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# The Book of Revelation

Lenten Study 2021

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The four horsemen of the apocalypse, perhaps one of the most famous images from Revelation, and one used extensively in popular culture: Used in films like *Tombstone* (1993) and *Now You See Me* (2013); books like Agatha Christie's *The Pale Horse*, and Archie Comics; music like Metallica's "The Four Horsemen" (1983) and Johnny Cash's "The Man Comes Around"; television's *Babylon 5* and *The Simpsons*; and countless works of art.

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## John travels to heaven and witnesses the opening of six of the seven scrolls; Revelation 4:1 - 7:17

Turning to the second part of Revelation we enter the literary world of apocalyptic writing. It becomes clear that John's revelation is rooted in his own assumptions of grander rather than those presented by the Gospels where Jesus tells people their wealth prevents them from getting into God's community.



John's description of the heavenly temple is a cross between the Temple in Jerusalem which was destroyed in 70 CE, and the opulence of imperial palaces across the Mediterranean. The occurrences of incense, menorahs and reading from the scroll speak to 1st century Temple worship, while the throne, officiating dress and representatives circled around speak to the Roman government. Revelation more than any other book in the Christian Scriptures pushes the imagery of God and Christ ruling from their throne and acting on the interests of humanity below.



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## Gematria (Hebrew Numerology)

We must remember the significance of gematria when reading Revelation, and the passages this week have several numbers with symbolic meanings:

**One:** Unity, wholeness, divinity

**Three:** Stability, completeness

**Four:** Divine revelation, eternal harmony, and God's throne in heaven

**Seven:** Luck, blessings, completeness

**Twelve:** Totality, wholeness, completion of God's purpose

In addition to the numbers themselves, the numbers can also be added. So 24 is 12+12 meaning twice the completion of God's purpose as well as abundance.

The number 1000 by itself or multiplied by other numbers should not be seen as literal but as representing an undefined large number. So 1000 years is an extensive period of time. 12,000 in Revelations 7:5-8, does not mean an exact number of people but rather wholeness (12) times an incredibly large number, meaning a huge population

This system is extensive and can be a distraction in and of itself, so we will only be reviewing those numbers that have broad sweeping significance to Revelation, not an exploration of every occurrence.

## Tetramorph (four living creatures)

Once John gets to the heavenly temple he encounters beings with the head of a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle. In iconography this is known as a *Tetramorph* (Greek: four shapes), and was extensively used throughout ancient Egypt, Greece and Babylon. Ezekiel saw the tetramorph in his vision while in exile in Babylon:

***Ezekiel 1:10** As for the form of their faces: each of the four had a human face, with a lion's face on the right and a bull's face on the left, and also an eagle's face. **11** The pairs of wings that stretched out overhead touched each other, while the other pairs covered their bodies.*



In the second century of the Common Era it was interpreted as the four gospels, but that was a faulty conclusion given that Revelation and the four Gospels were written at the same time and John of Patmos couldn't possibly have that as

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his intention. Irenaeus (c. 130-202 CE) first proposed the link between the four living creatures and the four Evangelists, identifying the man as Matthew, lion as John, ox as Luke and eagle as Mark. Jerome (c. 347-420 CE) suggested the assignment that became them most common with the man as Matthew, lion as Mark, ox as Luke and eagle as John.

The connection between Judah and the lion is outside the tetramorph, and comes from an older Hebraic tradition that assigned symbols to all twelve tribes of Israel.

### **Liturgical Language**

Throughout the worship in the heavenly temple, songs of praise are sung to the lamb. These songs are reminiscent of songs sung in the prophets as well as Psalms itself, and find their way into the worship rites of most Christian denominations. The first song is very familiar:

*Holy, holy, holy the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come (Rev. 4:8b)*

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory (Isa 6:3)*

*Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory (Sanctus prayer during Communion)*

The fourth song concludes the worship service:

*To the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever! (Rev. 5:13b)*

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen. (Psalm 41:13)*

*Glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning is now and will be forever, Amen (Doxology)*

Next to nothing is known about Temple worship in the years just before its destruction or the worship of the diaspora in the early decades after the Hebrew community was exiled from Jerusalem. The same is true of the original forms of early Christian worship. However, these examples of praise parallels along with the actions of those congregated, might shed light on late first century prayers and worship.

Additionally, these statements were not just potential worship in the first century, they were also political statements. If Jesus is Lord, then the Emperor is not.

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## Jesus as the Lamb

The primary imagery of Jesus throughout Revelation is that of Lamb, which brings to mind many stories from the Hebrew Scriptures including Abraham finding the ram to sacrifice instead of Issac, the lamb slaughtered and blood used to paint the doorframes in the Exodus narrative, the peaceful image of the lion and lamb together, and the imagery that would be alluded to within the Passion narratives in the four Gospels. Jesus as the slaughtered and sacrificial innocent was obviously well developed by this time in early church history.

The unique thing about the Lamb in Revelation is that it is slaughtered yet very much alive and considered the only worthy being on earth or in heaven, the only one worthy to open the scrolls. This is a post Resurrection Christ.

## For Horsemen

The horsemen were associated with war, death, famine and disease, undermining the preferred peace, long life, prosperity and health that were considered blessings. There was also an association with Roman military strength which brought suffering to conquered people around the Mediterranean: only the military rode horses. The rich travelled with camels and the poor on foot or with donkeys.

The connection with Ezekiel continues:

*For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four deadly acts of judgement, sword, famine, wild animals, and pestilence (Ezek 14:21)*

Many have tried to figure out the significance of the colours of the four horses, but there appears to be no further meaning than the horses match the intentions of the riders: the white horse was used in military campaigns, the red horse in bloody death, the black horse with lack of food, and the pale horse with disease.

## The sixth seal: earthquakes, floods & eclipses



Ancient peoples did not understand the science of the environment or geography, they interpreted anything of nature as God's actions for good and for ill. Hebrews were not alone in this. Writings of myth and historical accounts from all the cultures in the Mediterranean made that

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connection. It is a region that experiences 15% of the world's seismic activity, 10% of the world's tsunamis, and has a high degree of volcanic activity. Italy is noted for the most earthquakes in Europe. With so many land disturbances, it is no surprise that the people had developed an interpretation that found God responsible.

Those who have looked to Revelation as predictive often used the sixth seal as their starting point for developing their end date.