Revelation 6:3-8. Second, Third, and Fourth Seals

This is the continuation of The Last Prophecy: An Abridgment of Elliott's Horae Apocalypticae.

Oppression Of The Empire, Military And Civil, And By God's Four Sore Judgments. Commodus to Diocletian, A.D. 180 – 284.

[3] ¶ And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.
[4] And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.
[5] And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.
[6] And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.
[7] And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see.
[8] And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth [or over the four parts], to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth. (Rev 6:3-8)

IN THE SECOND SEAL the emblematic horse and its rider again appears; but the color is seen changed from white to red – from the emblem of peace and prosperity to that of war and bloodshed. Moreover there is in the rider's hand, instead of the Cretan bow, a great sword, a military emblem; and it is declared of him that he was "to take peace from the earth, and that men should kill one another."

We turn to history, and what find we for some ninety years after M. Aurelius to have been the state of Roman affairs?

Commodus began his reign well; but after a time changed his course of conduct and began a system of oppression and misrule, till at length in an insurrection he was assassinated. Pertinax succeeded, and in a month met a

similar fate; then Julian, but was soon assassinated. Next came a four years' civil war, which raged from east to west, and through which Severus fought his way to the throne — a throne established on the defeat and slaughter of his competitors, Niger and Albinus. Then came a fourteen years' interval of internal peace (such as it was); but followed, on the accession of Caracalla, son and successor of Severus, by the murder of his brother and co-regnant emperor Gata; and then Caracalla's own murder by Macrinus. A civil war ensued which crushed Macrinus and raised Elagabalus to the throne, who in his turn was assassinated. Then, after a partial interval of peace during the reign of Alexander Severus, came the murder of that prince. Civil wars followed against his murderer and successor Maximin, wherein two emperors, Gordian and his son, perished the same day in Africa. Next, Maximin himself and his son were murdered at the siege of Aquileia. Subsequently, Balbinus and Maximus, joint emperors, were put to death at Rome; and, not long after, the younger Gordian. Then came the destruction of the Emperor Philip and his son at the battle of Verona, which, in the year A.D. 249, decided the civil war between himself and Decius. Can the history of any other empire exhibit such a fifty years' record of civil strife and bloodshed? Truly "peace was then taken from the Roman earth, and men had power given them to kill one another." What followed for thirty or forty years was only an aggravation of the same evil, though with the accession of other evils noted in the next seals. "With Commodus's death commenced a most disastrous period," says Sismondi; it lasted ninety-two years, from A.D. 192 to 284. During that time thirty-two emperors and twenty-seven pretenders to the empire alternately, by incessant civil warfare, hurled each other from the throne."

Having seen the evil, let us now examine its cause. By the great sword given to the rider or ruling power in the symbolic vision, we might, as this was a military badge, infer that the agency prefigured as causing all these calamities was a military agency. And on looking into history we shall find the idea correct. During the era of peace, prosperity, and triumph, described in our former lecture, the power of the senate and magistracy of Rome was predominant. To enforce the laws the military aid was useful and necessary, but it was kept in check by the civil authority. With Commodus began the fatal change. He first exalted the Praetorian guards and their Prefect to despotic influence. So great did their control become, that on occasion of his death they proceeded to sell the empire, as their right, to the highest bidder. This shows, as Gibbon says, that "the power of the sword" had begun its reign. The rule of the military became a pure despotism. In the reign of the first Severus the licentious Praetorian band that overawed Rome was quadrupled; and under his son-in-law, Plautian, to whom he gave the command, the city, we are told, was "made to tremble." The senate he utterly set at nought, saying, "That he would have no such power come between him and his army;" and he bequeathed this maxim to his son, "Enrich the soldiery, despise the people." The soldiery exercised supreme law, set up whom they pleased, put down whom they pleased, and murdered whom they would. "The sovereignty had passed into the hands of the legions." These caused the imperial murders, and the civil insurrections and wars.

Dion Cassius, a historian of the time, speaks of this disastrous change from the former era of prosperity, peace, and triumph, continued down to the

commencement of the reign of Commodus, in this manner: “It was a change from a golden age to one of iron;” and he paints, in strong colors, the then established military license and despotism as the great evil of the times.

