

Revelation 6:1, 2. The First Seal



This is the continuation of [The Last Prophecy: An Abridgment of Elliott's Horae Apocalypticae.](#)

Prosperity and Triumph of the Roman Empire in the Era Next Following After the Visions in Patmos, Nerve to Commodus. A.D. 96-185.

[1] ¶ And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.
[2] And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer. (Rev 6:1-2)

THE SYMBOL of an animal is not unfrequently used in Scripture to represent a power or a nation. In Daniel we find it said, "The ram that thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia. The rough goat is the king of Grecia (Dan 8:20); and accordingly on Persian coins a ram is still to be seen, and on Macedonian coins a goat, attesting the propriety of the emblems. Similarly on ancient coins of the Roman people a horse was stamped on the one side, and on the other Mars, the reputed father of Romulus and the Roman people, to whom the warrior horse was sacred. Hence the propriety of the horse in the visions of the first four seals to depict the Roman people or empire; while the colors white, red, black, and livid pale, figured its state at the time symbolized; and the riders the ruling agencies in that state, whether favorable or adverse.

In the first seal the color of the horse was white, indicating prosperity and triumph; and the rider had a laurel crown given him, the distinctive badge in St. John's time of ruling emperors. So the vision indicated that new emperors would arise, in character quite contrasted with the then ruling emperor, Domitian, and would be the main causal agencies in the foreshadowed prosperity and triumph.

In further illustration of the imagery of this seal, there may be noted the frequent Roman custom, when an emperor was going to war, and success augured to him, of the senate striking a medal, whereon the emperor was depicted galloping forth on horseback, and striking down the enemy, with the motto underneath, "Augustus going forth." Further, if success really attended him, the plan was to represent him on an arch going forth between trophies and captives; with Victory personified, either crowning him, or crown in hand preceding him. Such a medal was struck for Claudius when he conquered Britain.

Such being the purport of the symbols of the first seal, as we believe St. John must have read it, it is our part now to follow up his graphic prophecy by showing its historical fulfillment.

The date, as before observed, of St. John's writing was A.D. 96: the Emperor Domitian then reigned, but died that same year, and was succeeded by Nerva. Trajan followed; next Adrian; and after him the two Antonines; until the accession of Commodus, A.D. 180.

In order to see whether the character of their reigns agreed with the figuration of the first Apocalyptic seal, turn we to Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, our best standard English work upon the subject, and peculiarly valuable as the testimony of an infidel. For, somewhat remarkably, his history commences with this very period.

He represents the period then as "a golden age" of prosperity, union, civil liberty, and good government; "unstained by civil blood, and undisturbed by revolution:" a period remarkable, both at its commencement and at its close, for very wonderful and almost uniform triumphs in war, whereby the glory of the empire was illustrated, and its limits extended; while the intermediate time was generally a time of profound peace. And he thus strikingly sums up the view: - "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus." As to the causes of this happiness and prosperity, he adds, with reference to the five successive emperors whose reigns filled up the period, "The delight was theirs of beholding the general happiness of which they were the authors."

We said that there were triumphs, too, indicated in the vision; for the rider "went forth conquering and to conquer." It was the same in the history. We read even in the short reign of Nerva of a triumph over the Pannonians. More especially the reign of Trajan was memorable in history for its triumphs. Dacia, Armenia, Mesopotamia, and other provinces were then added to the Roman Empire. And though for some forty-three years afterwards there was for the most part honorable and happy peace, i.e., during the reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, yet there were victories in the few brief wars that occurred; via, a victory gained over the Jews by the former, and some smaller ones over the frontier barbarians by the latter. These wars, says Gibbon, "just served to exercise the Roman legions." After some sixty or seventy years, however, it appeared for a time as if the character of "conquering and to conquer" was about to change. The whole of the barbarian world, especially from the east and from the north, burst the frontier barriers, and sought to overwhelm the Roman Empire. The result, however, was to show the truth of the Apocalyptic symbol, "He went forth, not only conquering, but with the destiny that he should still (to the end of the first seal) conquer." After one defeat at first, the Eastern war was ended in the capture of Artaxata, Seleucia, and Ctesiphon. Again, in the north, victory after victory attended the second Antonine, till the German barbarians were driven to their forests and reduced to submission. On occasion of the Trajanic and earlier series of victories, a column, still standing at Rome, was erected to Trajan; and on occasion of those of the latter times of the seal, another was erected to M. Antoninus.

But there is one symbol in the vision yet unexplained, and which to anyone conversant with Roman customs might appear strange. It is the bow in the hand of the rider. Romans were not wont to be so represented on medals. A javelin or sword was the weapon in their hands. How then, it may well be asked, can this be a Roman emblem? To solve this we must refer back to the time when the bow was first invented. The fable is that the Grecian god, Apollo, first discovered it, and then instructed the inhabitants of the island of Crete with its use. Subsequently the Cretans, of all the Grecian people, were most famous as archers; and their manufacture of bows, too, was in much repute. Cretan medals still extant illustrate this; and ancient military history, both Greek and Roman, strongly attests it. Hence the apparent Cretan significancy of the emblem in question. Let me add a further and curious confirmation of this from the still extant epitaph or epigram on the tomb of a Greek female. The epitaph consists of a set of emblems: a magpie, some wool, a cup, and a bow; with an express explanation of them to this effect: that the magpie sculptured was to mark the loquacity (talkativeness) of the deceased; the cup, her proneness to drink; the wool, her diligence in work; the bow, to signify that she was a Cretan! But how does this apply to the five Roman emperors, who succeeded one another, as we have seen, for the space of some eighty or ninety years? Observe, the crown did not descend then, as now, in hereditary succession from father to son. The reigning emperor might adopt his successor, who, in virtue of this adoption, was, according to the Roman law, regarded precisely as his son. This being so, Nerva adopted Trajan; he, Hadrian; Hadrian, Antoninus; who, in turn, adopted Marcus Aurelius. So indeed inscriptions still extant illustrate to us. There is one, for example, in honor of Marcus Aurelius, which reads thus: "To the Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of Antoninus Pius, grandson of Hadrian, great-grandson of Trajan, great-great-grandson of Nerva." Thus they were to be all regarded as of Nerva's family. What, then, was Nerva's own country and extraction? Aurelius Victor, and our best-known modern historians after him, relate that Nerva was in respect of family extraction a Cretan!

Thus, then, is the enigma solved. Had a sword or javelin been pictured in the conquering rider's hand, it would have indicated nothing peculiar or characteristic. But He who cannot err, and who knew that the very year this prophecy was given a foreigner in respect of extraction should for the first time govern Rome, with a distinctness peculiar to all these pictures, gave the precise badge to mark the country of his ancestry.

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