



*This is the world,
brutal and cruel, that Troy tried to withstand.
Cruelty wins in the end.
Our little clearings of civilization may seem real,
but mindless wilderness always lurks,
may take its time,
but in the end overwhelms all our pretensions to decency.
We revert to beastliness. (Seneca, Trojan Women, Lines 985-990)*

The four horsemen of the apocalypse

Part 3 of 5—the red horse and its rider

Revelation 6.¹⁻⁸

¹I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures invite, with a voice like thunder, "Come!"

²Then I saw—imagine this!—a white horse. Its rider held a military bow and was granted a crown. He went off triumphantly, intending to conquer.

³And when he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature invite, "Come!"

⁴And another horse, this one red, went off, its rider given power to take peace from the earth, to the extent that they kill each other. He was equipped with a vicious sword.

⁵And when he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature invite, "Come!"

Then I saw—imagine this!—a black horse. Its rider held a set of scales in his hand. ⁶I heard something like a voice coming from the four creatures, announcing: "A quart of wheat or three quarts of barley costs a day's wage, while olive oil and wine you are not to impact"

⁷And when he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature invite, "Come!"

⁸And I saw—imagine this!—a pallid horse. As for its rider, his name was Death, and hell accompanied him. And he was given dominion over a large swath of the planet to slay with the sword and with starvation and with death and with earth's wild beasts.¹

¹ This represents the author's translation. The reader can review textual notes on these verses in my first homily, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Part 1 of 2—general observations."

In our two preceding homilies devoted to the four horsemen of the apocalypse, we have suggested that John's purpose in writing the apocalypse was at least three-fold: 1) describe the world as it is, a world ruled by satanic impulses and powers; 2) imagine a better world, a world ruled by God and principles of godliness; and 3) call his readers to action such that they resist the former and hope, pray and labor for the latter.

As for the four horsemen, we have suggested that they represent the world as it is. Rather than representing singular individuals or eras, they represent types or patterns that have been and continue to be repeated over and over again. While this pattern plays itself out in the world as it is, it has its genesis in the heavens, as John will demonstrate later in his work. We have also suggested that the four horsemen represent one, single plot line. Each horse and its rider advancing the established plot line of the preceding horse and rider.

The plot line begins with the first horse, white, with its rider. Based on his white mount, we identified the rider as a wealthy, prestigious, and powerful man.² With his military bow in hand, we were also able to identify him as a military man and likely calvary man. Finally, with his crown, we were able to identify him as a national leader. Imbibing the nation's character, this national leader marshaled his nation's forces with one objective in mind: to conquer and dominate other peoples and nations.

We need not, indeed must not resort to any tired literalism or limit ourselves to any specific historical context when contemplating the individual or symbols found in the first seal: white horse, rider, bow, and crown. If we were, today, to update the scene, we might legitimately replace the white horse with a black stretch limousine or sleek white private jet (these are military leaders' modern modes of transportation, the ugly green camouflaged jeep long ago jettisoned for something more respectable, corporate). We could replace the military bow

² National leaders have, of course, until recently been male. So, we do not mean to be sexist here. Females now function as national leaders in many nations of the world. This is to be celebrated. One can hope that they will be wiser than their preceding male counterparts, but so far, anyway, the jury is still out. If they continue the pattern established by their male forebearers, they will be no better than, and be under the same condemnation as those male leaders of the past.

with fighter jets, aircraft carriers, unmanned drones, and, of course, the granddaddy of them all, nuclear weapons. And we might replace the crown with a Bible on which presidents and prime ministers swear oaths even as they plan how to break them (But no matter their ideologically viewpoint, they can always be counted on to remain true to the satanic principle of buying up armies and navies in order to wage eternal war and reign with blood and horror on the earth).

This horse and rider represent the time-honored desire to conquer and dominate; a cancerous desire that nearly every nation in world history has violently acted upon. With the desire to dominate as the first act in our ongoing plot line, we only wait to see the consequences of this unholy desire. The Revelator does not keep us waiting; for the opening of the second seal with its red horse and its rider advances the plot line to its next logical phase. Predictably, this next phase involves consequences of this desire that are tragic, deadly, and hellish.

The first horseman reminds us that all the tragedy, all the death, and all the hellishness found in the coming three seals begins with something as seemingly benign as a desire, a want, a craving, an unholy need: the desire, want, and need to excel, to conquer, to dominate. Without this satanic-like desire to dominate, not only would there be no four horsemen of the apocalypse, but there would be no apocalypse. But this unholy desire does exist, ever and always. So too do the consequences, represented in the second, third, and fourth horsemen. It is to the second of the four horses and their riders that we now turn our attention.

the red horse

With the appearance of the white horse in the first seal, we considered the meaning of its color, and concluded that it was indicative of wealth, power, and prestige. So, what are we to make of our second horse, red in color? Perhaps the red color of our second horse tells us nothing. Perhaps the horse is just a horse, a simple brown/chestnut horse. But, we are dealing with THE REVELATOR here. This is his APOCALYPSE. Of course his notice that the horse is red is indicative of something more, much more, than equestrian hair color. But, what might the red color of the second horse signify? While the reader ponders this mystery,

we should take a moment to consider the red horse's rider.

The rider is equipped with a deadly, vicious sword. With his vicious sword in hand, the rider is given an awesome commission: to "take peace from the earth." This results in rampant, militant, institutional mayhem and murder: peace was taken from the earth "to the extent that they kill each other."

So, with our mounted rider slashing this way and that with his vicious sword, corpses lying about the horse's pounding hooves, why, would you guess, is John's second horse red? It is difficult to imagine the reason to be anything other than sinister. It is difficult to see the horse's red color being the result of anything other than the fact that it is covered with freshly drawn human blood. Indeed, it is tempting to see the same white horse that appeared in the first seal, now splattered red from spouting human blood.

The present homilist might be accused of having an overactive imagination. However, he can hardly be accused of being more imaginative than the Revelator.

But, whatever one decides about this imagery of the red horse, there is no doubt where the first rider's desire to conquer and dominate has led. Predictably, it has led to unimaginable conflict and violent death—just how unimaginable we will not fully grasp until the fourth horse. Of course, this conflict and violent death is not surprising. What else could we possibly expect? What, you expected nations and peoples under attack to submit to their enemy's aggression? Bow down to the invading army? Thank the conquering "hero"? Of course, they offer resistance. Of course, the resistance leads to death and destruction.

No insatiable nation or its enabling leaders can ever claim that resistance came as a shock; that the ensuing war simply snuck up on them. Unholy desire for dominance always telegraphs conflict and carnage long before they appear in all their gory glory. And to be sure, after the Revelator's apocalyptic warning, no nation or national leader can ever claim surprise at the consequence of their unholy desire to dominate and subjugate. They are, in fact, left without excuse. These warmongers, having been warned and forewarned, will surely need assertions of God's merciful disposition to be true as much as any whoremonger or the

vilest of sinner.

So, our red horse and rider, representing war and violent death, is the direct and predictable consequence of our white horse and its rider with his desire to conquer, subjugate, and dominate. The second horse and rider are the continuation of the plot line began in the first seal.

the agent in the passive voice

Now, we should say a word or two about the passive voice that we have seen in these first two seals, and will see again in the fourth. In the first seal, the rider of the white horse “*was granted* a crown.” In the second seal, the rider of the red horse is “*given power* to take peace from the earth” and thus instigate the “killing of each other.” In the fourth seal, the rider of the pale horse “*was given dominion*.” Even in the third seal, where there is no passive voice, the horseman, this time on a black horse, is not in complete control as he seems to be commanded to limit his military induced economic devastation: “olive oil and wine you are not to impact.”

