



The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: The Spiritual Diagnosis of War



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“The apotheosis of State power is war. In war the State's force is not hidden or implicit, it is vividly on display. War creates a hell on earth, a nightmare of destruction on an otherwise unimaginable scale.”

David Boaz (Internet)
<http://www.libertarianism.org/ex-11.html>

The question before us is: can we make peace with revelation? In this question, the term *revelation* has two meanings—a duplicity that in and of itself is not unusual in so-called apocalyptic literature. (apocalyptic means primarily *hidden*—it is literature with a hidden meaning). A question to be considered, of course, is “hidden from whom,” and “why hidden?” But the more primary question for us in this conference is the question of the two different meanings of “revelation”. One is the idea of the entire Bible being some sort of “revelation”, and the second is the single book of the New Testament—a book that stands as its capstone and its concluding statement. This is a doubly intriguing question because at another time I would like to make the argument that the book of Revelation is the most important book in the New Testament and in a sense really is THE REVELATION in encapsulated form. I have gone so far as to structure an introductory seminary class on the New Testament by reading it backwards, beginning not with the gospel of Matthew, but with the book of Revelation. Why is that? Because, at the end of the day, the book of Revelation takes us where no other book in the “larger revelation of the New Testament” can take us—to the application of the gospel to “humanly constructed systems.” Whereas the gospel of Matthew, for instance, sketches out for us an imaginative, visionary life of individual compassion in the Sermon on the Mount, the book of Revelation takes on complete human systems, such as political life, and its near cousin War. War is the great human system writ in large letters. I believe that it is the most important question of human existence. There is painfully little about War in the Gospel of Matthew, there is painfully much it in the book of Revelation. And the revelation about War is what I wish to talk to you about this morning.

The question for us, of course, is how do we “make peace with this ‘New Testament (spiritual) War book?’” How can learning about the topic of War help us develop Peace? The key to understanding this is not as complex as you might think. In a nutshell, the book of Revelation leads us to peace through an imaginative journey to the ultimate ends of War.

Let me repeat that: *the book of Revelation leads us to peace through an imaginative journey to the ultimate ends of War.*

Let me share something else about this thought. I once had a brilliant young student in another introductory biblical studies class in seminary who brought all of us to a point of exceptional clarity about the nature of “The Revelation.” After hours and days of wrestling with the meaning of the necessary reconstructing of the biblical text that is the warp and woof of seminary classes in biblical studies, he quieted all of us with this statement: “What you are saying is that the Bible is a *‘cautionary-tale.’*” When I heard the words I knew that I had just learned the secret of biblical interpretation in two words. YES! YES! EXACTLY! The Bible is the record of a group of imaginative thinkers who mapped out an alternative to society as we know it, controlled by powerful political interest groups who put their own security and well-being before the society as a whole. It is a cautionary tale of where that society ends up (in a word “exile”). In a word, *the policies of any society become its destiny*. The writers of the Old Testament sketched out the destiny, or better the *reason* behind the destiny of losing their home land and landing in exile (of losing the so-called promised land); the writers of the New Testament similarly cautioned us against taking God’s grace as a sign of God’s weakness. The key issue for the New Testament is the rejection of Jesus by the world, or better, by the systems that run the world. Yet this rejection of Jesus does *not* do the world in. It continues with the powerful and the privileged continuing to call most of the shots. Is God weak? Can’t S/He do something about this? The New Testament cautions us to not fall victim to this way of thinking. It cautions us to replace our vision of God’s failure with the truth of God’s grace. The NT, in other words, interprets the failure of the transformation of the world as a sign of God’s grace. If God allows this world to continue, the surely there is hope for us all, no matter our alienation from God.

Let’s move to a closer look at the book of Revelation. It is a violent book. Violent images abound. Not the least of which is the Lamb of God himself. The Lamb of God portrayed as violent? How can that be? We read these words in Rev. 5:9b-10:

““You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign^[b] on the earth.”

