

## **Zechariah's astonished horses and the second woe**

by Douglas E. Cox

The horses of the prophecy of the 2nd woe may allude to the horses mentioned in Zechariah 12, and 14.

In Zechariah's prophecies, the armies of those who come against Jerusalem are not killed; instead, they are smitten with "astonishment," and with "blindness," and other plagues. This illustrates that they are involved in warfare of a spiritual nature, not a flesh and blood conflict.

Zechariah said Jerusalem will be "a burdensome stone for all people." The conflict is such that "all the people of the earth" are involved. Human nature wars against the Spirit of God.

The Jerusalem to which Zechariah's prophecy applies is the heavenly city; that is why "all the people of the earth" are involved in the conflict.

Zechariah wrote:

Zechariah 12:1-4

The burden of the word of the Lord for Israel, saith the Lord, which stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundation of the earth, and formeth the spirit of man within him. Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about, when they shall be in the siege both against Judah and against Jerusalem. And in that day will I make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all people: all that burden themselves with it shall be cut in pieces, though all the people of the earth be gathered together against it. In that day, saith the Lord, I will smite every horse with astonishment, and his rider with madness: and I will open mine eyes upon the house of Judah, and will smite every horse of the people with blindness.

Isaiah foretold that in the last days the mountain of the Lord's house would be established at the top of the mountains, above the hills. [Isaiah 2:2] This was fulfilled, when Jesus ascended to heaven,

after his resurrection. He was the only begotten son of God, so he represents "the mountain of the Lord's house."

Jesus became king on David's throne, in the heavenly Jerusalem. Peter said, that God made him "Christ." That implies he was given a perpetual throne over all Israel, in Jerusalem. Mount Zion has become heavenly and spiritual, a mountain that cannot be touched. [Hebrews 12:18] Jesus has reigned over his church throughout its history, and over all nations.

Christians of all nations, representing tens of thousands of denominations, ministries, and sects are included in Zechariah's prophecy of a siege against Judah and against Jerusalem. They are involved in spiritual warfare about seeking the things promised to the saints, and entering the kingdom of God. This warfare involves the sharp sword of God's word, and its interpretation.

In Revelation 19 Jesus is depicted mounted upon a white horse, and with a sharp sword going forth from his mouth.

Revelation 19:11-16

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, King Of Kings, And Lord Of Lords.

As Jesus is mounted upon a white horse, his foes are also represented by horses, and horsemen. In the prophecy of the second woe, [Revelation 9:13-19] the horses have heads of lions. The apostle Peter compared the devil to a roaring lion:

1 Peter 5:8

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:

There is a connection between the heads of lions of the horses in the second woe, and the devil, as both are lion-like. It may be that by saying the horses had heads of lions, John depicted the natural minds of men, and also alluded to the devil. [Revelation 9:17] The head of a lion represents the natural mind of man which is opposed to the Spirit of God. [Revelation 9:17] In the prophecy, lion-like heads belong to each horse individually.

In Revelation 11:7 the two witnesses are killed by a beast who ascends from the bottomless pit. Revelation 20 identifies who this beast is.

Revelation 20:1-3

And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and

a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season.

The binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1-3 corresponds to the description of the souls of those who were "beheaded" in Revelation 20:4, who reign with Christ, in newness of life. This "beheading" applies to individuals. This prophecy may be compared with the second woe, where horses are described having lion's heads. Being "beheaded" could be a cure for having the "head of a lion." But the saints who reign with Christ are not headless; each is a new creation in Christ. Their minds are subject to Christ and his word, which transforms them. Paul wrote to the Galatians:

Galatians 5:14-16

For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another. This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

Paul continued:

Galatians 5:17-18

For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

"Biting" and "devouring" other brethren is one example of lion-like behaviour. It is a metaphor. Paul contrasts those who walk in the Spirit with those who walk after the flesh. The horses of the 2nd woe represent people who belong in the latter category. Their lions' heads depict carnal human nature. In Revelation 20:4, those who are *beheaded* reign with Christ; their lions' heads are gone. "Beheaded" alludes to *repentance* and becoming a *new creation* in Christ.

The beast who kills the two witnesses in Revelation 11 is Satan. While he is bound in the bottomless pit, Satan no longer deceives the nations. Those believers who reign with Christ are led by the Spirit, and follow the Lamb. But when Satan is loosed, and ascends from out of his pit, he kills the two witnesses, the *Spirit*, and the *Word*, two things Jesus said will testify of him, each of which dwells in the believer. One who "testifies" is a witness. Spiritual death falls upon one third of men. [Revelation 9:15]

The binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1-3, and the saints' reigning with Christ, are both said to span *a thousand years*. John says that when the thousand years are finished, Satan ascends from his pit. He was previously bound, but now he breaks free. This could apply to individual Christians who once reigned with Christ, for whom Satan was bound, but who allowed Satan to ascend from his pit, and deceive them. They ceased to be led by the Spirit of Christ. Instead they become deceived, and believed the delusions of Satan. Otherwise, for those who remain faithful, there is *no end* to their reign with Christ.

In Revelation 12:4 a third of the stars of heaven are drawn by the tail of the dragon, and are cast to the earth. If the stars represent believers, *one third* of them being cast to the earth agrees with the

interpretation of the horses of the second woe *killing one third of men*. If the horses of the second woe kill a third of men in a *spiritual sense*, rather than in a literal or natural sense, those who are *killed* by them might include believers who return to the world, from which they had escaped. Their faith is what is "killed." Paul said:

Romans 8:6-8

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Scholars have proposed a variety of interpretations for the 200 million horses in Revelation 9:13-21. These may be listed under the following headings: 1. Turks, Arabians; 2. Asian hordes; 3. wars and artillery, 4. Nuclear war; 5. demons; 6. the Scriptures; 7. hordes of antichrist; 8. No interpretation.

## **1. Turks, Arabians**

Johann Albrecht Bengel interpreted the horses and horsemen as "Tartars and Turks." Their number was two hundred million, and to explain this Bengel added together all the Turkish armies of more than two centuries. Bengel wrote, "When St. John adds that their number was heard by him, he hints that the certain number specified, if it is put for an uncertain one, yet has not a wide uncertainty; and that the greatness of the number, however incredible it may appear, is still to be credited."

William Burkitt interpreted the horses and horsemen as a vast army of Turks, Arabians, Mahometans.

Thomas Coke interpreted the horses as the Turks & Saracens, in the siege of Constantinople.

Paul E. Kretzmann believed them to be "Mohammedan hordes."

William March wrote that the horses and horsemen represent "the Othmans slaying the third part of men, or subduing the Christian states in the Greek or Eastern Roman Empire over a period of three hundred and ninety-one years and fifteen days."

John Trapp claimed horses and horsemen represent Turkish armies and artillery.

## **2. Asian hordes**

Others say they are armies of Asian people who threaten the West.

H. A. Ironside believed the horses and their riders were "Asiatic hordes."

J. Dwight Pentecost quoted William Kelly who wrote of the horses and horsemen of the second woe, "Euphratean horsemen are let loose on the western powers, overwhelming all Christendom, and in particular that west as the special object of the judgment of God."

David C. Pack wrote: "The reference to horses and horsemen is obviously a representation of an immense army. Yes, 200 million is certainly 'a mighty army.' In all likelihood, this is an attack by

the Russian and Northern Asian hordes (armies) against what is called the Beast and Babylon (Revelation 17 and 18)."

### **3. Wars and artillery**

Interpretations in this category claim the horses and horsemen represent armies and their artillery, or war itself.

Adam Clarke wrote of the horses, "Is this an allegorical description of great ordnance? . . . Fire, smoke, and brimstone, is a good allegorical representation of gunpowder."

George Leo Haydock speculated that the lions' heads of the horses represent the artillery of the army, or cannon.

Ray Stedman thought that the horses signify a great military campaign.

John F. Walvoord said the second woe horses and horsemen are "a massive force of tremendous military power."

Daniel Whedon wrote that 200 million horses represent "the totality of the wars of the Christian ages."

### **4. Nuclear war**

One person found evidence for a nuclear attack on Europe in the prophecy.

John H. Ogwyn wrote: "When the sixth angel sounds, two events occur. One is the unleashing of a nuclear attack on Europe, and likely on its Latin American allies as well. The other is the massing of the largest army ever assembled on the east bank of the Euphrates—200 million men."

### **5. Demons**

Another theory says the horses and horsemen are demons. If this theory is true, the horses must be invisible. Their colourful breastplates cannot help us in identifying them.

Charles D. Alexander interpreted the second woe horses and horsemen as "hellish squadrons; "200,000,000 demon horsemen."

William Barclay referred to the horses and their riders as "squadrons of demonic cavalry."

G. K. Beale wrote that the horses and their riders are "ungodly spiritual forces, which are portrayed as a multitude of armies on horses. . . demonic beings are presented as monstrous horses."

E.W. Bullinger claimed that they are "supernatural beings. . . They are not human. They come from below. We know of nothing like them. When God thus describes them nothing ought to be easier than to believe what He says. They need no explanation."

He wrote: "When Israel would trust in the horses of Egypt they were warned that their riders and horses were 'flesh and not spirit' (Is. xxxi. 3). Here we have horses that are spirit, and not flesh."

Friedrich Dusterdieck wrote: "the armies in this vision, like the locusts of the fifth trumpet, are of a demoniacal kind."

David Guzik wrote, "The safest interpretation is to see this as a literal 200 million strong army, but a demonic army invading earth."

Clarence Larkin referred to them as "infernal cavalry."

John MacArthur suggested that these horses signify a demon force.

Heinrich Meyer wrote that the horses and their riders are "a supernatural army" or plague.

Henry Morris claimed that the horses were "a demonic legion of nightmarish animals indwelt by evil spirits." He also claimed they will be specially created.

Peter Pett stated that the horses are demons, or evil angels.

Joseph Augustus Seiss claimed the horses are "supernatural horses;" "infernal horses."

J. B. Coffman called the horses "monstrous hordes of destroying cavalry."

## **6. The Scriptures**

Christopher Wordsworth wrote, referring to the horses of the second woe, "The Scriptures, in swiftness and strength, like an innumerable Army of Horsemen, are now sweeping over the world."

## **7. Hordes of antichrist**

John Hooper wrote, "these symbolic horsemen are Apostles of Satan, sent forth by him for the destruction of that outward fabric of Christian polity and government."

On the number 200 million, Ford Cyrinde Ottman said: "To apply the number to some angelic host, without producing Scriptural warrant therefor, is to send us into a region where all reasoning is lost, and to permit man to roam wherever his imagination leads him."

Ottman believed the second woe depicts "demon-possessed men" — "These myriads of horsemen, whose coats of mail are mingled with 'fire and smoke and brimstone,' are the demon worshippers of a coming day."

According to Jon Paulien, the horses signify "the gathering of Satan's host which precedes the battle of Armageddon."

## **8. No interpretation**

William R. Newell argued for no interpretation of the prophecy, claiming none is required; the horses of the second woe are *literal* horses with lions' heads and serpents for tails!

## **Are the horses of the second woe demons?**

I suggest they are not, for the following reasons:

1. Ford Cyrinde Ottman, quoted above, found no support for this interpretation in the text. It is certainly not a *literal* one.

2. *Colours* are specified, but demons are *invisible*. The idea that the horses and riders in the second woe are demons implies they are invisible. But that seems to negate John's description of the breastplates, which are coloured fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulphur yellow. If they are invisible, why describe the colours? The claim that the horses signify demons is discredited by their colourful breastplates, as demons are invisible. It would be pointless to specify colours for the armour worn by invisible demons.

3. Breastplates imply they are *mortal*. Demons are not mortal, so would not require breastplates. So why would invisible demons wear breastplates? The focus on the breastplates in the prophecy strongly suggests the horses represent *mortal men*, not invisible demons.

### **On the idea that the horses are literal:**

1. Taking the prophetic horses literally is contrary to the character of the book of Revelation, which is highly symbolic. Almost all commentators agree that the horses and horsemen depicted in the first four trumpets are symbolic; why should they be taken literally in the sixth?

2. The generation of such a large population of horses (200 million) would require a breeding program spanning many centuries. The current world horse population is probably less than 70 million, far too few to fulfil the prophecy in a literal way in a few years.

3. The area of grazing land required for supporting large numbers of horses is a problem. Much of the land in the vicinity of the Euphrates is desert, and probably would not support hundreds of millions of large grazing animals.

4. Since the horses in the prophecy have riders, each horse would need to be individually broken to its rider at about two years of age, and trained to accept a bridle, a saddle, and a rider. To muster a cavalry of 200 million, this should occur at around the same time for all of the horses.

5. Warfare using horses is obsolete, as horses are vulnerable to modern firearms.

6. The horses have tails which are serpents, and they have heads, that cause harm. Each serpent tail is attached to a horse. In prophecy, tails represent *false teachers*. Isaiah said, "The ancient and honourable, he is the head; and the prophet that teacheth lies, he is the tail." [Isaiah 9:15] Those who claim the horses with heads of lions and serpent-tails are "literal" unwisely reject the interpretation of tails provided in Scripture.

Both the literal interpretation, and labelling the horses as demons figuratively *kill* the prophecy, obscuring its symbolic application to the world's nominal Christians who know little about Scripture and lack spiritual understanding.

Psalm 32:9

Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee.