

# The role of composition in the interpretation of the Rider on the white horse and the seven seals in Revelation<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The article investigates the way in which the author of Revelation composed the seven seals: Formal elements group the seals in smaller patterns. It then explains how this reading of the composition contributes to the process of interpretation by analysing the Rider on the white horse as first seal. Other aspects of the author's compositional skills are brought into discussion in a last part of the article where the meaning of the Rider on the white horse and the ambiguity of the symbols are discussed.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Discussions of the vision of the seven seals in Revelation 6 often focus on the section on the Rider on the white horse (Rv 6:1-2). This symbol is significant because it is placed at the beginning of the first set of seven seals that encompasses and is followed by several other sets of sevens in the book generally. It has also received attention because of its possible connection with the seminal Revelation 19:11-16 where a similar or identical Rider introduces the last and final phase in the book. As a symbol it could, therefore, be more important than other symbols in the text.

What is furthermore striking is that conflicting interpretations are given for the Rider. These, often directly opposite and contradictory readings, draw attention to the fact that it has a special and ambiguous character and escapes easy understanding. That one symbol can generate such conflicting views illustrate the immense problems in interpreting it, but, at the same time,

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<sup>1</sup> It is a privilege to write this essay in honour of Piet Geyser, a friend and colleague over many years. I fondly remember many good discussions with him as someone who is committed to New Testament as a discipline.

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they signal to the attentive reader the difficulties in interpreting symbols in the book of Revelation generally.

There is no doubt that the symbol is highly ambiguous, giving rise to the contradictory readings:<sup>2</sup> On the one hand many scholars read it in a *positive* light as referring to Christ as Messiah and Divine Warrior (amongst others because of Revelation 19:11-16) or as the victorious proclamation of the Gospel. This reading still enjoys some status because in earliest centuries it represented the traditional interpretation of the symbol (Charles 1920:164). At the same time, though, and especially in recent times, as the integrity of the text and text coherence came to be appreciated more and more, others began to regard it as a *negative* symbol because they argue that “logically” the first seal has to be consistent with the following seals that clearly refer to negative events or actions (cf Bachmann 1986; 1998 – who otherwise himself reads it positively in quite a sanguine manner). This negative reading of the symbol is then continued in different ways, depending on the way it is linked to the following symbols. Mostly it is seen as referring to military conquest (e g especially in terms of a Parthian attack). In his always sober approach, Swete (1911:86) typically wrote that it suggests “a picture of triumphant militarism. The lust of conquest which makes great Empires, whether the Seer had in view the Empire of the Caesars or the Parthian power which menaced it... was the first and momentous of the precursors of the final revelation.” (Cf similarly, in Roloff 1987:80, “siegreicher Krieger ... der in seiner Gestalt Aggression und Eroberung verkörpert;” Harrington 1993:91, “triumphant warfare;” Knight 1999:67-8; Lambrecht 1998:200-1, 207.)

The interpretation of this seal is so difficult because of its cursory nature and because the intra-textual and inter-textual references to the Rider on the white horse are so restricted. The pronouncement on the Rider is tantalizingly short, forcing readers and scholars to interpret the text with all possible frames of interpretation (e g symbols in scriptural traditions of the author, cf for example Fekkes 1994, but also apocalyptic traditions and Greek mythology in Bauckham 1993:38-91 and 174-198). It is interesting to see how the interpretation of the text is determined by the way in which the text is framed. In the case of the Rider on the white horse, its ambiguity intensifies the role of inter- and intra-textual references and increases the possibility that interpretation of the text will vary considerably.

This does not mean that the interpretation of this symbol and the seven seals is completely relative to how the interpreter frames it. There are indications that the author developed his symbol in terms of specific inter-textual information. Recently developed textual information and inter-textual

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<sup>2</sup> Rissi (1964:407) spoke of the “special mystery” of this figure in an illuminating article.

links thus could shed new light on the seals. In the case of Revelation, this careful composition of symbols has become increasingly evident in recent years as more and more studies indicated what a very careful author John is. His structuring technique, and then specifically his inclination to present his material in well-designed forms and patterns, more specifically in ring compositions, chiasms or *inclusio*'s, have been impressing scholars increasingly – to such an extent that it is often regarded as a book that has been composed over a long period of time as the author indulged in his intense compositional work.