Many commentators, perhaps most, understand this passive voice and the fact that the various riders seem not to be in total control of their lives or activities as indicative of God’s sovereignty, even in the lives and actions of ungodly individuals and in the wake of their tragic choices. Such individuals as those represented by the four horsemen could and would not become rulers, wage war, impact the lives of others, or dominate in any way, it is argued, unless God granted them such powers. According to this interpretation, then, it was God who granted the first rider a crown, gave power to the second rider to “take peace from the earth,” restricted the third rider’s impact, and gave unfettered dominion to the fourth rider.

Hmmm...

I know it is popular to speak of God as a God who works through human history “a “God of history,” But I am not so sure that this understanding of God is appropriate to the passive

voice found in this text. For a number of reasons which we cannot go into here, I am not wild about this common interpretation of the passive voice as found here. And, not unlike many, I am not so sure of God's ability, or perhaps better, willingness to control human desires and activities, either at the micro or macro level. Human beings, both as individuals and as group members have a divinely appointed agency. What they are "given" is the right and responsibility to be agents unto themselves. God does not encroach upon this divinely appointed agency. But he does hold human beings accountable for the way they exercise this divinely bestowed right.

While I have no better answers than anyone else about questions of theodicy, or how God's participation in human affairs maintains agency, I feel little uncertainty about this: notwithstanding the occasional rhetorical flourish, God does not "give" leave or power to individuals to dominate, oppress, terrorize, maim, kill, or otherwise bring hell into the lives of others as our four horsemen do.

So, what are we to make of the passive voice? What message does it send? Powerful rulers—historically, and even today, mostly male—even the most powerful among them, do not rule without consent; without it being "given" them by their fellow citizens. The circle of consent may be extraordinarily small as it always was in the ancient and medieval worlds. It may be more expansive as it is in so many modern nations. But the power to rule is not in any single individual's power to control.

In ancient Egypt, for example, the power to rule was "given" a Pharaoh by a mythology of succession adopted and perpetuated by Egyptian power elites. Without this consenting mythology and its practitioners, no individual could be called, "Pharaoh." In empires such as Assyria or Babylon or Rome, small circles of autocrats "gave" or sustained a man's power to rule through consent. Medieval monarchs ruled through consent of small, normally plutocratic, circles of patronage. Today's presidents, prime ministers, senators, governors, mayors, etc., govern and rule through consent of electorates. Such rulers may be, often have been brutal and intimidating bullies—one might think, for example, of Iraq's Saddam Hussein or tRUMP, America's modern-day version of Caligula. Nevertheless, they still require an, often, obsequious circle of consent, however small. Today, just how little control modern

leaders have is often seen by the fear they have for the fickle and demanding electorate, whose whims leaders seek to mimic in order to maintain their hold on whatever power they may possess.³ It's pathetic, really. Juvenile. But no less evil and no less deadly for that.

The Revelator is completely cognizant of the fact that no single individual can control his own power to rule. Thus, the rider on the white horse is “granted” power to rule, not by God, but by a circle of consent, big or small. Consistent with his desire to dominate, a circle of consent gives him leave to follow his heart's desire. Disturbing whatever peace there may have been, that same circle of consent commissions him to engage in war, whatever its cost in human life. Thus, it gives him power, authorizes him to kill. Unfortunate for the circle of consent, it cannot control the level of death and hell it unleashes with its commission. Things can and often do get out of hand, escalating and spiraling out of control, as we will see in the fourth seal.

Illustration

As an illustration of the desire to conquer, rule, and dominate that is found in the rider of the first seal's white horse, we examined two Book of Mormon figures, Amlici and Amalickiah, along with those in their circle of consent. We observed the same unholy desire in each of them. Although the Book of Mormon chronicler simply reported Amlici's machinations and let his desire to dominate speak for itself, that same chronicler choose to be more pointed about Amalickiah's desires, specifically highlighting his and his followers' desires and “designs” to conquer, subjugate, and dominate.