Observe, now, it was by girding a man with a sword that he was admitted to the military profession among the Romans, none but a soldier being permitted to wear it. Further, to his chief generals, when appointed to the high office of the imperium, with power of life and death over the military, a sword was publicly presented, in token of it, by the emperor in person. So to the Imperial Lieutenants, invested with military command in the provinces, in a ceremony outside the walls of Rome; and to the Praetorian Prefect, in a ceremony inside the walls. Thus we read that the Emperor Trajan, on. presenting a Praetorian Prefect with this sword-badge of power, addressed him with the words: “Use this for me, if I rule well; if not, against me.” St. Paul too, you may remember, alludes to the custom: “He beareth not the sword in vain.” (Rom. 13:4) The symbolic sword-bearing rider may therefore represent generally the military power, whose, badge was the sword; or, more especially, the military generals, with power of the sword, whether Praetorian Prefects at Rome, or the Imperial Lieutenants of the provinces.

But military despotism could not be established in a country without other evils following soon in its train. The next two seals depicted graphically the great successive aggravations.

THE THIRD SEAL. — Hitherto I have omitted all critical arguments, considering it better to state the facts where I think them proved satisfactorily, than to go over the grounds by which such proofs have been arrived at. I must in the present lecture deviate, in some little measure, from this plan.

Most expositors have explained the emblems in this seal to mean famine. The color of the horse being black (opposed to the white, which symbolized prosperity and happiness), might seem at first sight to favor this solution; while the balance in the rider’s hand has been explained, in accordance with the view, to foretoken a time of such scarcity that bread should be eaten in each family during its continuance by measure.

It has been shown, however, that the Roman denarius, = eightpence of our money, was the daily wages for a man in the time of St. John; also that a choenix of corn, = one quart in measure, or two pounds in weight, was considered a day’s sufficiency of food for a man. And could it be a famine price when three times this amount of barley bread might be procurable by a laborer’s daily wage?

Nor, again, as to the balance in the rider’s hand, does it appear to be here used with reference to the measuring out of bread by a parent to his children, but in relation to the buying and selling of corn; in which relation it would always be necessary, and might as well be an indication of plenty as of famine. At this present time, on a baker’s monument outside one of the gates of Rome, a pair of balances appears sculptured as one of the designations of the trade.

Moreover, the charge “injure not” (if we take that rendering of the Greek

phrase), said relatively to wine and oil, the two articles of consumption next most important to bread at the time and in the empire alluded to, all but precludes the idea of scarcity.

Notwithstanding, then, the black color of the horse, and the balance, this is not a famine scene.

No doubt the black color is figurative of distress and affliction in the Roman body politic; and to see what distress, we have only to look into the history of the times, and to compare the prophetic symbols.

It appears, then, from history, that at an epoch following some thirty years after that of the commencement of the second seal, an aggravation of taxation was established which pressed most heavily on every part of the Roman Empire; the object being, with the money raised therefrom, to support the licentious soldiery and the lavish and profligate military government.

From the time of Augustus there had been a difference between the taxation of the provincials of the Roman Empire and of the Roman citizens at Rome and in Italy. The provincials were obliged to pay tributes of produce in kind, of corn, wine, and oil; and also a capitation tax, i.e., a tax on each head. The taxation of the Roman citizens consisted of excise and legacy duties. About A.D. 215, the provincial taxation was most oppressively increased by the celebrated edict of Caracalla, which, with apparent Liberality, gave the provincialists the rights of Roman citizens, but of which the real intent was to add the burden of Roman taxation to the provincial, already too burdensome. The edict was compulsory, and its corrupt administration made it still more oppressive. Gibbon says, in recounting the history of Caracalla, “The great body of his subjects was oppressed by the aggravated taxes, and every part of the empire crushed under the weight of his iron sceptre.” Under Alexander Severus a check was attempted to the corrupt and oppressive fiscal system; but only partially, and in vain. He could not stop the evil. The soldiery, the real masters of the state, must be satisfied. “Am not I he,” said he to his mutinying troops, “who bestows upon you the corn, the clothing, and the money of the provinces?” He struggled nobly but vainly against the oppression of the age, and paid his life as a forfeit to his efforts. After his murder the evil increased. Italy soon shared the fate of the provinces. Gibbon, in speaking of the empire thirteen years after, under Philip, says, “The industry of the people was discouraged and exhausted under a long series of oppression.” The evil went on under Gallienus, Claudius, Aurelian, and Probus; until, in fine, Diocletian developed the system yet more fully, and increased the oppression and desolation of the provinces.

One main constituent of the provincial taxation, I have said, was that of produce in kind. Gibbon says, “We shall be too often summoned to explain the land tax, the capitation, and the heavy contributions of corn, wine, oil, and meat, exacted from the provinces for the use of the court, the army, and the capital.” So the very items specified in the Apocalyptic seal are noticed. And again, as if in illustration of the black color of the horse under it, “The evil, like a noxious weed, sprang up again with most luxurious growth; and in the succeeding age darkened the Roman world with its deadly shade.”

