of the saints in heaven?
3. The vision of the 144,000 and the countless throng that accompanies them sends a positive signal. Does its depiction of a “heavenly” reality appeal to our modern sensibilities?

Basic Reading

Gonzalez, *Revelation*, 46-58.

Further Reading

The Seals

J. A. Draper, "The Heavenly Feast of Tabernacles: Revelation 7.1-17," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 19 (1983) 133–47.

John P. Heil, "The Fifth Seal (Rev 6,9-11) as a Key to the Book of Revelation," *Biblica* 74 (1993) 220–43.

Susan Hylén, "Metaphor Matters: Violence and Ethics in Revelation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011) 777–796.

A. Kerkeslager, "Apollo, Greco-Roman Prophecy, and the Rider on the White Horse in Rev. 6:2," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993) 116–21.

The 144,000

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Followers of the Lamb: Visionary Rhetoric and Social-Political Situation," *Semeia* 36 (1986) 123–146.

C. R. Smith, "The Portrayal of the Church as the New Israel in the Names and Order of the Tribes in Revelation 7.5–8," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39 (1990) 111–18.