This intricate design is true of the work on several levels. The meaning of the work is to be found *syntagmatically* in the flow of the text, from micro-level through meso-level to macro-level, as will be pointed out in more detail below. As the author moved on with the composition of his text from the beginning to the end, he designed new sections in terms of and based on earlier ones. He, however, also created meaning by balancing passages, separated from each other in different locations, with each other so that they mutually refer and relate. To a certain extent one could compare his compositional skills with a poet who, in a collection of poems, uses poems as units on their own and located in different parts of the book, to explain each other. These *paradigmatic* textual strategies bring decisive new insights in the text. Researchers who read the symbol of the rider in Revelation 6 positively in the light of Revelation 19, to some extent worked intuitively with this technique, although they failed to understand that links between passages can create meaning in different ways (cf below). This is, in fact, the type of insight that is growing, namely, that passages relate not only in a complementary manner, but also in terms of contradiction. The best known example is the symbol of the evil triad in Revelation 12-13 that stands in contrast with the Trinity and the prostitute which is the evil counterpart of the bride of the Lamb (Revelation 21).<sup>3</sup> These obvious examples of paradigmatic composition is a clear signal that the author would apply the same technique elsewhere in his text – especially in the light of his careful artistry in these matters.

This way of designing a text requires serious attention, since such literary information need to be accounted for at an early stage of interpretation, before contextual, inter-textual or historical information is used to frame the text. Where this does not happen, the integrity of the text is being compromised. As an example of this, this essay attention will investigate, syntagmatically, the composition of the seven seals to show that certain scholarly interpretations go against the grain of the text. At the same time

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<sup>3</sup> Cf the salient remarks of Rissi (1964:416).

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other relevant passages in Revelation will be investigated paradigmatically in order to see how they and their similar dynamics illuminate the seven seals. In this way it will discuss the compositional skills of the author and its decisive relevance to an understanding of the book.

This focus on textual composition is by definition thoroughly historical. It not only reads the text in terms of its first setting, but it also wants to illuminate the historical context in which it originated. In our present time, much attention is paid to methodological matters aimed at outlining responsible interpretation. This essay contributes indirectly to that debate in so far as it delineates certain facets of the text that are to be taken seriously in historical work. It wants to illustrate how important historical information can illuminate a dark text – but then only when that information fits the literary clues that are given throughout the text.

A syntagmatic analysis of the series of seals in Revelation 6 will be given first. This implies a close reading of all the seals in the order in which they are presented in the book to determine their mutual relationship. What is under investigation here is the structuring strategy of the author. The assumption is that the medium is the message, so that the “how” in which the material is presented renders significant clues for the “what” of the material (cf Johnson 1999 for a practical application of these two perspectives). Formal features of the text will contribute decisively to its meaning (for the following, cf the close reading at the end of this essay).

## **2. THE SEVEN SEALS AS TEXTUAL UNIT**

The seven seals are decisively determined by their literary nature as well as the literary character of the book in which they are integrated. Revelation is first of all in general conceived of as a “book.” It begins (1:11) with instructions to the author to *write* down his visions in a *book* (εἰς βιβλίον; 1:11). This command is given to him in his first (auditory) vision, indicating the significance that he attaches to the activity of actually writing down. A few verses further on, he is once again commanded by the One like a Son of Man to *write* down his visions (Re 1:19), underlining the significance of this activity. Insightful is that each of the seven letters in Revelation 2-3 that follow on the introductory vision is introduced by the command to *write* (2:1, 8, 12, 18, 3:1, 7, 14). The sevenfold repetition of the command is obviously intended to authorize his text as divine, but nevertheless also stresses the fact that he is involved in the *writing* of a book.

The prologue (1:1-3) and epilogue (22:6-21) as outer frame of the book continues to authorize the book by delineating its salvific nature. Once again, though, the literary text is pulled into these dynamics of authorization. The

seminal first beatitude in Revelation 1:3 stresses the acts of reading and listening and explicitly mentions the words thereof. This focus is confirmed by repeated references to the text as *book* in the epilogue (1:3, 19; 22: 7, 9, 18, 19).