Here is the revealed meaning of the death of Jesus in a nutshell. Through his death he has “purchased” the right to break the seals. But what does that image really mean? What stands behind the seals, in other words, what do they “seal”? The answer, of course, is the accumulation of human violence. From a theological point of view, human institutions—particularly political institutions—“hide” or “seal” multiple acts of human violence. The death of Jesus on the cross according to human wisdom means “failure”. The death of Jesus on the cross from the standpoint of revelation means “breaking the seals of (hidden) human violence. All of this is rather straight-forward, but it has a

mystical side as well. The mystical side is that somehow—mystically—Jesus is promoted to the office of “seal-breaker”, not by his birth and greatness of his teaching, but by his death. This implies something about the mirroring effect in human existence, that some sort of ebb and flow, of back and forth, is deeply built into the way that we experience the world. The violence done *unto* Jesus somehow, mystically, becomes the basis of his power to *reveal* the hypocrisy of humanly constructed institutions. Simplistically speaking, we may simply say “it takes one to know one.” The violence done unto Jesus becomes the basis of his *ability*, or *right*, to uncover the nature of human violence itself. A profound turning upside of the way that humans think. It is nothing less than the core nature of, and meaning of, R/*revelation*. The reason, par excellence, of why the book of Revelation is the fitting *end* of the NT (or, just as easily, the fitting *beginning*). It all depends on whether or not you want to tell the full meaning of the story at the outset, or build toward it for a climatic conclusion.

As we know, the book of Revelation is the primary example of what scholars term *apocalyptic literature*. This literature is rooted in the prophetic movement in ancient Israel. It is simply an updated, more modern form of prophecy. It shares with prophecy two key aspects, namely it is rooted in forth-telling more than fore-telling. Secondly, apocalyptic literature is rooted in ethical thought “but not in the way that you think!” It is not “the good guys are rewarded and the bad guys get it in the end. That is the old, violent way of human thinking. Rather, it is “this is what is going to happen to you if you don’t change your ways.” The Bible intends for its readers to make a change in their lives, to, as it were, *transform* their lives (or, better, to allow their lives to be transformed). It is a *rewriting* of the meaning of human violence. Following the mandate of “cautionary tale,” apocalyptic literature sketches out in code form what will happen *should we fail to make that change*. Thus, the foretelling aspect of the book of Revelation is more about “code language” about the present than it is “about a key for unlocking the future.” We may say that the intention of the writers of apocalyptic literature is to rhetorically *convince* us to change our *systems* by *warning* us of the consequences should we not. In that way, the purpose of biblical apocalyptic literature, and ultimately the R/*revelation* itself is to diagnosis the present reality—a reality I might add that is more or less presupposed in our own present situation as well. The imaginative ride into our midst by the riders of the Four Horsemen is a textual “cautionary tale” should we fail the journey toward human responsibility.

One of the crucial questions that we need to ask ourselves is what are we to change from and change to? Whence the danger that we ignore at our own peril? With that question in mind, let us turn to the image of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in Rev. 6. Let me read to you Rev. 6: 1-8:

¹ I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” ² I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

³ When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ⁴ Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword.

⁵ When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶ Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “Two pounds^[a] of wheat for a day’s wages,^[b] and six pounds^[c] of barley for a day’s wages,^[d] and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

⁷ When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” ⁸ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

The most important question we may have is: Whence these horsemen? Do they come from God? Is the intention of the seven seals to keep the fury of God from us? Does the Lamb loose the seals in order to loose this fury of God upon us? Most likely not! The argument for that is not so much to be made from these verses from the book of Revelation itself. It is to be made from a reading of the entire biblical revelation. I would argue that the horses come galloping toward us from the forces that we ourselves have created, forces that we attempt to “keep sealed up.” They are the forces of violence that we use to keep our humanly-constructed systems vibrant and efficacious. In the last analysis, “they” are “us”. (Pogo was right after all: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”) These horses come galloping toward us in succession, and we know for certain that the end of that succession of stallions is a pale green horse named death. Only this horse is named and is made, therefore, explicit in our consciousness. Should those first three horsemen succeed in their individual tasks, we may be certain of the arrival of the fourth.

These Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse portray a grim picture. Yet, despair is not the intention of the revelation. It is illogical to make such an assumption: why write if the death of all is inevitable? Why warn if the transformation effected at the end of the warning is of no consequence? The contrary argument is more naïve than the immature believer who demands word for word correspondence between text and everyday reality. The message is surely *hope*, for a community that would treasure and keep alive a text for nearly 2,000 years because it discouraged optimism and championed depression of the human spirit is far more unlikely than the argument that God personally carved each latter of the Bible into its original parchments. Humanity needs hopeful literature and its most treasured documents are surely bearers of hope! Biblical apocalyptic literature, like that portrayed in the image of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is no exception to this rule.