“Amalickiah was desirous to be a king.”⁴

“Yea, having been made king over the Lamanites, he sought also to reign over all the

³ There seems to me to be no other explanation, for example, for America's GOP to have so slavishly, cowardly, and self-destructively followed tRUMP except that its members feared that portion of the electorate that were mesmerized by the man's horror show of unreality, lies, and corruption.

⁴ Alma 46.⁴

land.”⁵

“Those who were in favor of kings were those of high birth, and they sought to be kings; and they were supported by those who sought power and authority over the people.”⁶

Captain Moroni, inspired by the same spirit as John, didn’t need John to tell him what to expect as a consequence of Amalickiah’s unholy desire. Moroni, we are informed, “knew that [Amalickiah] would stir up the Lamanites to anger against them, and cause them to come to battle against them; and this he knew that Amalickiah would do that he might obtain his purposes [i.e. fulfill his desires].”⁷

Moroni didn’t even need to rely on any inspired intuition. Amalickiah’s brother, Ammaron, made clear how far his desire to conquer and dominate would lead him and his people.

“We will wage a war which shall be eternal, either to the subjecting the Nephites to our authority or to their eternal extinction.”⁸

Indeed, the disruption of peace, the battles, and the violent end of so many lives that flowed from Amalickiah’s desire to dominate “never did cease for the space of many years”⁹—just short of twenty, according to the chronicler.¹⁰

Just over a dozen years before Amalickiah’s rise, Amlici desired to be king over the Nephites. When he failed to accomplish this desire through legal means, he ordered his followers to “take up arms against their brethren; and this he did that he might subject them to him.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, Amlici’s intended victims resisted.

“They did prepare to meet them; yea, they did arm themselves with swords, and with

⁵ Alma 48.²

⁶ Alma 51.⁸

⁷ Alma 46.³⁰

⁸ Alma 54.²⁰

⁹ Alma 48.²²

¹⁰ These wars are reported in Alma 46-62

¹¹ Alma 2.¹⁰

cimeters, and with bows, and with arrows, and with stones, and with slings, and with all manner of weapons of war, of every kind.”¹²

The ensuing battle brought great death.

“There were slain of the Amlicites twelve thousand five hundred thirty and two souls; and there were slain of the Nephites six thousand five hundred sixty and two souls.”¹³

Just as our rider on the red horse, Amlici’s and Amalickiah’s shifting circles of consent gave them power to “take peace from” Nephite and Lamanite lands even to and including the violent snuffing out of many lives—all of this to satisfy two power-hungry men’s unholy desire to dominate.

Conclusion

In parts 2 and 3 of this series of homilies on the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, we have viewed the first two acts of John’s four act play. In the first act, John exposes the unhallowed and obsessive human desire to conquer, to dominate. In the second act, John reveals the natural and recurring consequences of this unholy desire: war and violent death. Through the two Book of Mormon characters, Amlici and Amalickiah, we have illustrated these first two stages of the pattern of human desire and behavior that John, the Revelator, will describe through all four of his demonic horsemen.

In seeking to understand his father’s vision of the “Tree of Life”—in particular, the meaning of the tree itself—Nephi sought inspiration. In response to his plea for understanding, Nephi was granted a series of fourteen visions.¹⁴ After some preparatory explanation in the first three visions, Nephi finally learns the meaning of the tree in his fourth vision. Here, he learns that the incredible tree seen by his father is a representation of “the love of God” which “is

¹² Alma 2.¹²

¹³ Alma 2.¹⁹

¹⁴ The 14 visions, of varying lengths, are: 11.¹⁻⁷; 11.⁸⁻¹¹; 11.¹²⁻¹⁸; 11.¹⁹⁻²³; 11.²⁴⁻²⁵; 11.²⁶⁻²⁹; 11.³⁰; 11.³¹; 11.³²⁻³⁶; 12.¹⁻¹⁰; 12.¹¹⁻²³; 13.¹⁻¹⁴.⁸; 14.⁹⁻¹⁷; 14.¹⁸⁻³⁰

the most desirable above all things.”¹⁵ This vision of the love of God is followed by four more visions, each of which reveals how God’s love was manifest through Jesus Christ’s life, ministry, suffering, and death.

