

The Apocalypse of St John: Various Symbols and Signs

Tigers massacre Indians

That might have been the headline in Detroit this morning. Granted, the Detroit Tigers did not massacre the Cleveland Indians, but they did win the baseball game 3-2 last night. But what if the headline did read something like "Tigers kill Indians?" Even if we aren't die hard baseball fans, chances are we understand the context of the headline, especially if it is on the sports page of the newspaper. But what if that headline was buried for hundreds, maybe



even two thousand years? What if people on the other side of the world picked up the headline and read that the Tigers killed the Indians?

Do you think they would be thinking about a baseball game or is it possible they would assume the reason why Native Americans no longer populate North America is because of a tiger rout. Better yet, could this be seen as a prophecy to the nation of India?

Some great Bengal Tiger might come and demolish one of the most populous nations on the planet!

It sounds silly to us because we understand the baseball symbolism. We know that when we are driving down the road and a pickup truck has the number "3" on the back, that he/she is a Dale Earnhardt fan. We know what the numbers 401k and 1099 mean in terms of the IRS. But people two thousand years from now in another culture may not.

This is the point when reading the Apocalypse (Revelation) of St John. The imagery and symbolism must be looked at in regards to culture and time. Does a beast mean the same to us as it did to them? What about horsemen? Locusts? Lions, Tigers, and Bears, Oh My (all of which are NFL teams, by the way).

The Lion and The Lamb

"Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth." Revelation 5:6

This is surprising to St John because in v. 5 one of the elders says to him "Do not weep. See the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." The next thing John sees is a lamb, "standing as if it had been slaughtered." To further complicate matters the lamb has seven horns and seven eyes. St John tells us that the seven horns and eyes are the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth. What does this mean? Who is the lamb?

First of all let's look at the number seven. As we have noted already in this study, seven has special significance as being the number of wholeness, completion, and perfection. The universe was completed in six days and God rested on the seventh making the whole cycle of creation a perfect seven days. Seven becomes a sacred number.

When we see seven horns we must look at two things: the horns themselves, and then the number seven. Horns have symbolized royal power (Psalm 132:17). The messianic lamb bears seven horns, representing the completeness, wholeness, and perfection of royal power.

The seven eyes representing the seven spirits of God could hold a two-fold meaning. The messianic prophecy from Isaiah (11:1-3a) states that the messiah will have six (or perhaps seven) manifestations of the spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and fear of the Lord). Or it could emphasize the lamb as the bridegroom (remember this letter was written to seven churches) of the church, or it could be a reference to the seven archangels (Tobit 12:15). It is also important to remember Zechariah 4:10 and to perhaps say that the seven eyes represent God's omnipotence in that nothing is out of sight for the messiah.

But what about the lamb itself? It may seem obvious to us reading this with Christian eyes to associate the lamb with Christ. After all, when we sing the Agnus Dei, "O lamb of God that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us." Agnus Dei is Latin for "Lamb of God." But what is most interesting is how St John hears one thing and sees another. For instance, he heard an elder say to him, "See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah...has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and the seven seals." The whole drama in chapter four and five is who is worthy to open the scroll and break the seals. A great search has taken place all over the earth and in heaven and under the earth, and no one was worthy. Now, the elder is telling John that the Lion is worthy. When John looks he expects to see a Lion, an animal full of power and might that corresponds with the Hebrew expectation of the Messiah. Instead, he sees a Lamb. Not only does he see a Lamb, but this lamb has been slaughtered. It is interesting how John hears one thing, yet sees another. Or perhaps, John expects to see one thing, and is surprised by the reality.



Just because the one who is worthy appears as a lamb and not a lion does not cancel the truth that the messiah is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Remember Jesus saying to the crowd, "I thank you father that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding?" Sometimes we miss the truth because we are expecting something else. Our faith must be open to God's revelation and not our own expectations.

But there is a dual reality in the Lion and Lamb. Christ, the messiah, is the Lion who has conquered. He has not conquered in the military sense that was expected, but he conquered slavery, sin and death. The irony is, however, he did not accomplish this by the sword or with might as would be expected with a Lion. He did it through sacrifice. He did it through the cross. Therefore Christ conquered as a victorious Lion but he did it as a meek lamb.

It is only Christ who is worthy to open to the scroll and break the seven seals. Notice the sevenfold praise given v. 12. The Lamb receives power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing (7).

The Four Horsemen

Growing up, I thought the Four Horsemen were the wrestlers Ric Flair, Sting, Arn Anderson, and Lex Luger.



It wasn't until later I discovered they were actually biblical characters. The four horsemen have terrified biblical readers for centuries. This terror is aptly demonstrated in the woodcut by Albrecht Durer showing the four horsemen destroying those in their path. John Hagee on television the other day began his interpretation of the four horsemen as being Christ



riding on a different horse. This interpretation is problematic. Furthermore, as scholar Craig Koester has stated, trying to look at these horsemen as predictors of the future is a waste of time. To say that the first horse represents conquest and that the end of the world is beginning when a person tries to take over the world is to be ignorant of history. How many people have tried to take over the world? Napoleon, Alexander, Hitler, Marcus Aurelius? The horses again, may have dual meanings; they may have a local Roman meaning that the readers of John's Revelation would understand as well as a larger spiritual meaning that is significant to us today. For instance the local meanings of the horses:

1. White Horse with bow – Parthian warriors to the east of the Roman Empire.
2. Red horse – the resulting bloodshed; the Roman leaders were proud of the Pax Romana or Roman peace, this horse has the ability to take away that peace
3. Black horse – warfare is followed by inflation and famine; the Roman economic system was able to produce food for many, but with an invasion and the end of peace, this would be threatened
4. Pale horse – war brings about death

Remember to whom this letter was first written, to the seven churches that were being persecuted by the Roman Government and culture. To know that those who caused their suffering would not go unpunished was a message of hope to the original readers.

The general spiritual meaning we can take from the horsemen is that when we misuse power, we bring judgment on ourselves. Lust for power, war, famine, and death are not judgments left only for God, we do a fine job of bringing those on ourselves. When we abandon faith, hope, and love, the result is war, famine, and death.