

# Alpha & Omega

## Bible Studies in the Book of Revelation

Understanding the symbolism of Revelation chapter 6

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### ABOUT “Alpha & Omega”

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

~ Revelation 1:8

*Alpha & Omega* is the second series of Bible Studies especially written so that you can do them alone at home, or with others in a group. They don't depend on a leader or someone affirming the right answer. The title of this series comes from the introduction of John's letter to God's people, preparing them for the persecution and difficulty the Church of Christ was about to face. But it gives them (and us) two views of this: the seen reality of what God's people experience, and the unseen reality of God's glorious and gracious rule in Christ over all these events. They suffered, and we will suffer, but Christ rules even over the suffering ... and he is returning soon with saving victory for his Church!

### SYMBOLISM IS NOT REALITY: IT *SYMBOLISES* REALITY

As noted at the beginning of this series of studies, Revelation is full of symbolism: it's visions are not looking at reality as if making a video recording on your cell phone, but are symbols that metaphorically reveal aspects of reality God wanted the seven churches of Asia to understand in preparation for the persecution descending on them.

When coming to symbols in Revelation, the temptation is to bring questions and ideas to the text *before* looking at the text, asking “Who or what historical event is represented?” when we should be asking, “What does the text say?” It is a mistake to think that if a person is part of the symbol it is symbolising a person; or that if an event is part of the symbol, it symbolises an actual event; or that if a number is part of the symbol, it symbolises the actual number.

Symbols are a dramatic way of highlighting something about what is symbolised that is completely different from what it looks like in reality. For example, if a person declares someone to be a “beast,” no-one takes this to mean they are actually a beast or look like a beast: the symbolisms describes conduct or character, not physical reality. Something symbolised **does not look like** the symbol!

When in Romans 3:13-18, for example, Paul draws on a range of OT symbols to describe the fallenness of man, no-one in their right mind would imagine people would actually look like their description! But if we were to read that passage the way Revelation is often read, we'd probably produce a children's worksheet with a cartoon for children to colour that featured a grotesque human head with an open grave for a throat, a knife or sword for a tongue, vials of poison replacing the teeth behind the lips, and a mouth full of cursing and bitterness (how do you draw that?) in place of food.

Yet that is what is too often done with Revelation, giving children a wrong message because the compilers of the worksheet have understood neither the symbolism nor the message themselves in the first place.

### **Please Read Revelation 6:1-9**

What is there in these texts that would encourage or discourage seeking to identify particular horses and/or horsemen with particular people, angels, events or whatever apart from them symbolising judgement of war/sword, famine, plague/pestilence, and death/ravaging of beasts?

## THE RIDER ON THE WHITE HORSE

Much attention is given to identifying the white horse and its rider in Revelation 6, despite *nothing* in this text suggesting the symbolism represents a person. Conquest is sent as judgement on the world, not as a person. It is one of a set of four, the rest of whom are not fantasised into people. Why look for a person in this symbolism?

From the early Church until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, seeing the rider as Christ has been the most popular way the text is stretched beyond what it says. (Since it is Christ who sends all four out, is it likely Christ is the first rider Christ sends?) Then in 1866 the idea that it is the antichrist was formed. More recently, the Roman Empire has been suggested. Each depends on separating the first horse and rider from the others, interpreting it in a different way from the others, and making what the text says it is about secondary to what the text doesn't say it is about.

Key images are the whiteness of the horse, the crown of the rider, the shooting of arrows, and the appearance of Christ in Revelation 19. In what follows in this study and in the rest of Revelation, it will be seen that the whiteness of the horse is irrelevant for identifying the rider; the crown is found on the King of Kings *and* on Satan and his legions and proves nothing; the shooting of arrows is terrifying but contrasts with the sword of Christ and therefore is of little exegetical help; and the appearance of Christ in Revelation 19 is a *contrast* rather than likeness.

### Going back to the basic rules of interpreting symbolism (Study #1):

a. *John is revealing mysteries, so what is revealed should be plain and easy to see.* It is not easy to see a person if, as is the case, symbols don't look like what they symbolise, much less identify a particular person. At the most, one might possibly say the text indicates judgement delivered through human terrors rather than demonic ones (but see Zech 6:5). As far as the rest of this book goes, white is associated with Christ and the redeemed – but (apart from 19) never with their mode of transport, and its use here, picking up on the OT and contrasting with judgment rather than life and purity, makes Christ possible here but unlikely and not a necessary conclusion. The rider is crowned, as is Christ, but so are the heads of the dragon and the beast in 12 & 13: the crown does nothing more than symbolise actual or pretended dominion.

b. *John often explains what the symbols stand for.* Here he tells us that the rider is a conquering conqueror in the pattern of judgement evident in the whole set of four. He gives no other meaning.

c. *John uses symbols and metaphors from his and the other Gospels.* In John 4:35 white symbolises readiness for harvesting the redeemed, and in the other Gospels Jesus' transfiguration is white. White could symbolise Jesus, or just as easily someone posturing as a divine Saviour, or it could simply identify one horse from the others.

d. *John knows and uses the Old Testament.* The relationship of this passage to Ezekiel and Jeremiah is inescapable – and the white horse there was neither messianic nor a person (described, along with the others, as one of “the four spirits of heaven.” Zech 6:5); further, there are no riders. This also groups the four together as a “type” (cf Rev 7:1).

e. *John uses symbolism commonly understood in the culture of the day.* Emperors and victors in numerous empires were known to ride white horses, and victorious Roman Generals would wear white robes symbolising their victory. The Greek deity Pegasus was a winged white horse. Probably more significant is the fact that this rider is using a bow and arrows as he rides – a terrifying skill perfected by the Parthians, and feared by the Romans (the main persecutors of the church at the beginning of this tribulation).

That leaves the comparison of the first horse and rider here with the appearance of Christ in 19, but the contrast is so dramatic as to make any suggestion that they are the same highly unlikely. The only remaining issue is, could the first horse and rider be the “Antichrist”? Many readers will be surprised to learn that there is no specific mention of the Antichrist in Revelation. Even in 13 where either or both beasts have that *attributes* of antichrist, John does not identify them as such. In John's letters there are four mentions of the antichrist – the most helpful for this discussion is 2 John 7 in which “*many* deceivers” are identified as “*the* antichrist.” John makes no effort there to identify an Antichrist, but he is adamant that the church should be alert to the “many antichrists” (1 John 2:18) and the “spirit of the antichrist” (1 John 4:3). John seems less concerned with the identity of Antichrist than with his impact on believers. Paul's reference to “the man/one of lawlessness” in 2 Thessalonians 2 6ff has all the *characteristics* of the common concept of the Antichrist, but Paul, like John in Revelation, makes no use of the name. There is no basis here to build anything of significance (apart from evil persecution) around the concept of an Antichrist, much less to magnify it into a significance totally absent from John's writing, so don't go looking for him!

It is unmistakably unsafe therefore to identify the first horse and rider with any particular person, be it Christ, the Antichrist, or any other! Stick with the message of the text: Christ rules, and the terrors and disasters seen on earth are judgements Christ sends across the earth and across history in a warning of the final judgement he will bring.