With his ninth vision, however, the series of visions takes an ominous turn. In his ninth vision, Nephi learns that, notwithstanding the tree’s attractiveness, there is a second opposing force that vies for human attention and affection. This is symbolically represented by the infamous “large and spacious building.” This building, it turns out, represents “the world and the wisdom thereof” and “the pride of the world.”¹⁶ One can be attracted to and love God or be attracted to and love the world. With this ominous turn of the ninth vision, the remaining visions seem to portray the tug and pull that humanity feels between the two opposing affections.

In his tenth vision, Nephi

“beheld multitudes of people, yea, even as it were in number as many as the sand of the sea. And* I beheld multitudes gathered together to battle, one against the other; and I beheld wars, and rumors of wars, and great slaughters with the sword among my people. And* I beheld many generations pass away, after the manner of wars and contentions in the land; and I beheld many cities, yea, even that I did not number them.”¹⁷

Similarly, in his eleventh vision, Nephi “saw wars and rumors of wars among them; and in wars and rumors of wars I saw many generations pass away.”¹⁸ After warring amongst themselves for so long, his people would then be faced with a “gentile” population committed to dominance. Notwithstanding the manifestations of God’s love shown to these “gentiles,” the desire for dominance would lead to “wars and rumors of wars among all the nations and kindreds of the earth.”¹⁹

¹⁵ See 1 Nephi 11.²²

¹⁶ 1 Nephi 11.³⁵⁻³⁶

¹⁷ 1 Nephi 12.¹⁻³

¹⁸ 1 Nephi 12.²¹

¹⁹ 1 Nephi 14.¹⁵

“Wars and rumors of wars.” This phrase represents a principle character of this world, with its “wisdom” and “pride.” “Wars and rumors of wars” represent one of the most common enterprises of the human race.

John would certainly applaud and second Nephi’s insight. It is the message he is sending through his four horsemen.

As if the repeated warning of “wars and rumors of wars” became stuck in his head, within a year of finishing his translation work, the Book of Mormon’s modern-day translator, Joseph Smith, would repeat the warning for his own and following generations.

“And in that day shall be heard of wars and rumors of wars, and the whole earth shall be in commotion, and men's hearts shall fail them.”²⁰

Only a year later, this same Joseph would warn of the expanding nature of warfare that would face the world after him. “Beginning at the rebellion of South Carolina... war will be poured out upon all nations.”²¹ In the end, this self-induced downpour of violence would continue “until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations.” But, we must hold off any discussion concerning such “consumption” for the fourth horse and rider.

For now, we simply reaffirm scripture’s testimony—John’s, Nephi’s, and Joseph’s to name but three—concerning humanity’s insane and habitual interests in dominating, warring, and killing. Very few human “endeavors” are more pervasive than that to war and kill one another. “Wars and rumors of war” is as good a description of humanity’s character as any.

Before we end this homily, we must, as always, remind the reader that John the Revelator was involved in much more than descriptive analysis of the ugly human past and its bleak future.

“Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those

²⁰ DC 45.²⁶

²¹ See DC 87.¹⁻²

things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.”²²

John’s work was ministerial, his apocalypse a call to action. A call to repent. A call to reject and resist the wisdom and pride of the world. A call to reject and resist the unholy desire to dominate others. Finally, a call to “renounce war and proclaim peace.”

“Therefore, be not afraid of your enemies, for I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy. For if ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me. Therefore, renounce war and proclaim peace...”²³

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

²² Revelation 1.³

²³ DC 98.¹⁴⁻¹⁶