Let us now consider whom the rider, or governing power, was meant to indicate. Agreeable with what has been above said, it might seem to refer to the provincial rulers, by whatever name called; for to them was committed the exacting of the taxes. And the very words spoken from the throne, the seat of equity, in monition and rebuke to the rider, and also the badge of the balance that he bore in hand, is confirmatory of this. For sometimes, to prevent injustice, the price at which the governor should rate wheat and barley was prescribed, with a view to prevent injustice and oppression by the government at home. In one remarkable instance under the republic, the Cassian law, in its order to the Proconsul, was expressed literally thus: "A measure of wheat for a denarius!" So too with the justice-loving emperors: whether they did it successfully, like Trajan and the Antonines, or the reverse, as Alexander Severus. Again, as to the balance in the rider's hand, it was an official badge of those who had the administration of justice in their hands; such as the Roman praetors and provincial governors. Under the old republic they were wont to have a balance over the magisterial chair, on coins struck in honor of their appointment to their high office; and sometimes also an ear of corn, with reference to their duty of collecting the corn produce. In imperial times the emperors had the supreme power; whence the ascription to them of the balance of justice. But the propraetors had it delegated to them. Nor ought we to omit that, in sending a provincial governor to his province, a horse was presented him for his use, and he went forth mounted from Rome.

Notwithstanding the monitions given them from time to time, the injustice of the Roman provincial governors was so notorious that they were called by M. Aurelius and Alexander Severus "robbers of the provinces." Throughout what remained of the third century, whatever laws were made against extortion and injustice they may be looked upon as records of crime rather than preventives of its commission. A general internal wasting of the state resulted from it. The agriculture of the provinces was insensibly ruined, and preparation made for the terrible famine and pestilence which (as we shall see in the next seal) soon followed.

Can any picture, then, be more correctly, as well as graphically, drawn than the one before us? "When he opened the third seal, I beheld, and lo! a black horse; and he that sat on it having a pair of balances in his hand! And I heard a voice (from the throne) in the midst of the living creatures say, A choenix of wheat for a denarius, and three choanixes of barley for a denarius; and see that thou wrong not with regard to the oil and the wine!"

There is yet one remark to be added relative to the price of the wheat specified in the prophecy. Owing to the adulteration of the denarius, then begun (a fact well known to numismatists), as well as to changes in the market price of grain, it will be found that "a choenix of wheat for a denarius" was the enunciation of the fair market price of wheat in the times of Alexander Severus, to which we refer the third seal.

In THE FOURTH SEAL Scripture is its own interpreter. The rider is Death! His badge Hades, or the grave. Four agencies of destruction were committed to him; and the horse on which he rode (still emblematic of the Roman Empire) appeared of a livid hue, – a symptom of approaching dissolution.

Well did the pictorial prophecy prefigure the misery of this period. About fourteen years after the death of Alexander Severus, beginning with the reign of Philip, about A.D. 248, Gibbon speaks of the twenty years of "shame and misfortune, of confusion and calamity," that then ensued. And, all unconsciously speaking the voice of Scripture, he says that at that time "The ruined empire seemed to approach the last and fatal moment of its dissolution." Yet more, in continued accordance with the prophecy, he depicts the agencies of destruction at work. The sword! "Every instant of time was marked, every province of the Roman world was afflicted, by barbarous invaders and military tyrants;" — the sword from without and the sword from within — Famine! "A general famine was a calamity of a more serious kind (i.e., than certain other calamities superstitiously ascribed to the era); the inevitable consequence of rapine and oppression, which extirpated the produce of the present and hope of future harvests." — Pestilence too! Gibbon continues: — "Famine is almost always followed by epidemical diseases, the effect of scanty and unwholesome food. But other causes must have contributed to that furious plague, which, from the year A.D. 250 to 265, raged without intermission in every province, every city, and almost every family in the empire." He adds, that during a part of that time 5000 persons died daily in Rome; and many towns that had escaped the hands of the barbarians were entirely depopulated. Speaking of the provinces he says, "We might suspect that war, pestilence, and famine, had consumed, in a few years, the moiety (half) of the human species." (Note: The Merriam-Webster dictionary on my phone uses this sentence from Edward Gibbon as an example of usage of the word moiety.)

Does not this well answer to the prophetic picture: "Behold a livid horse! And his name that sat thereon was Death; and Hades followed after him: and power was given to him to kill with the sword, and with famine, and with the pestilence, and with the wild beasts of the earth."

