

4.19 - Zechariah's Horses

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[CONTENTS](#)

- [4.19.1 - Zechariah and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#)
- [4.19.2 - Zechariah's Horsemen](#)
- [4.19.3 - Zechariah's Chariots](#)
- [4.19.4 - Significance for Understanding Revelation](#)

4.19.1 - Zechariah and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

There are similarities between the horsemen associated with the first four seals which John sees (Rev. 6:1-8⁺) and two visions given Zechariah which also concern horses. Zechariah's first vision concerns riders astride colored horses (Zec. 1:7-11). His eighth vision concerns chariots drawn by colored horses (Zec. 6:1-8). The visions of both Zechariah and John concern: (1) horses; (2) of varied colors; (3) with riders; (4) which ride forth to various destinations.

4.19.2 - Zechariah's Horsemen

In his first vision Zechariah sees a man riding a red ([אדום](#) [ʾādōm]) horse and behind him were horses: red ([אַרְמִיִּם](#) [ʾārummîm], *red ones*), sorrel ([סְרֻקִּים](#) [s^oruqqîm], *spotted ones*), and white ([לְבָנִים](#) [wū^lbānîm], *white ones*). There are more than four horses in Zechariah's first vision, for a rider is seated upon one horse and there are said to be several horses of each color, presumably also with riders. The color of the *sorrel* horse is uncertain, although a variegated pattern seems to be the best understanding.¹

If we compare this with Zec. 6:2, where the chariots are drawn by red (ʾādummîm, [πυρροί](#) [pyrroi]), black (shechōrîm, [μέλανες](#) [melanes]), white (lebhānîm, [λευκοί](#) [leukoi]), and speckled (beruddîm, [ψαροί](#) [psaroi]) horses, and with Rev. 6⁺, where the first rider has a white horse ([λευκός](#) [leukos]) the second a red one ([πυρρός](#) [pyrros]) the third a black one ([μέλας](#) [melas]) the fourth a pale horse ([χλωρός](#) [chlōros]), there can be no further doubt that three of the colours of the horses mentioned here occur again in the two passages quoted, and that the black horse is simply added as a fourth; so that the seruqqîm correspond to the beruddîm of Zec. 6:3, and the [πῖπος χλωρός](#) [hippos chlōros] of Rev. 6:8⁺, and consequently sârōq denotes that startling kind of grey in which the black ground is mixed with white, so that it is not essentially different from bârōd, speckled, or black covered with white spots (Gen. 31:10, 12).²

It seems best to understand the colors of the three horses in Zechariah's first vision as denoting bloodshed (red, "The color of blood"³), peace or victory (white, "the reflection of heavenly and divine glory . . . hence the symbols of a glorious victory (Rev. 6:2⁺)"⁴), and a condition of partial peace and conflict (sorrel).⁵ Perhaps the horsemen, in walking "to and fro throughout the earth" typically encounter all three conditions in their tour. At the time of Zechariah's vision, they report "all the earth is resting quietly" (Zec. 1:11).⁶ Some see Zechariah's horsemen as being *sent out* to cause death (red), sickness (sorrell), and victory (white) much like the horsemen of Revelation 6⁺,⁷ but the context of Zechariah's vision says nothing of them being sent out in judgment, but that they had *already* been riding and were now *returned to report* what they had seen.⁸ The most we can conclude concerning a similarity between Zechariah's first vision of the horsemen and the horsemen shown John is:

1. They are connected with the judgment of God (Zec. 1:15).
2. They ride at a time of apparent peace (Zec. 1:15 cf. Dan. 8:25; Mat. 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-30; 21:34-35; 1Th. 5:3).

4.19.3 - Zechariah's Chariots

Zechariah's eighth vision has a greater bearing on the horsemen shown John. Zechariah sees four chariots which come forth from between two mountains of bronze (Zec. 6:1). In our commentary on [Revelation 1:15](#), we understood that bronze is a metal which can withstand the heat of fire and often represents judgment. Each chariot is drawn by horses of different colors—much like our four horsemen: red, black, white, and dappled (Zec. 6:2-3). The chariots are said to be captained by "spirits" (or *winds*)—a reference to the Holy Spirit or possibly invisible messengers such as angels.⁹ There are *four* chariots, just as there are *four* horsemen shown John, indicating a global scope of activity (see [Four: the Entire World, the Earth](#)). The four chariots drawn by different colored horses ride out as follows:

1. The chariot drawn by black horses rides north.
2. The chariot drawn by white horses also rides north.¹⁰

3. The chariot drawn by the dappled horses rides south.
4. The destination of the chariot drawn by red horses is not explicitly given.

As is common with prophetic passages, Zechariah's last vision has a near-term referent and a far-future referent. The near-term referent is the overthrow of Babylon and judgment of Egypt at the time of Zechariah. The far-future referent is to the times preceding the coming of Messiah to establish His millennial reign.¹¹ In Zechariah's day, the black and white horses riding north were bound for *Babylon*. The dappled ride south to *Egypt*.

The land of the north, i.e., the territory covered by the lands of the Euphrates and Tigris, and the land of the south, i.e., Egypt, are mentioned as the two principal seats of the power of the world in its hostility to Israel: Egypt on the one hand, and Asshur-Babel on the other, which were the principal foes of the people of God, not only before the captivity, but also afterwards, in the conflicts between Syria and Egypt for the possession of Palestine (Dan. 11). . . . Then follow the white horses, indicating that the judgment will lead to complete victory over the power of the world. Into the south country, i.e., to Egypt, the other representative of the heathen world-power, goes the chariot with the speckled horses, to carry the manifold judgment of death by sword, famine, and pestilence, which is indicated by this colour.¹²

"The black horses" go to Babylon, primarily to represent the awful desolation with which Darius visited it in the fifth year of his reign (two years after this prophecy) for revolting [Henderson]. The "white" go after the "black" horses to the same country; two sets being sent to it because of its greater cruelty and guilt in respect to Judea. The white represent Darius triumphant subjugation of it [Moore]. Rather, I think, the white are sent to victoriously subdue Medo-Persia, the second world kingdom, lying in the same quarter as Babylon, namely, north.¹³

The emphasis given is fitting for in the fifth year of Darius (three years after the prophet saw these visions); Babylon, which had been conquered by Cyrus, revolted against Darius and experienced devastation and depopulation in retaliation. When these things happened, Zechariah and the Israel of his day could know that truly the spirit (i.e., the wrath of God, cf. Zec. 1:15; Eze. 5:13; 24:13) was quieted (i.e., was satisfied) in the north country.¹⁴

But where do the red horses ride? One view explains the red horses as the "strong steeds" which, rather than riding in a single direction, are commanded to "walk to and fro *throughout* the earth" (Zec. 6:6-7).

It should be observed that the red horses (cf. Zec. 6:2) seemingly are assigned no mission and that the bay horses are separated from the grizzled, whereas in Zec. 6:3 they appear to be together. While it does not solve the problem completely, it seems best to view the black . . . white . . . and the grizzled as being references to the second, third, and fourth chariots that are sent on specific missions and that the bay in Zec. 6:7 should be taken not to denote a color, but to denote a characteristic, i.e., strong (the Heb. word 'amōts can denote strength as well as a deep red color). If this understanding is correct, then the bay in Zec. 6:7 is a reference to the red horses drawing the first chariot of verse Zec. 6:2. While the second, third, and fourth chariots are off on their specific missions, the first chariot engages in a general mission of going to and fro through the earth (mentioned three times in Zec. 6:7, an indication that their task is every bit as important as that undertaken by the other chariots). Their mission throughout all the earth is indicative that war and bloodshed will hold sway throughout all the world. The reference to the earth must be understood in a much broader sense than just to the land of Israel. It must be understood as being a reference to the earth universally.¹⁵

This view notes that whereas the black, white, and dappled horses are all given specific destinations, Zechariah 6:6 indicates a global scope for the "strong steeds." Others understand the "strong steeds" and their walking "to and fro throughout the earth" as referring to the collective whole. Another explanation is that the red horses seen by Zechariah had *already drawn their chariot* in empowering Medo-Persia's overthrow of Babylon:

Now, when these visions were shown to Zechariah, Babylon had already been overthrown, and its world-empire taken away, visibly and apparently, by the Medo-Persians, behind whom, however (as the prophet beholds), there was the invisible chariot of God, with its red horses of blood and vengeance. This act of judgment on the first great Gentile world-power which had oppressed Israel and laid waste his land being already an accomplished fact (though in the 3rd verse, for completeness' sake, all the four are shown to the prophet together . . .), this first chariot is passed over by the Angel in the interpretation, and is not seen among those who 'go forth' in Zec. 6:6—its mission, as far as the Babylonian Empire is concerned, having already been fulfilled.¹⁶

4.19.4 - Significance for Understanding Revelation

Whatever the case may be concerning the red horses, the similarities between Zechariah's vision of the chariots and the horsemen shown John are:

1. *Four* different categories of horses ride with a global ministry.

2. The horses ride at the *command* of God—they serve God's purposes.
3. The horses ride in *judgment*.
4. The horses have similar *colors* representing victory (white), bloodshed (red), black (judgment), and pale or dappled (sickness leading to death).

We note the reversal in the order of the white horses and black horses in Zechariah's vision versus what John sees of the four horses. In Zechariah's vision, the white horses *follow* the black horses in their ride north indicating a time of judgment and destruction followed by victory and peace. Here, the white horse rides out *ahead* of the black horse, indicating victory and peace which *degenerates* into a time of judgment and death. The pattern established in John's vision (Rev. 6+) matches what we see elsewhere in Scripture of the end-times—at a time when people believe all is well, then destruction will come suddenly (Mat. 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-30; 21:34-35; 1Th. 5:3). One of the most difficult aspects of interpreting prophetic passages from the [OT](#) is determining whether a passage was completely fulfilled in the local near-term setting, or whether aspects of the passage reveal events of the end. Often, a passage begins describing a local situation, but then transcends that situation and reveals information concerning the last days.

There is a well-known type of biblical narrative in the Old Testament in which the Holy Spirit leads a prophet to consider some event that is taking place before the gaze of the world at that moment. The inspired writer presents some of the details of what is to him contemporaneous history. Then, suddenly, without so much as a break in the paragraph, the Holy Spirit carries the writer forward more than two thousand years to the time of the end and speaks of prophetic events which have some similarity with those taking place before the eye of the prophet.¹⁷

Some feel that Zechariah's vision of the chariots is such a passage:

God's wrath is specially spoken of in this last vision as being caused to rest on "the north country" [Zec. 6:8], because not only was it there that the attempt was first made to array a world-empire against God, and where apostasy sought, so to say, to organise and fortify itself; not only did Babylon also, at a later time, become the final antagonist and subduer of God's people and the destroyer of His Temple [Solomon's Temple], but probably because there, "in the land of Shinar," the metropolis of world power, Babylon, the great rival of the city of God—wickedness [Zec. 5:8], . . . will once again establish itself, and all the forces of evil again for a time be concentrated. Then God's judgments shall be fully poured out, and anti-Christian world-power be finally overthrown to make room for the Kingdom of Christ.¹⁸

It is interesting to consider that in Zechariah's time the chariots rode north to Babylon in judgment, whereas in the book of Revelation it is once again *Babylon* which occupies center stage in the end times to be overthrown in judgment (Rev. 18:2+, 21+).

Notes

¹ "Brown; other sources suggest 'bright red,' or even pale yellow.'; . . . color pattern, i.e., a spotted or two-tone color pattern, possible in colors of lighter and darker brown."—James Swanson, [Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew \(Old Testament\)](#), electronic ed (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), s.v. "#H8320." "The significance of the colors is not stated, and this is complicated by the fact that the Hebrew word translated 'brown' (NIV) or 'speckled' (KJV) is found only here in the Old Testament, so that its meaning is not sure."—F. Duane Lindsey, "[Zechariah](#)," in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., [The Bible Knowledge Commentary](#) (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1983), Zec. 1:8. "The Hebrew אַרְבָּקִים [s'ərūqqîm] means 'red.' Modern translations such as 'speckled' or 'spotted' are based on ancient versions that attempt to bring the color of this horse into line with those of Zec. 6:2-3. This is a methodological fallacy since these are two different and unrelated visions."—[New Electronic Translation : NET Bible](#), electronic edition (Dallas, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1998), Zec. 1:8. Yet it seems unlikely that *sorrel* represents red horses for they are distinguished from אַרְמִים [ʾārummîm], which are said to be the red horses. Moreover, the translators of the LXX, probably closer to the meaning of the word than we moderns, render the word as ψαρο και ποικίλοι [psaroi kai poikiloî], *speckled and many-colored ones*.

² Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, [Commentary on the Old Testament](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), Zec. 1:8.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "Speckled' (from a root 'to intertwine'), a combination of the two colors white and red (bay [Moore]), implies a state of things mixed, partly prosperous, partly otherwise [Henderson]."—A. R. Fausset, "[The Revelation of St. John the Divine](#)," in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, [A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments](#) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, 1877), Zec. 1:8.

⁶It seems best to understand “all the earth” as a figure of speech for it seems unlikely that the entire world was at peace during the time of Zechariah. But the language could also have a secondary eschatological application: “Perhaps the vision has a more eschatological reference in anticipation of the worldwide kingdom of Messiah, since the patrol covered not only the vast Persian Empire, but also the whole world—though perhaps ‘the whole world’ is a figure of speech (synecdoche) for the Persian Empire.”—Lindsey, [Zechariah](#), Zec. 1:9.

⁷“We must not, indeed, infer from this account that the riders were all sent for the simple and exclusive purpose of obtaining information concerning the state of the earth, and communicating it to the Lord. For it would have been quite superfluous and unmeaning to send out an entire troop, on horses of different colours, for this purpose alone. Their mission was rather to take an active part in the agitation of the nations, if any such existed, and guide it to the divinely appointed end, and that in the manner indicated by the colour of their horses; viz., according to Rev. 6+, those upon the red horses by war and bloodshed; those upon the starling-grey, or speckled horses, by famine, pestilence, and other plagues; and lastly, those upon the white horses, by victory and the conquest of the world.”—Keil, [Commentary on the Old Testament](#), Zec. 1:8.

⁸“In our vision, however, the swift messengers were in the first instance only sent out to reconnoitre the earth and the state of the nations in their relation to the land and people of Israel.”—David Baron, [Zechariah: A Commentary On His Visions And Prophecies](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1918), 32.

⁹“We must therefore regard them either as ideal appearances, personifying the forces and providential acts which God often uses in carrying out His judgments on the earth, or, what seems to me the simplest and most natural explanation, *angelic beings*, or *heavenly powers*.”—Ibid., 175.

¹⁰Some texts interpret the Hebrew here as indicating that the white horses rode west: “The one with the white horses toward the west.” (Zec. 6:6, NIV84). “The one with the black horses is going out to the region of the north; the white ones have gone out to what is to the west of them; the spotted ones have gone out to the region of the south; and the dappled ones have gone out.”—[Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text](#) (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1997, c1985), Zec. 6:6. But, as McGee wryly observes, “Notice that none of the horses go to the west—that would put them into the Mediterranean Sea, and none of these are sea horses!”—J. Vernon McGee, [Thru The Bible Commentary](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1981), Zec. 6:8.

¹¹“The prophet’s eyes are opened to see the invisible chariots of God which are being sent forth for the overthrow of Gentile world-power, and to prepare the way for the Kingdom of Messiah.”—Baron, [Zechariah: A Commentary On His Visions And Prophecies](#), 173.

¹²Keil, [Commentary on the Old Testament](#), Zec. 6:1-8.

¹³Fausset, [The Revelation of St. John the Divine](#), Zec. 6:5.

¹⁴Jerry Falwell, Edward D. Hindson, and Michael Woodrow Kroll, eds., [KJV Bible Commentary](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1994), Zec. 6:4.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Baron, [Zechariah: A Commentary On His Visions And Prophecies](#), 179.

¹⁷Donald Grey Barnhouse, [Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 124.

¹⁸Baron, [Zechariah: A Commentary On His Visions And Prophecies](#), 182.

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(Content generated on Thu Apr 30 16:37:50 2020)

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