

Roman Empire from 96-324 CE



Key Bible References

Revelation Chapter 6

Introduction

Bible Context

Revelation is a book of prophecy. This is shown in the opening verses of the book which state;

The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show to his servants things which must shortly come to pass. (Revelation 1:1)

After encouraging and admonishing the seven ecclesiasties of the first century in Revelation chapters two and three, a vision of hope for the faithful is given in Revelation chapters four and five.

Revelation 6 introduces the prophetic visions that would soon begin to come to pass. It was a recognisable vision. It describes the opening of six seals in which each of the first four visions involved a horse, each one being a different colour, which is very significant. The Romans identified themselves by a horse. The Christians, living in the realm of the Roman Empire at the time the prophecies were given to the apostle John in 96 CE and for all generations after, the horse would be identifiable with Rome. Even today we have words related to horses that have come to us derived from the Latin, such as cavalry and equine.

History

An Overview of the Roman Empire 96 – 324 CE

By the second century CE the Roman Empire was administered by a vast civil service. Cities such as Alexandria, Athens, Antioch and London prospered. The Empire covered about 3.5 million square miles and included some 80 million people. The frontiers in most cases were natural boundaries, such as the Atlantic Ocean in the West, the Rhine and Danube Rivers in the North, the Black Sea and Syrian Desert in the East and the Sahara in the South. This was most of the then known world and it was covered by a network of thousands of kilometres of Roman military roads, which aided political stability, defence, trade and travel.

Trade brought luxury goods from all parts of the Empire and from beyond its borders. Roman influence brought with it Roman civilization: baths, aqueducts, villas, market centres, shops, reservoirs, temples, theatres, libraries. Coastal forts and lighthouses were built. Roman peace *Pax Romana* and social law and order made possible economic prosperity throughout the Empire.

The History Correlated with Revelation 6

The history of the Roman Empire from 96 CE to 324 CE falls into six clear phases which are clearly identifiable in the six seals of Revelation chapter 6. A brief history of each of these periods and a parallel explanation of the prophetic symbols in Revelation 6 will show the harmony that exists between the actual events that occurred in the Roman Empire and the prophecy that was given to John on the Isle of Patmos.

Peace and Prosperity 96- 183 CE

Bible Reference:

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. 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. (Revelation 6:1-2 KJV)

History

In 96 CE Emperor Domitian, a bitter cruel tyrant, was assassinated.

By contrast the period of the reign of the emperors Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, the two Antonines and the first three years of Commodus ushered in a time of relative peace and prosperity for the Empire.

The years from 96-183 CE, when the Empire was expanding to its greatest limits with sound defences, were comparatively peaceful. In parallel to this there was a rapid growth of Christianity during these years, despite some persecution of Christians especially during the rule of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

The Romans were essentially pagans and identified themselves by a war-horse. They claimed to be the offspring of Mars, their god of war. Evidence of this is found in the writings of Latin authors, ancient coins and artefacts. They also indulged in horse-racing and horse sacrifices.



The white horse

*The rider has a bow with no arrows
speaking of conquest without death*

Commentary: Revelation 6: 1-2

First Seal: Peace in the Empire and Christianity Spreads.

The first seal is opened by the Lamb, the Messiah, who was given knowledge of the future to pass on to the faithful. (Revelation 6: 1-2) John sees a white horse and hears a voice telling him to come and see. He also sees a rider wearing a crown and carrying an arrowless bow.

The crown was the *stephan*, the crown of victory promised to and recognised by the faithful Christian. Paul wrote that every man who strives for the mastery is temperate in lifestyle to obtain “a corruptible crown” or *stephanos*; but the reward of the faithful is an incorruptible crown (1Corinthians 9:25). White symbolised peace and to all those of that time, the image of the white horse would represent the Roman Empire at peace.

The image also portrays an expansion of Christianity throughout the Empire, through the symbol of the crown of victory and the arrowless bow.

The cruel persecutor of the Christians, Domitian, had died in 96 CE, the year that he had banished the Apostle John to the Isle of Patmos and the year of the revelation to John. Some persecution of the Christians still continued but the Emperor Trajan's advice to Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, about the treatment of Christians was that Christians should not be sought out, but if they are reported to be Christians and this is proved, then they should be punished. This probably reflects the spirit of that period of the Empire with regards to the treatment of Christians.

With the growing popularity of Christian doctrine and morals, Christianity spread rapidly.

Bloodshed and Civil Unrest 183-211 CE

Bible Reference:

And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. 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. (Revelation 6:3-4)

History

In 180 CE Aurelius Commodus, who was well educated, ascended the throne as Emperor when his father died. In 183 CE, he uncovered a plot and conspiracy of the Senate, organised by his sister Lucilla, against him. This aroused his anger and he used an excess of bloodshed and cruelty in destroying his opponents, including Senators and Patricians.

In 192 CE Commodus was strangled to death by Pertinax, who was considered virtuous and who tried to repair the damages caused by Commodus and to restore peace. His radical reforms upset the Praetorian Guard, who had enjoyed laxity and resented the new discipline imposed on them to curb their vices and licentiousness. Sedition followed. Fifteen thousand guards, with dagger in hand, marched on the palace and murdered Pertinax.

They then put the Empre up for auction and Didius, the highest bidder, paying each of the guards, gained the Empire. Three Generals, Claudius Albinus, Pescennius Niger and Septimus Severus, incensed by this, marched on Rome to defend its honour. Severus, the first to reach Rome with legions trained in warfare, subdued the Praetorian Guard and was pronounced Emperor.

Severus disbanded the Guard and replaced it with his own Legions. Albinus and Niger, in turn, opposed Severus, who ruthlessly subdued them. There was a period of civil war and upheaval and in 202 CE, Severus began a severe persecution of Christians. For a time approximately 2000 people died daily through civil war, murder, famine and pestilence. Severus died in 211 CE.

Political instability was to bring further unrest to the Empire.

The Red horse bloodshed and violence

Commentary: Revelation 6: 2-4

Second Seal: Bloodshed and Civil Unrest

In Revelation 6: 3-4 the second seal is opened revealing a red horse, representing bloodshed. Power was given to him that sat on the horse and a sword to take "peace from the earth."

The horseman represents an identifiable class of people in the Roman Empire. The Emperors and city were in the care of the Praetorian Guard. These soldiers carried a 'machaira', which was a short sword or dagger.

This period in Roman history was dominated by the Praetorian Guard whose power increased so much that they began to tyrannise Emperors, the city and the people. Blood shedding, assassination and murder dominated this period, which began with the excessive cruelty and bloodshed by the Emperor Commodus, who in turn was murdered. His successor, Pertinax, was assassinated by the Praetorian Guard when he tried to curb its excesses.

The red horse and the sword present an appropriate symbol of the civil war, upheaval and violence of the years from 183 to 211.



Famine and Distress 212-235 CE

Bible Reference:

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. 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. (Revelation 6:5-6)

History

Caracalla, who had several times attempted to kill his father Severus, and Geta, his brother were joint heirs to the Empire when their father died. They were implacable foes. Centurions in the pay of Caracalla, in the midst of negotiations to divide the Empire between Caracalla and Geta, entered the conference room and assassinated Geta. Caracalla killed twenty thousand of Geta's associates, bringing distress and mourning to the Empire. He won the army over by increasing their pay and the giving of lavish gifts. In doing this he impoverished the state's finances. He increased taxes and as a result farming quickly became uneconomical, creating a famine, which was not caused by a lack of rain. He compelled Senators to provide expensive entertainment, palaces and theatres.

In 217 Caracalla was assassinated at the instigation of Macrinus, his civil officer. Macrinus was unpopular with both the people and the army. He tried to reform the army, but found himself faced with mutiny. Elagabalus led the army against Macrinus, who was slain.

Elagabalus, the first Asiatic Emperor of the Romans, and the pretended son of Caracalla, wasted away the treasures of his people in the wildest of extravagances. He indulged unashamedly in lust, licentiousness and sensual delights to the disgust of his subjects. The sun's marriage to the moon and the display of superstitious gratitude for his elevation to the throne were the only serious business of his reign. His cousin Alexander Severus gained the affection of the public, arousing the jealousy of Elagabalus, who degraded him from the rank of Caesar. Elagabalus was massacred by the infuriated Praetorian in 222 CE and his memory was branded with eternal infamy.

Under Alexander Severus there were thirteen years of peace. He was only seventeen years

old and was guided by his mother. Provinces were relieved from taxes, the high price of food and interest on money was reduced. His people were aware of his reforms and repaid his beneficence with gratitude. He attempted to inspire the army with a sense of duty, but mutinies of the troops followed and his officers were murdered. His life was finally sacrificed to the fierce discontent of the army.

Commentary: Revelation 6: 5-6

Third Seal: Distress and Mourning

In Revelation 6: 5-6 a black horse is depicted and the rider carries a pair of balances in his hand.

The black horse indicates a time of distress and mourning. Ancient Roman coins depict a pair of balances and these indicate that the Emperor was the administrator of law and his agents execute the laws. In this period they performed their duties excessively. The heavy taxes placed on food by Caracalla, Geta and Elagabalus resulted in great distress.

Tax gatherers placed their charges on to the original tax, resulting in huge increases in the cost of wheat and barley. Farming was becoming unprofitable and production of food was reduced creating widespread famine, which was not due to lack of rain but the result of oppressive taxation.

Alexander Severus' reforms alleviated the food shortage, but his attempts to reform the army led the army to organise his assassination.

Widespread Violence 235 – 303 CE

Bible Reference:

And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. 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, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth. (Revelation 6:7-8)

History

The period that followed was one of increasing violence and brought the Empire almost to the point of collapse. The long Thracian sword, in keeping with the murder of Alexander Severus 235 CE, became symbolic of this period.

Maximin, an obscure Thracian, ascended the throne. He was ambitious and powerful in the army and the army of the Rhine saluted him as Emperor. He was like the cruel, straight, heavy Thracian weapon. During his three year reign, he did not visit Rome or Italy. The nobles were contemptuous of his obscure birth and he proceeded to slay those whom he thought remembered his obscurity. Thousands were murdered and spies infested the Empire. He confiscated the independent revenue of the towns, acted unjustly in the matter of wheat and barley, stripped temples and melted down the statues of gods, heroes and emperors to be made into coins.

The people were aroused and riots and massacres followed. The Senate prepared to wage war against Maximin. In 238 CE Gordianus and his son were proclaimed emperors, but both of them died in a war being fought in Africa. In the meantime, Maximin was marching towards Rome. Maximus and Balbinus 238 CE were appointed successors. By this time distrust reigned in the Senate and army. Maximus opposed Maximin at Aqualeia and Balbinus took over the government of Rome, where civil war broke out between the people and the Praetorian Guard, which supported Maximin. In the midst of violence, widespread bloodshed and confusion, Maximin was slain by his soldiers. Maximus and Balbinus, distrustful of each other, failed to cooperate and they too were assassinated. Within a few months six emperors suffered violent deaths.

Commentary: Revelation 6: 7-8

Fourth Seal: Violence Spreads

In Revelation 6: 7-8 the horse is a pale horse, '*chloros*', a pale green, the colour of death. The rider's name was 'death'.

How appropriate a symbol for these years. In the first fifty years of the period thirty nine Emperors died violent deaths. 'Hell' and the 'grave' reinforce the violence of these years.

The judgements came more upon the Italian division, a fourth part of the Empire.

Again a sword is mentioned but it is now the '*rhomphaia*', a long sword as used by the Thracians. In keeping with this symbol and the murder of Alexander Severus, Maximin, an obscure Thracian, who unleashed excessive violence and civil war, became Emperor.



Coin of Maximin

History Cont'd

In 238 CE a third Gordian, who had been made Caesar, was declared Emperor.

In 242 CE, his soldiers made Philip, an Arab, Emperor, while Gordian was engaged in war against the Persians. Gordian was subsequently murdered.

Philip in 244-249 CE was deposed by a revolution headed by Decius, a Senator, who was slain in a battle against the Gothic barbarians in the North.

Gallus and Hostilianus made a treaty with the Goths by which Rome promised to pay a ransom to secure peace for a year.

After Gallus and his son were assassinated, Aemilianus, who had defeated the Goths in war became Emperor for four months before being murdered, after being defeated in battle by Valerian.

Valerian and his son Gallienus assumed the purple in 253 -261CE, but Gallienus allowed his father to remain a prisoner of war of the Persians until his death. Gallienus reigned until 268 CE, during which time nineteen pretenders to the throne died unnatural deaths. Six emperors, three of which were murdered and one was struck by lightning, followed Gallienus with Diocletian becoming Emperor in 285 CE.

The success of the Goths lured other barbarian groups across the borders of the Empire. The Franks came against Spain, the Allemani attacked the northern provinces, the Goths ravaged the coasts of Asia Minor and the Persians threatened the East.

At this time famine ravaged the Empire. It was long, general and serious. Epidemics and disease caused widespread death. The Plague, 250- 265 CE consumed an estimated half of the population, with some 5000 dying daily in Rome for a period of time.

It appeared that the very existence of this great empire was threatened from within and without its borders at the end of the third century CE.

Commentary: Rev 6: 7-8 Cont'd

Famine, hunger, disease and death prevailed and in addition barbarian nations, 'beasts of the earth', began to attack the borders of the Empire.

The Empire was like the *chlorus* 'horse' and seemed faced with dissolution and close to 'death'. At this time most Christians were living within the bounds of the Roman Empire and were affected significantly by events and conditions of the Empire.



The black horse of Violence



The green horse of death follows

Rise of Christianity 303-311 CE

Bible Reference:

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, do you not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled. (Revelation 6:9-11)

History

For 300 years Christianity had spread steadily in the Empire. Its promise of a happier after-life and insistence on love and equality of all men were not offered by emperor worship, the worship of pagan gods or of the sun. The refusal of Christians to acknowledge paganism and the status of the Emperor had resulted in periods of harsh treatment of Christians.

It was not until 311 CE that persecution ceased as emperors supported Christianity hoping to gain the support of the growing religion as a force for unity and stability in the disintegrating Empire. The Edict of Milan 313 CE by Constantine officially established toleration for all religions. However, among Christians, there was no longer a unified front.

There were two major camps, the Novatians and Cornelius'. Cornelius was the bishop of the church in Rome. Earlier standards had declined, discipline was relaxed and malice and ambition caused endless quarrels. Zeal and moral standards declined and men began to philosophise about basic principles. The Novatians, the minority group, opposed the laxity of Cornelius.

At the beginning of the fourth century, the government of the Empire was undergoing change. Emperor Diocletian made Maximian joint ruler and assumed the title of Augustus. Two lesser rulers, Galerius and Constantius, were appointed and given the title of Caesar. Constantius, who controlled the West, tolerated Christians having married one. Galerius, who opposed the Christians ruled the East.

Galerius persuaded Diocletian to issue an edict of persecution against Christians in February 303 CE in order to destroy the Christian movement by fire, axe and torture. Galerius carried out the edict with vigour and violence, but Constantius largely ignored it.

In 305 CE Diocletian abdicated and shortly after Maximian also. Constantius and Galerius were elevated to the first rank. Maximian and Licinus were appointed Caesars. Later, Maximian came out of retirement and elevated his son Maxentius to power. The Empire was now ruled by six emperors.

On the death of Constantius, Constantine, his son, came to power. A joint edict of toleration was proclaimed by Constantine, Galerius and Licinus. However, in 311 CE Galerius and Maximian died and Galerius' territory was added to that of Maximian.

Maximin was a ferocious, cruel despot, who began an extremely violent persecution of Christians. His terrible record of cruelty preyed on his mind. He owned his guilt and died in agony of mind in 313 CE. During his reign, Christians had suffered more than at any other time.

Commentary: Revelation 6: 9-11

Fifth Seal: Rise of Christianity

The 'altar' represented Christ's sacrifice and the way to redemption. In this period during the horrific persecution of Christians, many were slain and symbolically their blood was poured out in sacrifice and their prayers were for judgement to come on their oppressors, the rulers of the Roman Empire. The promise here to these persecuted Christians was that they would receive the reward of the faithful, but it would be for a later time. However there is a promise here that judgement would come upon their oppressors.

Upheaval and Constantine's Triumph 311-324 CE

Bible Reference:

And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand? (Revelation 6:12-17)

History

This period of Roman history began with four emperors, Licinus, Maximin, Maxentius and Costantine, and with paganism as the state's religion.

Constantine was of Serbian background, and had a reputation as a wild man. He had fought on many European battle fields from Britannia (England) to Byzantium. He is reputed to have murdered his wife, brother in law, a nephew who was only seven and several other relatives.

Constantine followed the policy of his father in granting religious toleration in the West of the Empire. He was ambitious and many Christians joined his army to march against Maxentius, who ruled in Rome.

In 312 CE Constantine defeated Maxentius at the battle of Milvian and took Rome. He defeated Licinus, in the East at Adrianople in 324 CE. At this time he claimed to march under the authority of the Lord.

With the battle of Chrysopolis in 324 CE, Constantine became sole ruler of the Empire.

At this time a revolution in government occurred, where the power of the priesthood to the pagan gods was eliminated entirely. A pseudo-Christianity, which incorporated some pagan festivals endowed with Christian aspects to appease the pagans, completely took over from paganism as the state religion.

Constantine removed totally the pagan system to allow for the rise of the Papal system.

Commentary: Revelation 6: 12-17

Sixth Seal: Constantine's Triumph

Revelation 6: 12-17 reflects the cataclysmic changes on the Empire brought about by Constantine.

The period began with six Emperors and concluded with one. There was a complete political change as indicated by the 'earthquake'.

In the book of Revelation, where earthquakes are mentioned, the symbol always denotes great political changes. In this period, the ruling powers (sun) were eclipsed and the pagan religious powers (moon) were subdued, through war and bloodshed.

Constantine and his army, comprising many Christians, like a 'mighty wind' brought about vast changes in the Empire. These verses capture the fear of all levels of the Roman pagan population (verses 14-15) as Constantine sponsored the Christian cause and later declared himself a Christian. The eagle on Roman standards was replaced by the cross and the church was elevated to power, persuading many that the wrath of the Lamb had been manifested and poured out on the pagan world.

A new epoch had begun and with the power of paganism now removed, the church emerged as a new force and power in the earth. The Roman Catholic Church came to believe that this period marked the beginning of the reign and kingdom of Christ on earth.