The question becomes then, how can the apocalyptic image of death be understood as a bearer of hope. Please follow the logic here: The Bible is a message of hope, intended to motivate its readers to change; it is a cautionary tale that imaginatively maps out the failure of the change that it seeks; the image of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ends in death for all; then, the intention of the image must be diagnostic of the problem rather than a prediction of future events. Let’s say it clearly, once and for all: The Bible is not a predictor of the future, just as it is not an absolutely reliable

rendition for the history that it inventively portrays. Those who demand absolute infallibility on either side of the chronological timeline, are equally misguided. The Bible is above all, about the nature of the present. It is a portrayal of the present more sharply ground than any image shot with a video camera—given to us by such sources as the *media*. It is, in the words of Rumi the great Islamic poet of the thirteenth century, not the water itself, rather the wetness of the water. My thesis in a nutshell, is that apocalyptic literature represents a spiritual diagnosis of the present, and not a predictor of the human future. With this image in mind, let us look into the horsemen for a moment in more detail—horse by horse!

The White Horse (I term him “Boundary-Maker”)

White in color, we name the first horse “Boundary-Maker”. We could just as easily name him “Savior”, for in the human condition, “salvation” comes through the creation of boundaries—separating goodness from the pollution of evil (what Robert Pirsig in the classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* calls the “knife of rationality”). Human salvation begins with human thought. The history of interpretation of this horse and rider is itself fascinating: many claiming that it is one and the same as the horseman of Rev. 19 (who clearly *is* the Christ). In Rev. 19:11-16 we read

¹¹I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war.

¹²His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

¹³He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.

¹⁴The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.

¹⁵Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:
KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Does this figure clearly associate Jesus (king of kings and lord of lords) as a warrior? Yes, but only in the spiritual sense of his weapon being the “Word of God.” He is a warrior of “faith and truth,” not military arms. He only makes war “with Justice.” His “army of heaven” is “dressed in fine linen, white and clean,” certainly not the shielding appropriate for the battlefield. Subsequently the text removes all doubt: it is the beast and

kings of the earth that desire the violence of the battlefield, and are the initiators of war, not the Christ. We read in v. 19

¹⁹Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army.

Their war is the “real thing,” not a spiritual battle, but a physical one. They will slay with swords, not with words. So we may conclude: this image of the white horse and rider in Rev. 19 shows us the ambiguity of the white horseman in Rev. 6. Authentic saviors slay, or have the potential to slay, with words instead of weapons. What they slay are acts of injustice, instead of the normal spoils of war.

But is the first rider of the Four Horsemen in Rev. 6 Jesus? Attempts to make him so illustrate more the misunderstanding of Christians of their own tradition than insight. They may well be blinded by the very whiteness they seek to interpret. The key to understanding that the figure is not Jesus lies in v. 2: “he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.” This statement requires that we understand the first horseman of the apocalypse as a true warrior. He is a figure of real war, rather than an allegory for spiritual war. This ambiguity of the two figures that have so mislead generations of interpreters is actually extremely insightful for understanding the first component of war consciousness. It leads us to see the true dialectical nature of the initial acts of war, and the partial truths that makes it so often irresistible. This very ambiguity is rooted in the concept “Savior”, and this ambiguity has accompanied Christian existence since its inception over 2,000 years ago. For in truth, the Savior speaks for God, and we are drawn by the truth of what he says. War, it seems, does not begin with the inclination toward violence—rather, it begins with ideas, with thinking the “right” thoughts

Like a living body, it is not an exaggeration to say that healthy communities flow with the life flow of information. At its core, the intention of the rider of the first horse is to sketch out a moral universe of good versus evil. Its color is white, the color of **moral** certitude. It conceives of the world as a battleground between the forces of “good” and “evil”. He is the creator of the mythic moral boundaries in our minds. It comes riding toward us following a moral script laid out as an “us vs. them” universe. It justifies death (both killing and dying) on the basis of the “good” and the “pure” which it attempts to incarnate in existing social structures. Its basis is the categorization of the “black” other as “enemy”, “evil”, “non-human”, “expendable”, “oppressor” and the like. It has obvious relevance to racism and colonialization. It frames people as rational constructs such as statistics, demographics, etc. to be ordered and structured for some “greater purpose,” e.g., “liberty”, “freedom”, “prosperity”, and the like.)

The intention of this horsemen is to bring a kind of peace to the human condition, a kind of negative, false peace built on two pillars: a bow and a crown; or, more precisely, peace built on the power of the bow (i.e., the military) and the power of the king (i.e., political power). The power of this bow and crown is primarily meant to address threats of *external* enemies. But, as these forces directed toward external enemies now come riding toward us, we see immediately that the Lamb has broken the seal (of God's grace) and that the constellation of forces that we use against others, now is turned towards us. These two realities work hand in hand in tandem in the Bible, and represent the fundamental environment to which the Bible responds. In other words, the Bible "sees" and reacts to a world run by bow and crown, or more popularly, general and king. The Bible is not an anthological book that delves into pre-monarchal times—or better, does so only through the lens of general and king.

I want to reemphasize something about this first horse that makes the whole episode of the image of the Four Horsemen stand out—

First, they come to us "from the outside" and not from "within" human experience. The Bible is decidedly NOT an anthropological study of the origins of human culture, just as it is not a science fiction projection into the human future. It addresses a key component of human existence—the period run by generals and kings. It suggests that how vigilantly we contain the power marshaled by these forces intended for use against our "enemies" will be a predictor of how likely we will be to engage the challenges of the next Horseman. In other words, the challenge will be to meaningfully address the underbelly of the benefits of generals and kings. The spiritual question posed here is how can we use force against our enemies, and escape having this same force come riding into our own midst?

The Red Horse (I term him "Enthusiasm")

The second horse is red, the color of **violence**, terror, and the state. It conceives of the world as a battleground between the powerful and the powerless. It justifies war on the basis of "victimage", "honor", "courage", "professionalization", and, and above all "retaliation" and "vengeance". This is, in essence, the structuring of a group (such as a state or "terrorist group") for the purpose of inflicting violence and terror as a mimetic, or doubling countermeasure of force. Following the moral, rational principles established by the White Horse, it frames the world visually, a place to "show" and "exhibit" one's own power and "show of strength.")

You have heard the old saw: "war is hell." Yet how quickly we become swept up by the enthusiasm of this "hell on earth." While fear may be the typical reaction of the soldier in combat, as the killing magnifies, it is quite possible to get a "battlefield high." It is possible to "sell" war as a test of manhood and rite of passage of young men into adulthood. It represents a kind of "coming of age" in which death itself is looked

squarely in the face and by doing so it becomes deabsolutized. Again, quoting Rumi, it is not God as the object for which we look that is central to the spiritual task, it is precisely in the looking for God that the absence of God is finally overcome. So it is here, that in the “looking” at death that death itself is overcome. We might say it this way: war takes death from the ultimate to the penultimate level in its attempt to “normalize” it. Once we face death on the battlefield, or shall we say, see the face of death on the battlefield, death itself becomes easier to accept. In fact, studies show that killing becomes easier with each successive act of killing. The principle is the same. One of the primary reasons that war remains entrenched in our lives is the yeoman service that it performs in concretely dealing with the ultimate conundrum of human existence: we are, after all, the creature that knows that it will die. Plato famously maintained that the study of philosophy is the preparation of death. It is little wonder that we find military images sprinkled through the pages of his work. The true philosophy is a soldier of truth. Was Paul so far away from this line of thinking when he advocated putting on the full armor of Christ to shield us from worldly temptation?

The Black Horse (I term him: “Cosmic Rider:)

The third horse is black, the color of sickness, disease, and most profoundly, the **plague**. It is often portrayed as the source of the plague that will destroy all of human life. The dynamic of this vision is the contagious nature of human violence--conceptualized as having a life of its own exceeding absolute human control. The “plague” itself is an image of that which stands beyond human control. The name of this horse that stands somewhat alone and apart from the first two could be called “Cosmic Rider,” or “Rider of the Clouds,” for the true nature of this horse is the cosmic powers that are unleashed by the forces of moral human rationality and raw human emotion by the first two horses. This third horse immediately precedes the entrance of the fourth—and final—horse, and may rightly be thought of as the bearer of the most dangerous of the three horsemen that precede the Horse of death, the one that opens the way to annihilation of civilization itself. It is the horseman which indicates loss of human control due to the nature of the universe and the relatively small place of humanity within it—a “final truth that we are only now beginning to learn as a species. We might term this horse many things, all of which rooted in the idea of “unintended consequences.” A more modern and popular term for this is “blowback”. “Entropy” is a scientific equivalent concept that captures the idea that humanly created systems eventually ebb and flow until their dynamic power dissipates over the course of time through no manipulation of human thought, action, or even awareness. This third horse reminds us of our basic human predicament—that is that we are compelled to create culture—to control the forces around us—and then we gradually become ensnared within the very grasping nets that we construct that causes us to slowly sink into the deep uncharted waters of life. Culture, it seems, saves us from drowning in the vicissitudes of life, only to entrap and smother us by means of the very objects of security that they bequeath. It is the third horse—sent by the cosmos itself, or better, the forces that we have sent out into the cosmos returning back to us—that eventuates in death, this time, not the death of the

enemy, but the death of ourselves. It is this black horse that exhibits the destructive consequences of war most vividly. It is rightly seen as the greatest obstacle to human peace.

The systemic realities unleashed by the Cold War, especially embodied in such events as the Cuban missile crisis, illustrate this reality most forcefully. It is imaginatively portrayed in an old film that you may have seen—"Failsafe"—when forces established for good eventually assume their own life and integrity and necessitate the sacrificial bombing of an American city (New York) by the American air force in order to "prove" that the concomitant bombing of a Soviet city by a sister American bomber is an unavoidable error and should not be followed with a massive Soviet air strike against the entire U.S. Failsafe is about a system gone haywire, a system that gradually dissolves into the manifestation of precisely that for which it was designed to prevent. That is "blowback", or "entropy" or "unintended consequences." It is the one reality that bureaucrats, politicians, and experts, continually mask from our thoughtful consideration. All three of the first horses are representatives of the "masks of war," but the third is the "mask of masks." It is the most dangerous because it is the dimension of war that is deeply embedded into the fabric of the universe itself, not simply the human mind and heart.

It really affirms the authentic way that the experience of war dives deeply—we might almost say "philosophically"—into the deepest realities of life. It signifies that aspect of life that lies beyond the human, found in the deepest corners of the cosmos itself. It reminds us that when we conduct war, we are touching the deepest of human realities, because killing is the closest human reality to the Divine. It is that force that ensures that the "negative peace" brought about by war does not last, indeed cannot last, because it is always subject to forces that it is incapable of managing and maintaining. "The best laid plans of mice and men..."

The Fourth Horse ("Death')

The fourth horse is pale, the color of human **hubris**, arrogance, and finally death itself (the end to which such human attitudes lead). It is the tendency of man to understand himself "as God" with its attendant rights of determining life or death. In Islam, which has raised the problem of arrogance and the submission to God that it promotes, has raised this issue to an art form. Islam helps us understand that THE problem is not the machinations of a violent human heart, but the perpetual drive of the human heart to exceed the built-in limitations of the human condition. Hubris is our final enemy, the final entre into the realm of death. This drive is most visible in the construction of human systems and human institutions, metaphorically visualized in the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11. It is NOT that this tower reaches up into the divine world; it is that the tower "makes more of man than man is." It successfully disassociates humanity from its embeddedness in the larger "chain of life" of which it is only a part.

The theological meaning of death itself is the basic point: we die because if we didn't, God only knows what pretentious undertaking we might pursue. Theologically, death stands in a kind of balanced position between a full, meaningful life that ripens "naturally" to old age and the immortality that we have lost due to our arrogance. The greatest subject of theology, and for that matter, literature and philosophy, is this subject of death. Ultimately, the subject of War is about the attack of War upon the naturally ripening of life that peace allows. It is that War cuts us off prematurely from this middle war between life and death. It introduces death into our lives *too quickly*, whether we die ourselves or kill another. This is the tragedy of War: "Let death come, but do not let it come too quickly." T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* bears eloquent poetic witness to the grip of death upon our soul. He writes:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

War does not allow us to return to the beginning again. It leaves us mid-stream, half-baked, up the stream without a paddle. It robs us of our joy in finding our childhood again in our old age.

Following the logic of Eliot, it may well be said that the Christian New Testament represents an exploration of the Judaic Old Testament. The last book of the Bible—Revelation—takes us back to the first—Genesis. The book of Revelation with its apocalyptic imagery brings us back to creation, to arriving where we started, and to know that place for the first time. This dynamic can be seen especially when we embrace the inner meaning of the Four Horsemen of Revelation 6. How so, and in what way? First of all, a close reading of the Genesis story leaves us with some profoundly unanswered questions about the origin, source, and purpose of evil in the otherwise creative and positive aspects of life. Let us review the crucial text in question, Genesis 3:1-7:

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

⁴ "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

⁶ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

The operative question here concerns the origin and purpose of the serpent. The theological question is: why did God create something that would violate the purposes (commandments) of God Godself? Is this stupidity, game-playing, or simply a lack of power? The key point (from the standpoint of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse) is that the serpent comes from the *outside* of the human order. Eve does not fail as a human being at this point because of moral failure or intellectual misunderstanding. She fails because the outside forces that impinge upon her are misread and misinterpreted. In modern biological terms, her brain is simply not up to the task at hand. She is quite literally blindsided. Like us, she does not know the origins of the serpent. She seems to believe that God will relent and meet her broaching of the commandment without serious repercussion. The implications of this misread of the situation are, stated mildly, enormous. Like Adam and Eve before us, we have been hiding from God (Gen 3: 10) ever since this initial act of “eye opening” and “becoming like God.”

This serpent coming from outside the human experience, yet impinging upon it, reminds us of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Both remind us, and are meant to remind us, of the temptations of war. Before the entrance of the serpent, we have the hint of the problem in Gen 1:28. Here Adam is told by God to “subdue” the earth. Why must the earth be subdued? Why is it created that way? They are child’s questions, and they are questions that the Bible simply does not answer. The Bible, it turns out, gives adult answers to adult questions only. It turns the simple question of the child “Where do bad things come from?” to the complex questions of adulthood, “Do we have the ability to eradicate war from human society?” It is vitally important to understand this nature of the Bible. It is an adult book, meant for an adult audience, in order that we might actually achieve adulthood. It is intended for no more, nor is it intended for less.

But, it is not only the earth that man (Adam) must subdue, but sin itself. The key to understanding the first several chapters of Genesis in the Primordial History is Genesis 4, the story of Cain murder of Abel—metaphorically the first act of “War” in the Bible. In its most primitive sense, Cain’s murder of Abel is War because it is about murder, and War, ultimately is the legitimizing of murder. This knowledge comes after obtaining something of the knowledge of God. The knowledge of God is finally the knowledge that allows us to kill—this is, in other words, the knowledge of morality (or, “good” and “evil”). Murder, the illicit taking of human life, that stands at the apex of the entire narrative of the first chapters of Genesis. The ride of the fourth Horseman is a return to this dynamic in our midst. In Gen 4, God says to Cain upon God’s displeasure of his sacrificial offering:

If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.

It is upon the turning of the issue from the origins of sin, to the ways and means of mastering it that the entire narrative rests. The implication of all this is quite clear: Just

as Adam and Eve could subdue the earthly wilderness and Cain could master sin, the appearance of the Four Horsemen in Rev 6 is not inevitable. Both, in essence, function as “cautionary tales” laying out what *will* happen should the seals that cover our violence be broken by the Lamb of God, the victim *par excellence* of our solidarity with Cain. The breaking of the seals is really the breaking of God’s grace—the end of God’s grace and the outpouring of divine justice.

To conclude: let us take a brief moment to look at the contemporary realities of our lives. We still live mostly in the shadow of the Great War (I tend to view WWI and WWII as two parts of a larger One Large Great War. The horror of this Great War began to lead us down the path toward the first virtual War, the Cold War. The Cold War was not War in the classical sense of the Great War (1914-1945). It was driven by the goal of not going to war (no matter how many lives would be lost or ruined in the pursuit of this goal). The “war” that succeeded the Cold War in our present time, namely the War on Terrorism, all the more testifies to the end of War due to its blurring of distinctions between good and evil, between soldier and civilian. Terrorism is more driven by theatrics than traditional combatant and military strategy and is something of a child of a visually-based culture. It is “high theater”—deadly yes, Warlike, not really. Its importance and popularity in the world is more driven by modern mass media than military strategy. The rise of the suicide bomber in this context marks a real turning point in the vanishing of war. The suicide bomber, who does not seek to *evade* death, but to *embrace* it, is not war. The refusal of a military machine to boast in, and typically inflate the number of enemy casualties, such as the American military in Afghanistan, represents the retreat of war from our consciousness, not its presence. In this new environment, war is not the “*continuation* of political policy by other means” (Clausewitz). It is the *failure* of political policy, and, it is in this conceptuality of war as failure, that our hope for its elimination realistically lies. For the first time in history, war is broadly understood as *failure*, as something *inhuman* lodged somehow deep within the human spirit. Only by fostering this understanding of War as failure can the ride of the fourth Horseman be avoided. Only by rejecting the temptations of the first three Horsemen as they gallop through our society, can we stay the ride of the horse of death.

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