

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse

St. John's vision of the 4 horses and their riders (Rev 6,1-8) contains allusions to two visions of the prophet Zechariah, which act as a guide for its interpretation.

For 70 years the Jews had suffered exile in Babylonia (the Land of the North) whilst Jerusalem and the cities of Judah had felt the anger of the Lord (Zech 1,12). In his first vision, Zechariah describes 4 horses - 2 red, 1 brown, 1 white – and their riders, returning from patrolling the whole earth and finding it at peace (Zech 1,7-11). At this point an angel asks the prophet to announce a reversal of the existing situation: the Lord is exceedingly angry at the nations (Zech 1,15), but is deeply moved to compassion for the Jews and for their homeland. Jerusalem will be restored, the Temple will be rebuilt and the Lord will come and dwell amongst his people (Zech 1,16-17; 2,5-17).

In a subsequent vision, Zechariah again sees horses, but this time they are leaving the Presence of God in heaven, to go out and patrol the earth. Instead of 4 single horses and their riders, he sees 4 chariots pulled by teams of horses of different colours – red, black, white and dappled (pale) grey – and called 'the 4 winds of heaven'. The black horses go to the Land of the North (Babylonia) and cause God's Spirit to rest there. The others follow, and the grey horses go to the South (Zech 6,1-8).

From the text it is not quite clear what the black horses achieve by causing the Spirit of God to rest in the Land of the North. However, in the context of Zechariah's visions the effect of God's Spirit is indicated in the following passage: "This is the Word of the Lord to Zorobabel: 'Not by force and not by strength, but by my Spirit' says the Lord of Hosts" (Zech 4,6). Here the Spirit of God is the power acting through Zorobabel to help the Jews to rebuild and restore their homeland. By analogy, the purpose of the black horses in causing God's Spirit to rest in the Land of the North is to inspire and strengthen the Jews exiled in that place, to return to Jerusalem, rebuild their city and Temple, and so prepare for the Lord's coming.

Returning to the Apocalypse we find that St. John's vision of the 4 horsemen (Rev 6,1-8) not only alludes to both of Zechariah's visions of horses, but also reflects their historical context: that of preparing for the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Recalling Zechariah's first vision (Zech 1,7-17), St. John describes 4 single horses and their riders. In every other respect, however, St. John's vision refers to Zechariah's later vision of the 4 teams of horses and chariots (Zech 6,1-8).

The colours of the 4 horses in St. John's vision are the same as those in the 4 teams of horses seen by Zechariah, except that the final horse is pale green instead of pale grey. This difference can be explained by the particular role of the 4th horse in St. John's vision - pale green represents death and pestilence more vividly than pale grey (Rev 6,7-8). Like 'the 4 winds of heaven' in Zechariah's vision, St. John sees the 4 horses and their riders leaving the Presence of God in heaven to go out into the world.

Acting in strict obedience to the 4 living creatures, it appears that the 4 horsemen perform a role that is directly related to that of the 4 living creatures. We can infer that whatever the 4 living creatures do in heaven, the 4 horsemen set out to accomplish on earth.

In biblical revelation, the principal role of the 4 living creatures, or *Cherubim*, is to guard, support and accompany the Throne of God (cf. Ex 25,17-22; Ps 80,2; Ez 1,22-28; 10,18-22). In other words, the living creatures uphold, or sustain, the sovereignty of God over his creation, and in the Apocalypse this role is expressed by their continuous adoration of his Presence (Rev 4,8). We would therefore expect to find that the 4 horsemen have a similar role on earth, namely to uphold the sovereignty of God over his creation.

Just as one of the teams of horses in Zechariah's vision differed from the others, so also one of the horses in St. John's vision is different from the rest. In Zechariah's vision the black horses bring God's Spirit to the Land of the North in order to inspire the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple and so prepare for the coming of the Lord. In the Apocalypse an analogous role is performed by the rider of the white horse, who carried a bow, was given a crown and, certain of victory, went out conquering (Rev 6,2). Assimilating two messianic passages in the Old Testament (Is 49,2; Ps 45,4-5), this figure represents the invincible force which leads to the establishment of the kingdom of God amongst men.

In a way which we can relate to the mission of the white horse, St. Augustine describes his conversion by the love of God in Christ: "You had pierced our hearts with the arrow of your love and our minds were pierced by the arrows of your words" (Confessions 9:2).

Since the means by which the Kingdom of God comes to be established amongst men is, in fact, by the proclamation of the Gospel, there is an evident relation between the mission of the white horse and that of the disciples of Jesus (Mk 16,15-18; Rom 8,37; 1Jn 5,4-5). So important is the mission of evangelisation that the end of this age will not come before the Gospel of the Kingdom has been proclaimed throughout the whole inhabited earth (Mt 24,14), or in other words until the white horse has travelled all over the world (Rev 6,1-2).

There is a clear relation between the role of the white horse and that of the 4 living creatures, in upholding the sovereignty of God over his creation. The white horse and its rider represent the force that leads to the acknowledgement of this sovereignty by men. However, with the other 3 horses of the Apocalypse this relation is not so clear. All 3 horses represent forces which are destructive to every aspect of man's life and happiness – the red horse takes away peace and brings violence and murder, the black horse causes prices to rise, bringing social injustice and misery, and the pale green horse brings death by war, disease, famine and wild beasts.

The description of the destructive influence of these 3 horses vividly recalls the prophetic warnings in the Old Testament, of what would happen if Israel neglected her Covenant with God and failed to observe his

commandments (Lv 26,14-15; Dt 28,15-69; Jer 29,17-19; Ez 5,12-17). In brief, the 3 horses represent the consequences of rejecting the sovereignty of God. They reveal 'the anger of God from heaven' (cf. Rm 1,18-32) for those who refuse to be conquered by the love of God in Christ (the white horse). Their purpose is therefore to deter or repel men from separating themselves from God, and to cause them to return and seek his Kingdom. All the apparent 'evils' of the last 3 horses of the Apocalypse are, in fact, signs from heaven urging us to repent and seek the Kingdom of God.

Representing the forces of creation, the 4 horsemen act together in such a way as to uphold and maintain the sovereignty of God over his creation. On the one hand they act directly to motivate the progressive establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth (the white horse). On the other hand, by disturbing all that is not orientated toward God, they act indirectly to motivate repentance and the desire to seek his Kingdom (the red, black and pale green horses). In this case we note that when the sovereignty of God is not accepted, and the order of creation is thus distorted or inverted, the very forces of creation become destructive.

When the 5th seal of the Scroll is broken, St. John sees the martyrs in heaven and hears them asking how much longer until 'the Day of the Lord'. They are told to wait a 'short time more' (Rev 6,10-11). The breaking of the 6th seal discloses a vision of 'the Day of the Lord' which would leave no survivors among the human race; mercifully this vision is re-presented in the events following the breaking of the 7th seal, in order to give time for the sealing of the saints (Rev 7,1-8) and for repentance (Rev 11,3-13; 9,20-21). In summary, the visions following the breaking of the last 3 seals all refer to the situation within a 'short time' of the Day of the Lord. The visions of the 4 horsemen, which follow the opening of the first 4 seals of the Scroll, therefore represent the entire course of history from the Ascension of Jesus Christ, the Lamb, until a 'short time' before the Day of the Lord. The divine purpose of this long period of history is therefore summarised by the mission of these 4 horsemen, that of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth and of upholding, in the face of man's persistent rebellion, the eternal sovereignty of God – for the good of all his creation.