The fourth destroying agent specified has not indeed been yet alluded to, viz., wild beasts. But here, too, history is the verifier of prophecy. We have it on record that at an epoch twenty or thirty years after the death of Gallienus the multiplication of wild beasts of prey had arisen to such an extent in parts of the empire as to become a crying evil. Arnobius, the Roman writer, alludes to wild beasts as one of the plagues with which the land was then afflicted, viz., in A.D. 296, near thirty years after the death of Gallienus.

And this reminds me of the necessity of showing that in that thirty years' interval the evils depicted had by no means passed away, though by the almost supernatural efforts of certain able emperors, attended by victories very remarkable in those terrible times, the actual dissolution of the empire was prevented. It was in A.D. 260, then, after the Emperor Valerian had been defeated by Sapor, king of Persia, and at length cruelly murdered, that Gallienus, his son, succeeded to the throne. During his reign the empire was broken by different usurpations into fragments. Of these, the most were ephemeral. But three of them maintained for several years each a part of the empire for himself, beginning in the several years A.D. 258, 261, and 263, viz., Odenatus and Zenobia in the East; Aurcolus in Illyricum; Posthumus in

Gaul and Britain; while Gallienus himself ruled in Italy. A fact this very remarkable! For it exhibits the empire as at that time divided into four parts, just as the Apocalyptic verse (according to Jerome's reading) represents the Roman Empire under the fourth seal; and those divisions precisely the same that Diocletian saw fit to establish by law afterwards.

After the death of Gallienus in 260, Claudius was elected, and made a struggle to raise the fallen fortunes of his country. He was, however, cut off by the pestilence five years afterwards, whilst engaged in fighting bravely against an immense army of Goths. So the sword and the pestilence were still doing their work.

Aurelian was next elected emperor. In continuing the war against the Goths, he found it necessary to cede to them the province of Dacia. Then came an irruption of the Allemanni. Three great battles were fought: the first near Placentia, which was accompanied by such loss on the part of the Romans, that the historians say, "The immediate dissolution of the empire was expected." In the two others, the Emperor Aurelian was victorious, and thus the fate of the empire was suspended. But in the year A.D. 275, after setting out to repel a Persian invasion, he was assassinated by one of his own generals.

Had the color of the livid pale horse yet changed? or were the destroying agencies of the fourth seal yet stilled? Let Gibbon tell in few words what followed. "The strength of Aurelian had crushed on every side the enemies of Rome, but after his death they seemed to revive with an increase of fury and numbers." In the following year the Alani spread themselves over Pontus, Cappadocia, Cilicia, and Galatia, and traced their course by the flames of villages. They were repulsed by the Emperor Tacitus; but he died afterwards suddenly, or was murdered; and so too his brother Florian, who succeeded him.

Under Probus, the next emperor, the Roman arms were victorious; and one condition of the peace that followed is remarkable. The barbarians were bound to supply them with 16,000 recruits. "For," says Gibbon, "the infrequency of marriage and ruin of agriculture had affected the principles of population, and had not only destroyed the strength of the present, but interrupted the hopes of future generations." After several victories in various parts of the empire over the Franks, and in Gaul and Egypt, in the year A.D. 281, all enemies seemed vanquished. Probus was honored with a triumph at Rome; but presently afterwards he was assassinated. Carus succeeded, and after several battles was killed – some say by lightning, some by assassination – A.D. 283.

Then followed civil war, three candidates fighting for the crown of the empire. One of them, Numerian, was murdered by Aper; and he again by Diocletian, who in a decisive battle defeated Carinus, and was elected emperor.

Then Diocletian divided the empire on system into four parts, under two chief and two subordinate emperors; deeming the empire too large and dangerously circumstanced to admit of the rule of one man. The empire, however, was still considered as one, and Rome as the one great capital of the whole empire.

I will only add the testimonies of three great historians, singularly

illustrative of the accuracy of our prophetic picture as to the state of things at this period of time. One, Sismondi, says: “Diocletian put an end to a long period of anarchy. But such a succession of invasions and civil wars, and so much suffering, disorder, and crime, had brought the empire into a state of mortal languor, from which it never recovered,” adding, “the deserts spread with frightful rapidity.” Another, Niebuhr, speaking of the same time, relative to the plague in the reign of Probus: “The empire was suffering from general distress, and its condition very much like that which followed after the cessation of the black death in the Middle Ages.” Again, another, Schlegel, remarks: “The division of the empire amongst several sovereigns appeared then (in Diocletian’s reign) an unavoidable and necessary evil. In other words, the several parts and members of the vast body of the Roman Empire, which approached nearer and nearer its dissolution, began then to fall to pieces.”

Continued in Rev. 6:9-11. The Fifth Seal

All chapters of The Last Prophecy: An Abridgment of Elliott’s *Horae Apocalypticae*