Hi,

Not much in the way of updates today:

* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.
* I am devoting only five daily emails to Revelation. But last year, I taught a twenty-week class on Revelation and all the sessions are [on my podcast site](https://scottengle.podbean.com/). The first was on Aug 20 2019 and the last on Jan 27 2020. You can listen to the podcast episodes via your browser ([here](https://scottengle.podbean.com/)) and through the Apple Podcast app and the Podbean player (iOS and Android).

Today, we turn to some of the dark images in Revelation. What role do they play in the story of God’s love and human sin?

***Revelation 6:1-11 (NRSV)***

**Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.**

**When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.**

**When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!”**

**When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, “Come!” I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.**

**When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.**

And so we’ve arrived at the violent and terrifying images from the book of Revelation. Four horsemen, seven seals, seven trumpets, each carrying forward the ever-increasing and repetitive terror. What do we make of this? What is the point of it all? Is it really a movie script of sorts, showing in detail horrors that lie ahead? Will we see a rider on a pale horse arcing across the skies? Will giant locusts come flooding out of a bottomless pit, torturing and killing people across the planet (9:7-11)?

While I think most of us would accept that God is not trying to talk to us about giant bugs, we are still left wondering what these images are about. Today’s vision of the four horsemen is a great place to begin exploring the interpretation of Revelation’s most difficult and troubling passages.

*The seals are opened*

In the heavenly throne room, the Lamb steps forward as the one worthy to open the scroll that is held in the hand of the one on the throne (see Revelation 5 and yesterday’s email). After all of creation joins in the worship of the Lamb and the one on the throne, the Lamb opens the first four of the seven seals, with each opened seal bringing forth a rider on a horse.

There is a pattern to these four horsemen. The first rider comes out on a white horse, carrying a bow, a weapon of war, and sets about conquering. It isn’t hard to imagine the threat posed by this first rider. The second rider is on a bright red horse and carries a mighty sword. This rider goes across the planet setting people against one another (as if we needed help with that one!). The third rider, on a black horse, seems a bit more obscure. This rider carries a set of scales that would be used in commerce. The prices quoted by the rider for the basics of life, like wheat, are astronomically high. This rider brings famine and economic hardship. The final rider is on a pale green horse and bears the name, Death.

Conquest, violence, famine, and death. They are dressed up in dramatic imagery but they are certainly not new to us. Furthermore, though John’s visions depict these as being inflicted by the heavens, we know that these are all self-inflicted, when we stop and think of humanity as one. It is we who make war on one another. It is we who take the peace away and stand by while others starve. Going back to the Garden of Eden, even death is the result of humanity’s choice. The riders bring nothing that we haven’t already brought on ourselves. Still, there is the clear sense in this vision that God is a threat.

So what’s the point? Is there something new here? Craig Koester suggests that this vision sets the stage for what follows, in that the riders are a call to repentance and faith. *Repentance*: Will we turn 180° and walk toward God not away from him? *Faith*: Will we trust God in all things and above all else?

*In God We (Ought to) Trust!*

Look again at each of the four riders. Can we build armies powerful enough to keep away all foreign conquerors? September 11 shattered that illusion for any who still held it. Can we build a large enough police force to stop all violence and return the peace? The proliferation of both prisons and crime answers that one for us. Can we have bank accounts large enough to shield us from any economic hardship? Even our resilient economy has had a very tough time with this pandemic. How about death? Do any of us know a doctor who can make us immortal? My doctors have gotten me this far in life, but they are only going to take me so far.

Stark images, such as today’s, are meant to be that proverbial wake-up call, the 2x4 upside the head. It’s a bit like an “intervention,” where loved ones gather to confront someone with the truth, to shock them into seeing that their life is a wreck and they need help.

As John’s visions continue through the remaining seals and then the trumpets, the 2x4 becomes a railroad tie. There is nowhere to hide from God (6:15-17) and no one else to trust. As the reader, you’ll find yourself screaming at the page, “What’s it going to take?! Is there no one who repents, no one who trusts God?”

Yet, in chapter 7, John hears and sees a faithful remnant. In chapter 11, we meet two faithful witnesses. Finally, we learn of some who look past their terror and give glory to God (11:13). The lukewarm complacency of Sardis and Laodicea have been overcome.

*A bit more on the violent imagery in Revelation*

With today’s Scripture passage, John’s Apocalypse embarks on a relentless, over-the-top depiction of violence. Eugene Boring writes:

“When the Lamb opens the sealed scroll, catastrophic violence is unleashed upon the earth and its inhabitants. The world is devastated by war, famine, plague, and death (6:1–8). People are killed because of their faithfulness to God and cry out for vengeance (6:9–11). Sun, moon, and stars are struck; mountains and islands are displaced, as everyone from king to slave tries to escape the approaching wrath (6:12–17). The earth is struck with hail and fire mixed with blood (8:7) and sea and rivers turn to blood (8:8–11; 16:3–4). Demonic locust-like creatures stream out of the abyss to torment humanity, and people cry out for death but continue to suffer (9:1–11). A twilight-zone supernatural horde of two hundred million cavalry pour across the Euphrates from the East (9:13–19).”

It’s ghastly and it doesn’t end there. To make it worse, God is often depicted as the source of the violence. None of it seems to fit with the Jesus we meet in the gospels. So what do we do with these images? Skip over them as if they aren’t there? Embrace them as a literal depiction of what awaits those who don’t love Jesus?

Professor Boring offers us some guidance in this:

1. John’s focus is not on future suffering, but the suffering endured by the Christians of his day. Apocalyptic thought puts this suffering in a cosmic context. Just as elsewhere the Bible gives vent to the community’s frustration and desire for revenge (read Psalm 137!), so it does here. The desire for revenge is not what God wants from us, but it is often what we give him.
2. John doesn’t invent these images, he draws on many biblical images and much biblical theology. We don’t talk much about the wrath of God anymore, but carve it out and you’ve lost much of the Bible. Across the span of biblical literature, God is relentless in his desire for justice and for the elimination of sin.
3. We always have to bear in mind that these images are not literal depictions of a to-be-experienced future. They are metaphorical and the question to ask ourselves is: “What is the message behind the metaphor?”

Like I suspect is true of most readers, I’m put off by these images. Their horror tends to close my mind. Yet, what does it *really* take for us to repent and shake off the powers of this world that want to enslave us to a way of living devoid of Christ. Does a gentle prodding get the job done? A hearty shout in the ear? A firm poke in the ribs? No . . . moving me to genuine repentance calls for shock therapy. And John delivers it.

*Still more -- John’s visions as literary tapestries*

John’s visions are literary tapestries. Each vision weaves together quotations from or allusions to the Old Testament with first-century images and references that would be understood by the first-century readers. John’s visions are more than simply his attempt to put into words what he experiences. His visions are carefully crafted descriptions designed to convey meaning to the reader – but to see it, we need to learn our Old Testaments.

The throne room visions from yesterday are a good example of John’s dependence on Old Testament imagery and language. In conveying his own throne room experience, John follows closely the throne room vision from Ezekiel 1-3. In both, there are four living creatures (the cherubim), as well as rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightning. In both, the throne has the appearance of precious jewels and a rainbow. In both, there is a scroll and angels who carry them. It isn’t that the visions are identical, but that John uses standard biblical imagery his readers would understand.

Here’s an example of a contemporary (90AD) allusion in today’s Scripture. The rider of the first horse comes out carrying a bow. Later, a murderous horde from beyond the Euphrates river to the east, in alliance with the beast from the bottomless pit, rides in to conquer the inhabitants of the empire (9:13-19) in a slaughter of millions. All of this plays on the common first-century fear of the Parthians to the east, whose mounted archers were never defeated by the Romans. A popular legend of the day was that the hated Nero would return from the dead, lead the Parthians, and conquer the Roman empire.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott