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SHORT STUDY

THE FIRST RIDER: A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL BACHMANN

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In a recent article in this journal, Michael Bachmann argued several points concerning Rev 6.1–8. I list both the important points he argues, as well as one of his major presuppositions, since I will respond to both: (1) the first horseman is to be understood in a positive sense, 'als Hypostasierung des Erscheinens Gottes';[1] (2) he is strongly identified with Christ in Rev 19; and (3) the remaining horsemen are manifestly negative figures. The first point is correct, but I have reservations about the other two. Since the third point is actually not a thesis that Bachmann tries to win, but rather one that he presupposes in arguing the first two points, I am in the strange position of sometimes showing that Bachmann reaches a partially correct position ([1], not [2]) by a manifestly incorrect argument (i.e. separating the first horseman from the other three).

Bachmann correctly argues that the first horseman of Revelation cannot possibly represent an Antichrist figure or some other figure bent on thwarting God's plan for his people. Whomever or whatever this figure represents, he can only be understood protagonistically. But unfortunately, while Bachmann helps the reader to break free of the Antichrist interpretation of the first horseman – which had been argued *inter alia* by Mathias Rissi and (more recently) by Allen Kerkeslager[2] – his replacement view is not entirely convincing. Bachmann claims that the description following the opening of the first seal (a white horse appears, his rider 'had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer') is positively related to the description of Christ in Rev 19.

Bachmann begins with what I regard as a strained argument for separating the first horseman from the remaining three. He rummages the Greek text for stylistic peculiarities in the description of the first horseman, including the way in which he is introduced, that could lead one to identify

[1] Michael Bachmann, 'Noch ein Blick auf den ersten apokalyptischen Reiter (von Apk 6.1–2)', *NTS* 44 (1998) 257–78, p. 278.

[2] Mathias Rissi, 'The Rider on the White Horse', *Int* 18 (1964) 407–18; Allen Kerkeslager, 'Apollo, Greco-Roman Prophecy, and the Rider on the White Horse in Rev 6:2', *JBL* 112 (1993) 116–21.

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this horseman *over against* the other three, rather than with them. The minute level of detail at which Bachmann argues, however, simply cannot unravel the tight plait of similarities in the descriptions of the four horsemen. Moreover, as Kerkeslager had noted in response to an earlier version of Bachmann's argument, *each* of the four horsemen possesses a number of stylistic peculiarities.[3]

This does not mean that Bachmann's identification of the first horseman as a positive figure is unfounded. While his philological argument is less than convincing, it is also unnecessary for the suggestion that the first horseman is a positive figure. There is no need to drive a wedge between any of the descriptions of the horsemen, since the narrative actually casts all four as heaven-sent. The entire narrative of the opening of the seven seals is a description of the 'day of the Lord', attested plainly with the cries of the victims of God's wrath upon the opening of the sixth seal: 'Fall on us [, mountains and rocks,] and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?' (Rev 6.16–17). There is no reason to assign any of the seven seals to the designs of anyone other than God. As J. Massyngberde Ford notes, 'Operations seem to be directed from the throne room itself.'[4] Exegetes who assign the first four seals to antagonistic powers are forced to think of the remaining seals as God's countermove, but nothing in the text suggests such a discontinuous reading of the seven-seals sequence. Furthermore, the role of the seven seals in the throne vision of Rev 5 supports our identifying every seal with the judgment of the day of the Lord, since the opening of the seals appears to be a sequence of *performatory*, rather than revelatory, acts. Otherwise, it makes little sense that the Lamb alone should be worthy to open the seals. (Surely an angel or a prophet could have opened the seals if their function were only revelatory.) The fact that the Lamb is the only one 'in heaven or on earth or under the earth' who could open the seals implies that he *effects* the judgments revealed, a fact already alluded to in the quotation from Rev 6.16–17 above (cf. 'wrath of the Lamb'). As Larry Hurtado writes, the Lamb is portrayed in Rev 5.5–12 'as the uniquely worthy one to execute God's eschatological plan of judgment and redemption'.[5] The seven seals, *en bloc*, are part of heaven's agenda.

Therefore, it seems to me that many scholars have read Rev 6 rather hastily, not realizing that the 'oppressive' elements in this chapter are effected by the Lamb and directed against God's enemies.[6] This is par-

[3] Kerkeslager, 'Apollo, Greco-Roman Prophecy, and the Rider on the White Horse', 116 n. 4.

[4] J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (AB 38; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 101.

[5] Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 122.

[6] Many scholars are predisposed to associate the calamities of seals 2–4 with antagonistic forces, apparently opting for an interpretive framework so resolutely dualistic that even the most common OT prophetic conventions are ruled out. Kerkeslager objects that 'Death and Hades' (a split hendiadys?) are 'antithetical to God' in Rev 20.14, and so must be in Rev 6.7–8 as well ('Apollo, Greco-Roman Prophecy, and the Rider on the White Horse', 116), but we must remember that apocalyptic is intended to be at least partially demythologized by its readers. The personification of death in an apocalyptic work need be no more than a narrative convention, and death need be no more a real personal force in the mind of the author than captivity, sword, or famine. In Revelation, death's alternating qualities of goodness and badness are strictly

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ticularly true of scholarly treatments of the first four seals, but one can also find scholars who assign all of Rev 6 – which relates the opening of the first *six* seals – to antagonistic forces.[7] I thus applaud Bachmann's argument that the first horseman should be read in a positive light, since this suggestion leads in the direction of rightwising the whole sequence of seven seals. My disagreement with Bachmann has to do with the particular identity he gives to this figure. Bachmann believes that the first horseman is a positive figure in an *absolute* sense, while the narrative only goes so far as to imply his positivity in a strictly *functional* sense. Contrary to Bachmann's argument, the first horseman is not necessarily positive in his person, so to speak, but rather is leant his positivity by his (possibly unwitting) service to God (cf. Isaiah's Cyrus). (This is not to say, however, that the first horseman represents a definite historical figure – see below.) In fact, this is the case with all four of the horsemen in Rev 6.1–8, and Bachmann's tactic of separating the first horseman from the other three, for the sake of viewing him positively, originates in an unwarranted search for figures who are only positive or negative in an absolute sense. *Functionally* positive figures are commonplace in biblical prophecy, and they have been allowed too little say in scholarly interpretations of apocalyptic texts.

There is another point on which I disagree with both Bachmann *and* the predecessors he names. By my reckoning, Bachmann, and other exegetes of this passage, are wrong to insist upon the determinative bearing of the symbolic value of the horse's colour for the identity of the first horseman. To be sure, celestial referents for the colour white could be multiplied many times over.[8] But Bachmann bypasses two significant facts: (1) The author's decision to assign a colour to each horse opens up the possibility that any match between the colours assigned and the colour regularly used to denote such positive attributes as heavenly origin, christological status, or purity are strictly fortuitous. I am not arguing that the author would have perceived 'white' as an inherently value-free colour, but its significance here may be only that of denoting a *functionally* positive element in the narrative, or it may be used void of any value at all. After all, there are *four* horsemen, not one, so four differently coloured horses are required. We should be surprised if an apocalyptic writer did not make one of them white. We are perhaps no more justified in seeking to decode the colour scheme of Revelation's four horses than that of the red, sorrel, and *white* horses in Zech 1.8 and the red,

functional. André Feuillet argues that the first horseman is intended 'à présenter le jugement eschatologique décrit dans les versets qui suivent sous son aspect théologique de victoire divine', but there is little reason to think that the first readers of Revelation would automatically associate calamitous portents with antagonistic forces ('Le Premier Cavalier de l'Apocalypse', *ZNW* 57 [1966] 229–59, p. 258).

[7] John G. Gager, for example, puts the first six seals on the negative side of a ledger recounting the whole narrative of Revelation as a dualistic struggle ('The Attainment of Millennial Bliss through Myth: The Book of Revelation', in *Visionaries and Their Apocalypses* [ed. Paul D. Hanson; London: SPCK, 1983] 150). Gager labels the negative side of his ledger 'Oppression/ Despair'.

[8] Bachmann cites the use of white in the Enochic *Animal Apocalypse* as an example for his interpretation of white in Rev 6.1–2 (p. 268), but the meaning of white in the Enochic text is not nearly as cut and dried as he makes it out to be. His use of Enochic material is selective. See Patrick A. Tiller, *A Commentary on the Animal Apocalypse of* I Enoch (SBLEJL 4; Atlanta: Scholars, 1993) 225–6, 380.

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black, *white*, and gray horses in Zech 6.2. (2) If, however, one *is* justified in searching for a more particular significance for the colour white – as is entirely possible – one may more profitably consider whether the conqueror has simply been outfitted with the trappings of a conqueror. The match between the colour of the first horseman's steed and that of Christ's steed in Rev 19.11 could be rooted in their both being portrayed as conquerors – the *TDNT* article on λευκός lists 'joy, fortune, and *victory*' among the many possible significations of the colour white in the ancient world[9] – rather than in any absolute or typological equivalence between the two figures.[10]

The rider is basically a conqueror. What do conquerors do? In ancient times, more so than in our own, the activity of a conqueror was conceived of primarily in terms of *taking captive.* Conquerors take captives. The history of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds, including Israelite and Jewish history, is filled with accounts of conquerors deporting populations to a conqueror's homeland, or alternatively dispersing them among the nations of the world. The purpose of this universal policy was usually to weaken the revolutionary elements among conquered peoples. (There were sometimes other reasons as well.) In fact, in the long run, this fortune of war was in some ways the most destructive in terms of its effect on national identity. Thus it may safely be said that the association of the image of a conqueror with that of the captivity of a people would likely have been both immediate and powerful. That, I think, is the point of calling the first horseman a conqueror. Equating the first horseman with the notion of captivity brings a sequence of four devastating fates into focus: captivity, sword, famine, and death. When we compare this sequence with the devastations of Jer 15.2, we find a one-for-one match:

Jer 15.1–2
1 Then the LORD said to me: Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!
2 And when they say to you, "Where shall we go?" you shall say to them: Thus says the LORD:
Those destined for death, to death,[11]
and those destined for the sword, to the sword;
those destined for famine, to famine,
and those destined for captivity, to captivity.
3 And I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, says the LORD: the sword to kill, the dogs to drag away, and the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth to devour and destroy.

In fact, Rev 6.1–8 seems to be Jer 15.2 in apocalyptic dress. To be sure, the ordering of the lists is different – Revelation has 'captivity, sword, famine, death', while Jeremiah has 'death, sword, famine, captivity' – but the items are all the same.[12] Ford, whose commentary is packed with fresh insights, points as well to LXX Ezek 5.12, which has 'death, famine, captivity, sword' (MT lacks 'captivity').[13] But, while she notes that the LXX's text 'ap-

[9] W. Michaelis, 'λευκός, λευκαίνω', *TDNT* 4.242 (emphasis added).

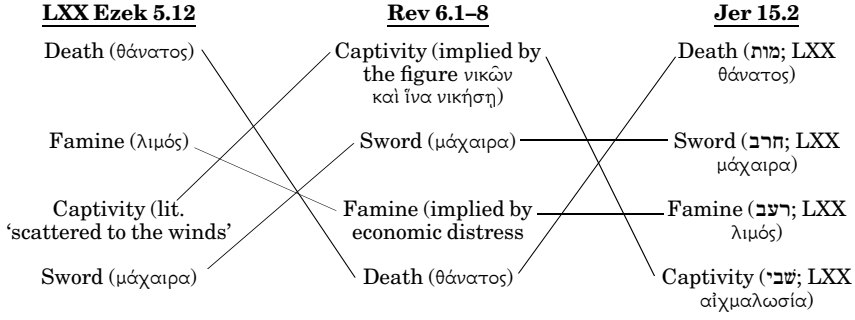
[10] Crowns are linked with conquering in Rev 2.10; 3.11; and 6.2.

[11] The NRSV's 'pestilence' for מות is unfortunate, although this translation is anticipated by the LXX.

[12] The earliest Christian tradents sometimes rearrange the items in a tradition for reasons unknown. Cf. the Matthean and Lukan orderings of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness (Matt 4.1–11//Luke 4.1–13).

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proximates our apocalypse more closely' than the Masoretic, she fails to note the semantic equivalence of LXX Ezekiel's 'scattered to the winds' (= captivity) and Revelation's white horse (= captivity) and thus misses the true extent of the parallelism. Like other scholars, Ford is primarily occupied with seeking OT parallels to the more traditional tetrad of 'sword, famine, pestilence, wild beasts' in Rev 6.8 than to the scheme of the four horsemen, a line of investigation which seems to have sidetracked the search for the scriptural background to the meaning of the white horse.[14]



I find this correlation with Jeremiah and LXX Ezekiel to be very suggestive for the interpretation of the four horsemen of Revelation. The author of Revelation either used Jeremiah or LXX Ezekiel, or Jeremiah, LXX Ezekiel and Revelation are drawing upon a stock list of heaven-sent calamities. (The case is perhaps stronger for LXX Ezekiel than for Jeremiah, since scholars have assembled an extensive list of possible echoes of Ezekiel in this section of Revelation.)[15] At any rate, the meaning of the first horseman becomes clear: he does not represent a defined figure in the apocalyptic drama – historical or otherwise – but rather symbolizes the threat of captivity as one (not necessarily chronologically first) part of a fourfold devastation.

CONCLUSION

Michael Bachmann correctly recognizes that the first horseman is cast in the drama as heaven's avenger, with a wholly positive role in God's plan. This recognition is a distinct advance over a great many previous studies which identify this figure with the Antichrist.

I can think of three credible relationships in which Rev 6.1–8 may stand to

[13] Ford, *Revelation*, 102.

[14] Rissi and Beagley, for example, both cite Jer 15.1–2 as an imperfect parallel to this latter tetrad, and miss the more impressive parallel between the four horsemen and Jer 15.2 (Rissi, 'The Rider on the White Horse', 412; Alan James Beagley, *The 'Sitz im Leben' of the Apocalypse with Particular Reference to the Role of the Church's Enemies* [BZNW 50; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987] 42).

[15] See esp. the parallels between Ezek 1–9 and Rev 4–7 listed by Feuillet, 'Le Premier Cavalier de l'Apocalypse', 247.

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Jer 15.2 or LXX Ezek 5.12. (1) Both Revelation and the OT passages are dependent upon the same stock description of devastation in multiple spheres. I regard this as a possibility, but somewhat unlikely because of the great amount of time separating Jeremiah and Ezekiel, on the one hand, and Revelation, on the other hand. For such time spans, direct dependence is a more convincing scenario. (2) The author of Revelation adopted a formula from Jer 15.2 or LXX Ezek 5.12, but without reinterpreting the original passage. Or (3) the author of Revelation reinterpreted Jer 15.2 or LXX Ezek 5.12, so that the actual referents of the two passages are either the same (to the author's mind) or stand together in some sort of typological relationship, i.e. Revelation records an eschatological destruction of the wicked among Israel, modelled after an earlier judgment found in Jeremiah and LXX Ezekiel. In support of this last possibility, it should be noted that the reordering of the devastations is no real obstacle, since the author of Revelation always reworks his scriptural sources rather freely.

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