



*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 4 of 5—the black 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 Textual notes to my translation can be found in Part 1 of this series of homilies.

Introduction

John the revelator wrote his apocalypse with an eye to describing the world as it has always been and contrasting that with the world as it might be. In doing so, he sought to be more than descriptive. He acted in his role as pastor to a people. As a faithful pastor, John issued a call to action in his great work.

“Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.”²

John begins his apocalyptic vision with his famous four horsemen. Through them, disciples of Christ can perceive the world as it is and thus fully appreciate the actions that are needed and the evils against which they war.

With the first of his four horsemen of the apocalypse, the Revelator names the first evil that disciples of Jesus must perceive, confront, and resist: the human desire to excel, to conquer, and to dominate others. This unholy desire, he warns through symbolism, inevitably leads to conflict. The Revelator knows what Jesus taught the Nephites so clearly.

“For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.”³

Although the revelator is focused on the world stage, the disciple must first resist this unholy urge in him or herself. He or she is then adequately equipped to name, confront, and resist

² Revelation 1.³

³ 3 Nephi 11.²⁹⁻³⁰. This saying takes in a far broader concern than the relatively trivial conflicts over dogma that take place in an Elder’s quorum meeting.

this desire as it manifests itself in the society and nation in which he or she resides.

With the second horse and its rider, John unmask the human desire to conquer and excel and dominate as the springboard for all war, with all its attendant evils, including the most ungodly of them all, violent death. This unmasking is accomplished through the symbolism of the rider's "vicious sword" and the horse's red color, almost certainly a reflection of its being freshly splattered with human blood.

The desires and actions found in these first two seals do not represent desires and actions by any single individual or nation in any given era, but a pattern of human desire and conduct that has been repeated over and over in human history, is being played out in today's world, and will, sadly, likely play itself out many times in the future. Because of the incessant and unholy desire to dominate, war and rumor of war dominate the global landscape: past, present, and future.

But violent death in battle is only one way that war brings death. Human warfare is far more imaginative. So, the Revelator introduces us to another horse, this one black, and its rider to further our understanding of the consequences of the unholy desire to dominate, and to increase, however unwelcome, our perception of the evil "genius" of warfare.

the black horse

With the coming of the black horse, we see the weakness of interpretations that seek to connect its rider with specific individuals or eras—as in the common LDS interpretation that the rider is Moses, giver of "the Law," holding the scales of justice. The scales are so obviously commercial that one wonders how such an interpretation ever gained traction. Of course, the use of commercial scales are regulated by law, and so the improper use of this commercial instrument constitutes injustice.

Be that as it may, we have a black horse whose rider holds weight scales in his hand. Small portions of wheat—the superior bread-making grain—and barley—the nutritionally inferior

grain for a poorer man's bread—are weighed and measured to be sold at exorbitantly inflated prices; prices that make survival most uncertain. At the same time, olive oil and wine continue to sell at their normal prices. What are we to make of all this? Following are a series of questions and answers that, we hope, will offer one rational and feasible interpretation of the third seal with its horse and rider.

Question: Why is the wheat and barley so expensive?

Answer: According to the economic doctrine of supply and demand, common, abundant things are cheap. Uncommon and rare things are more costly. I suggest that a scarcity of the two grains explains their exorbitant cost.

Question: Why are wheat and barley scarce?

Answer: If we follow the logic of the horsemen, these two grains are scarce because of warfare. This phenomenon is so common and so pervasive in human history as to require little explanation or proof. We have many examples, from the ancient world to the modern, when food was scarce due to war. In fact, it is entirely likely that many, if not most of the food shortages and famines that have occurred in human history were a consequence of the stupid human tendency to engage in war rather than any natural, climactic phenomenon or divinely instigated “plague” to which so many so often appeal.

It only makes sense. Troops trample crops and kill the livestock of the nation whose borders they invade. Those same troops pillage and plunder their enemy's resources in order to supply their own force's food needs. Food producers' production of food is disrupted as they go into hiding, are killed, or are conscripted into defensive military forces. Local and national financial institutions that in normal times help to enhance production are strapped for cash as resources are diverted for military purposes. Need we go on?

Question: Why are olive orchards and wineries unaffected?

Answer: Again, this is common. An invading army will not stay forever. As one of the reasons for a nation's violent incursions is inevitably economic, the nation will want to benefit economically from a defeated foe even after it has extracted its forces from foreign lands. Benefits will come in the form of tribute payments. Since grain is planted anew each year, a field of destroyed grain can be replaced in a single year, thus providing a quick benefit in tribute payments. But olive trees and grape vines are different. They are far more labor intensive. They require skilled upkeep year after year. If an invading army destroys these agricultural products, it will require many years to regrow orchards and wineries that can provide economic benefit to the dominant nation.

Thus, the Revelator is simply reporting what everyone already knows: during times of uncertainty, unrest, and war annual crops take the brunt of destruction and become scarcer than more labor-intensive crops and products. People suffer. People go hungry. People die of starvation.

This pattern of destruction weighs most heavily upon the poor. They can barely afford the necessities of life in normal times and at usual prices, let alone in desperate times and at the more exorbitant prices. Even in good times, the poor can afford little olive oil or wine. In times of inflation, these are luxuries the poor can hardly afford. The wealthy, on the other hand, go right on profiting and purchasing in good times and bad.⁴ Therefore, it is always the wealthy, the prestigious, the power elites of society who can afford to follow their unholy desires for dominance through war. They can economically afford war with its attendant privations.

Question: What is the significance of the horse's black color?

Answer: Whereas the previous horse's red might have represented the color of freshly drawn human blood, the black horse's color may reflect that of human blood,

⁴ One need look no further than the COVID pandemic of 2020-2021, when the wealthy went right on getting more wealthy while working people lost jobs and worried over having resources sufficient to keep a home over their heads, medical resources available, and food in their mouths.

dried to black over the passage of time. Or, perhaps, the black horse represents the color of the burnt, blackened fields of crops. It might also represent the greyish color of human flesh that is suffering a slow death from malnutrition.

Take your pick. But, we can say this with a high level of certainty: there are no explanations of the horse's black color that would make of it a good omen or positive aspect (Why would Moses ride a black, rather than white horse?).

Now, the “command” that the aggressor not destroy olive orchards and vineyards—and thus disrupt the economy of olives, olive oil, grapes, and wine—issues from “the four creatures” that dwell in the presence of God: “Olive oil and wine you are not to impact.” Some conclude from this, as we discussed earlier, that the Revelator wishes to affirm that God's sovereignty still holds sway over the actions of those individuals and nations that would perpetrate violence. In this interpretation, then, it is God who is limiting the damage that the violent aggressor is allowed to do.

I am not convinced. There are certainly other equally reasonable interpretations of this “command.” In my interpretation of the four horsemen, John is setting forth a common pattern of human behavior. Desire to conquer leads to war. War leads to death. War and death lead to economic disruptions. Economic disruptions lead to more death through privation.

But even the perpetrators of aggression, themselves, often place limits on their own destructiveness—not out of any concern for the victims of their aggression, but out of concern for future benefits that their “restraint” will bring to themselves. So, the four creatures, observing the familiar scenes play out before them, anticipate and announce the human “command” to preserve olive orchards and vineyards. Their “command,” then, should be read as descriptive of human, rather than divine prescriptions.

In our examination of the white and red horses with their riders, we utilized the Book of Mormon figures, Amlici and Amalickiah, to illustrate the phenomenon or pattern of human thought and behavior that John, the Revelator is portraying in the first two seals. Both men, like the rider on the white horse, were desirous of domination. They wished to dominate among their own people and then, as leaders of their people, dominate other peoples and nations. Both men repeatedly found circles of consent, small and large, that would grant them personal rule, and authorize them to pursue dominance of other peoples through violence.

Amlici's and Amalickiah's desires for personal and national dominance led, predictably, as it did with John's red horse, to war and violent death. The Book of Mormon chronicler informs us that thousands of Nephite and Lamanite combatants died in battle.⁵ In addition, we are informed that many non-combatants died as a result of the battles that flowed from Amlici's desire for dominance: "many women and children had been slain with the sword."⁶ In the case of Amalickiah's desire for dominance, the resulting wars lasted off and on for nearly twenty years.

In what seems like a near exact parallel to our interpretation of the third seal with its black horse and rider, the Book of Mormon chronicler informs us that "also many of their flocks and their herds; and also many of their fields of grain were destroyed, for they were trodden down by the hosts of men." Thus "the people were afflicted, yea, greatly afflicted for the loss of their brethren, and also for the loss of their flocks and herds, and also for the loss of their fields of grain, which were trodden under foot and destroyed by the Lamanites."⁷

All of this conforms to John's pattern of human desire and behavior as previewed in his first three horses with their riders. Desire for dominance led to war, war led to death, war and death led to severe economic disruption, food shortages, mass suffering, and the death of innocents.

⁵ See, for example, Alma 2.¹⁹

⁶ Alma 3.²

⁷ Alma 3.² and 4.²

John began his grand design of revealing this fallen world as it is by revealing the desire that underlies and fuels most if not all of its evils: desire. The desire to conquer. The desire to excel. The desire to dominate. These desires imitate those of the first great desirer, Satan, and are thus Satanic. Just as this desire to dominate led to war in heaven, it leads to war on earth. It leads to violent loss of life among warriors fighting in battle. It leads to violent loss of life of the innocent through economic privation. While the wealthy and powerful who survive the violence of war can survive the violence of economic privation, much of the populace cannot. The most vulnerable most certainly often do not survive the privation, but die, often, imperceptibly slow deaths that the ruthless can contribute to other causes.

This is the story, the plot, the byline of the first three horsemen of John's apocalypse. The story has played itself out in human history, not one, not twice, not a hundred, but thousands upon thousands of times. There is no era of human history that has not known—and, all too often, as in ours, lionized and celebrated!—this tragic story line.

Today, we not only have the advantage of John's warning, but of those such as we have seen in the Book of Mormon, as it recounted the tragic consequences of the desire to dominate as found in Amlici and Amalackiah. But, still, we persist in the insanity of it all.

Unfortunately, John has not yet mined the depths of the insanity. He has yet one more horseman to bring upon the stage. It is not a horseman with which we are unfamiliar. He has already ridden into our lives. He is present today. His satanic labors are enough to drive us, as it did John's imagined audience, to our knees and ask,

“How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge
and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”⁸

In our desire to be true to John's call to action, we must now take a clear-eyed view of this fourth rider, who, along with his three accomplices, drew such tragic complaint from the lips

⁸ Revelation 6.¹⁰

of the innocent. This will be the objective of our fifth and final homily on the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.