Revelation also reflects a “bookish” structure in its contents. It is almost eerily postmodern in the way it expresses self-referentiality. It contains a collection of letters and two books. The author thus has a literary mindset in almost a double sense of the word, constructing a well designed narrative in which the motif of books and embedded books dominates: The embedded letters (Re 2-3) and books (Re 5:1; 10:2) in the text reflect the literary activity of the author – he is a “bookish” person who is interested in writing and revealing texts (cf even Rev 10:4) about books.

This is further confirmed by the fact that these books and activities regarding them form focal points in the narrative. The seminal throne vision (Re 4) that determines the flow of the narrative in Revelation 4-21, is totally focused on the problem of getting a sealed book with seven seals opened: The Lion-Lamb is the only one who is able to open the book (Re 5:5; cf 5:2, 9) by breaking its seals (leading to the opening of the seven seals from Revelation 6 onwards). In the middle of the book and at the beginning of its second main part, the prophet eats a little scroll that makes him prophesy (10:2, 8, and 11) and that sets the scene for the major second part of the book.

These literary observations confirm a literary mindset of an author who is constructing a book-filled text in a careful literary manner. This insight is decisive for the interpretation of the seven seals. The literary nature of the book as a whole must affect the nature of the seven seals as a unit within it. A normal intelligent author would be consistent in structuring his text on all levels in a literary manner. One can thus expect the seals to reflect and to share in the literary nature of the book as a whole, as will be shown in the following essay. In other words, the seven seals as a unit are to be expected to have a carefully designed pattern.

It is, furthermore, not merely a matter of literary analysis of smaller and larger units, but also of their interaction. An analysis of the seven seals as a unit therefore will take seriously their integration in the book as a whole and in its constitutive parts. It is, for instance, obvious that they represent the contents of the first book in the text that receives so much attention in the throne vision in Revelation 5. Here in the opening of the seven seals the first remarks of the prophet regarding the end events are being revealed, providing the information for which the readers were prepared so carefully since the beginning of the book and that will be developed and reinforced so carefully in

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what follows. Within this setting, tension has been running high once one begins to read the first set of seven seals in Revelation 6. The seven seals do not simply in a *historical manner* refer to events that are about to take place, but more significantly, they have a clear *literary* function in the macro-text. They form the beginning and basis of events that are described in more detail and in a certain progression in the rest of the book. What is more, their historical referentiality is fundamentally determined by their literary nature and function.

When a particular symbol like the Rider on the white horse is investigated, it is of foundational importance to remember that as the first seal it is part of the intricacies of this composition of the text on different hierarchical levels. This textual information is of the highest order, enjoying preference when it comes to framing the text in order to interpret it meaningfully.

This will be given more attention now.

#### **2.1 The parameters of the passage: the church in Revelation 7**

The previous remarks located the seven seals in the framework of the book as a whole, pointing to their literary nature and to their nature as a smaller unit within this larger section. There are *seven* seals, beginning with the first six in Revelation 6 and including the last one in Revelation 8:1-5.

The reference to “seven seals” is, however, problematic in more than one way. In the first place there is a seemingly puzzling insertion of Revelation 7 between the sixth and the seventh seal. The unity of the seven seals is not always recognized because of these two scenes about the church in Revelation 7 that separate the sixth and seventh seal and that seem to fragment the text. These two scenes often function in a disruptive manner, causing the seventh to be left out when it comes to interpreting the seals. In the second place, the seventh seal is often regarded as an empty hull for the seven trumpets, causing interpreters to focus on the first six only. These two matters require more clarity since they are fundamental in determining the nature and extent of the seven seals. A literary analysis will show that Revelation 8:1-5 is not merely about the seven trumpets, but that it is a seal in its own right which must be interpreted together with the others in Revelation 6. This is already clear, negatively, because the section on the church can be read on its own as a unit that fits meaningfully into an otherwise tightly knit series of seven seals. If this unit is bracketed and recognized in its coherence with the sixth seal, the seventh seal in 8:1-5 follows effortlessly on the first six seals. Other indications that the seventh seal has more contents than the seven trumpets will be spelled out below.

The fact that the two scenes in Revelation form a unit needs more consideration, especially in terms of their link with the surrounding seals. There is growing recognition that it is firmly part of the sixth seal and not a loose intercalation. Several factors point this way:

Most important is the fact that the scene about the church provides the answer to the question that is raised by those who are being judged in 6:17: *kai; ti- dunatai staqhhai*; The answer to this question is provided by the symbolic action of *sealing* in this first passage, indicated in the arrival of the angel from the east with the *seal* of the living God (Re 7:3). This forms a striking contrast with the unsealing of the book with the seven seals that portrays the judgment of God. The antithesis can hardly be coincidental. This contrast (sealing-unsealing) underlines that the faithful will not be judged by God (cf also Aune 1998:439), but will be avenged. They will judge - anticipating what will be spelled out later on in Revelation 20. As such it forms the counterpart of the judgment described in the beginning of the sixth seal (Re 6: 12-17).

In the second passage the church is portrayed as a great multitude with white clothes and palm branches. John uses formal marker to integrate these two scenes: both start with the striking phrase that functions as a marker, *meta; touto eidon*. He begins a new section with this part on the church, but by repeating the marker (in the seven seals it is used only here) he wishes these two to be read together as a unit on their own that is fitted between the last two seals without affecting their overall unity. In the second scene on the innumerable host, the faithful are worshipping God day and night in the temple. It is then added in the interpretation of the vision that they are powerfully sheltered by the One on the throne (7:15). The Lamb, "at the center of the throne will be their shepherd" (7:17). The impact of this remark brings the vision in line with the previous one on the 144 000: they also are therefore protected. In addition, this continues a seminal motif in Revelation 1 where the One like the Son of Man holds the seven stars in his hand, whilst the sword emanates from his mouth, representing judgment (1:16). Whilst the seven seals focus on destruction and judgment, the panels on the church pick up the second great theme of the book, that is, God's protection of the faithful. Seen in this wider context, the two panels on the church can more specifically be

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interpreted as in line with the fifth and seven seals (showing the heavenly liturgy<sup>4</sup> of the church).

The two scenes about the church should not be seen as fragmenting the text. They form a nice unit on their own, placed not without good reason here in clear antithesis to the seals that portray judgment (cf Giblin 1991:90, who correctly describes it as an enlargement of the sixth seal). This section is inserted, quite tellingly, after, or (as some scholars now think, in) the sixth seal to indicate the woes before the end time – as is customary of apocalyptic texts. The reader who is aware of this, will not feel the section to be disruptive, but will be made even more attentive: once the six seals have been opened and once the fate of the faithful has been spelled out, they are now, finally, ready to face the final moments represented by the seventh seals. Not disruption, but coherence of the seven seals is promoted by the two panels on the church.

This analysis indicates how the seven seals, including the passage on the church, display a special coherence that picks up important motifs in the book as a whole. It also underlines the special nature of the sixth seal – by far the most extensive of the seven. The excellent compositional skills of the author are further clear from the way in which he uses the two scenes to intensify the narrative and stimulate the attention of his readers.

## **2.2 The seven seals as a unit**

There are other indications that the seven seals form a carefully designed unit. Note, for example, how each of the seven seals is introduced in Revelation 6:

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<sup>4</sup> The liturgical character of Revelation has been noted in many publications, of which Prigent (1964) is one of the better known ones. He focuses his discussion on liturgical allusions in the seven letters and on a Jewish liturgy that was Christianized in Revelation 4 and 5. His comments about the function of the liturgical elements illustrate their significance, “L’Apocalypse annonce aux chrétiens que leur culte, leur liturgie, leurs sacrements ont non seulement une valeur éducative puisqu’ils les préparent au retour du Christ, mais encore et surtout ils sont une participation effective à ce moment final dont ils offrent les arrhes. Déjà maintenant ils ouvrent les portes du paradis retrouvé, ils transportent les croyants au delà de la mort et du jugement et les introduisent dans la Jérusalem céleste, nouvelle et éternelle.” For other literature and a sober conclusion, cf Aune (1997) ad loc, but esp.314, “In spite of some traditional elements that certainly had a place in Jewish as well as Christian liturgy, the throne-room liturgy appears to be a Johannine creation based on his knowledge of Roman imperial court ceremonial, as well as aspects of Jewish and Christian liturgical traditions.” The liturgical nature of Revelation is most clear in the throne vision and the seven seals with which it is closely connected. The seven seals will be interpreted more adequately by an analysis of this aspect that cannot be discussed here, but will be addressed in another context. For criticism, cf a.o. Fekkes (1994:145).



|    |            |      |          |              |                                  |
|----|------------|------|----------|--------------|----------------------------------|
| 1  | Kai; eidon | oŧe  | hŧhoixen | to; aŧrniŧon | mian eŧk twŧn eŧpta; sŧfragidwn, |
| 3  | Kai;       | oŧe  | hŧhoixen |              | thŧn sŧfragida thŧn deuteran,    |
| 5  | Kai;       | oŧe  | hŧhoixen |              | thŧn sŧfragida thŧn triŧthn,     |
| 7  | Kai;       | oŧe  | hŧhoixen |              | thŧn sŧfragida thŧn tetarthn,    |
| 9  | Kai;       | oŧe  | hŧhoixen |              | thŧn pempthn sŧfragida,          |
| 12 | Kai; eidon | oŧe  | hŧhoixen |              | thŧn sŧfragida thŧn eŧkthn,      |
| 1  | Kai;       | oŧan | hŧhoixen |              | thŧn sŧfragida thŧn ebdomhn      |

A key phrase, *oŧe hŧhoixen*, introduces each seal, whilst each one is explicitly numbered (cf the table above).<sup>5</sup> Several aspects of this pattern are interesting:

The introductory phrase indicates that Revelation 8:1-5 should be read together with the other six seals. If this is not done, the scenes on the church are disruptive, fragmenting the text. This would run contrary to the intention of the author, who signals to his readers in a clear *formal* manner that all seven belong together.

This is not as obvious as may be thought. Charles (1920), in his groundbreaking commentary, neglected the coherence of passages in Revelation in general, but specifically also in this case. He focuses his interpretation of the seals on the first six (as the heading for his chapter 6 indicates – “The first six Seals - preliminary signs of the End”; Charles 1920:153) and rejects the seventh seal as corrupt and dislocated (1920:221ff). Such mishandling of the seventh seal is also evident in commentaries where it is understood as an empty shell for the seven trumpets. Knight (1999:75) thus writes that the opening of the seventh seal “results in a sequence of plagues that are heralded by the prayers of the saints (8.3-5) and the blowing of the trumpets by the angels (8.6).”

The following paragraph will underline and develop the implications of this pattern further. This will confirm how important it is that the interpretation of the seals is prepared by carefully determining the extent of the text in which the seals are being mooted by the author.

### 3. THE GROUPING OF THE SEVEN SEALS

The careful patterning of material in Revelation can be detected on different levels. The whole work but also the smallest segments display such patterns. Take, for example, the introductory phrase discussed above. The phrase that is so consistently used at the beginning of each seal is given a very subtle twist at the beginning of seal 5. Compare:

<sup>5</sup> Other formal links between the seven seals are discussed below. The approach followed here differs fundamentally from those readings that regard differences as mere stylistic variations, as e.g. in Lambrecht (1998:207).

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<sup>7</sup> *Kai;*            *ofte hhoixen*            *thn sfragida thn tetarthn,*  
<sup>9</sup> *Kai;*            *ofte hhoixen*            *thn pemptn sfragida,*

In the fifth seal the number that appeared after the noun in the previous seals, is quite significantly switched to a position before the noun. This did not go unnoticed from earliest times. Some ancient scribes produced a variant to bring this reading in line with that of the other seals (cf Aune 1998:382).

This subtle change formally confirms the division between the first four seals that are so similar and the last three that will prove to be equally similar (cf further below). This formal indicator also confirms that the author of Revelation likes to divide his series of sevens into smaller patterns of four plus three. That this division is a consistent technique is clear from the fact that it is used elsewhere in the book, for example in the seven letters, where the first three letters are linked by the call to heed the spirit (ολεϰων ου- ακουσαιτω τι το; pneuma legei tai- εκκλησιαι-) and the promise of victory (nikhw dwsω), whilst the last four switch these phrases.

The pattern of the seven seals deserves a closer look in order to illustrate the implications of this and in order to indicate how such patterns determine the meaning of the book. Two such implications can be spelled out immediately: The patterns point out how sections cohere. At the same time the patterns enable the reader to determine the individual features of a passage. This investigation has to be done since the interpreter need to look out for phrases and formulae that point to shared meaning, but also to telling *differences* that could easily be overlooked. These factors can be of paramount importance since they reveal how the author orders and groups the seven seals internally.

#### **4. THE LAST THREE SEALS**

Before more attention is paid to the four plus three pattern, there is, however, a more important link that calls for a closer look. The formulaic *kai; eidon* is an important marker in the Book of Revelation, as even a cursory reading of the text will reveal. The significance of this phrase and its ordered combination with other phrases, has already been noted by Charles (1920:106) who writing about similar clauses (e.g. μετα ταυτα eidon kai; ιδου), noted that *kai; eidon* introduces similar and closely related sections, paragraphs and clauses. Although these formulae appear regularly in apocalypses, “they are not ... so carefully distinguished in other authors as in our Apocalypse”. This is

the one phrase that usually helps to point the reader to significant moments in the text. When applied to the seven seals, interesting results are obtained.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.1 Seal one and six

It is telling that the author uses this phrase (*kai; eidon*) in the series of seals in a special way *at the beginning* of the first *and* the sixth seal (6:1, 12), thereby indicating that he wants these two to stand out from the rest.

Throughout the seven seals he uses the phrase *kai; oŧe hŧoixen* to introduce the opening of each seal, but only in the first and sixth seal is this phrase extended by *eidon*.<sup>7</sup>

Both these numbers (one and six) are, as will become clear in other respects, of special importance to the author. In his visions generally the sixth one, as the penultimate one, is always pregnant with meaning. The insertion of *kai; eidon*, the extraordinary length of the sixth seal, and, finally, the addition of the church scene further emphasizes its special place. In this way the author guides the reader to understand that the first and the sixth seal are of special relevance in the series of seven seals.

#### 4.2 Seal five and seven

Later on it will become clear that the author divides the seven seals into two parts: the first four seals form a unit, in which the first one then sets the tone for what follows in that part, whilst the last three seals belong together. The last three seals are grouped, however, not only by default, because the first four belong together, but also through form and contents. The fifth and the seventh seal share certain motifs that do not appear in any other of the seals. Other than with the sixth seal, the phrases *kai; oŧe hŧoixen* (6:9 for the fifth seal) and *kai; oŧan hŧoixen* (for the seventh seal 6:8) is followed by *eidon* (it is preceded by the word in seal 6). In this subtle way the two are linked. Both refer to the same *group* of people, that is, the slaughtered who are under the altar (*ta;~ yuca;~ twh eŧŧagmenwn* in 6:9), and the holy ones (*twh aŧiwn* in 8:3). Both seals focus on events relating to the *altar* (*uŧokatw tou qusiasthriou*). The altar is mentioned once in the fifth seal in 6:9, but becomes a strong motif in 8:3-5, where it is used five times. Both seals

<sup>6</sup> In this essay, I follow the unique and groundbreaking, but also sadly underestimated and unrecognized work of Lund (1992) in many ways.

<sup>7</sup> The special nature of this phrase at the beginning of seal one and six is confirmed by the different manner in which he uses *καὶ εἶδον* elsewhere within the seven seals. He also uses the verb elsewhere, but then in a variant phrase (*καὶ εἶδον, καὶ ἰδοὺ;*) in 6:2, 5, 8, where he describes his vision of the first and last two horses (the white, black and pale horse). There the visionary phrase is once again combined with another one and together they function to link those seals. But here, in a unique combination, it emphasizes the first and the sixth seal.

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mention *prayers*: in 6:10 the loud cry of the martyrs to God is mentioned, whilst 8:4 describes the offering of their prayers on the altar. There is a natural link between altar and prayers since John is here referring to the altar of incense that is associated with the prayers of the saints (Giblin 1991:86). How important this is, is only clear when the telling link with the throne vision is explored. In Revelation 5:8, after the Lamb had taken the scroll from the One on the throne, the four living creatures and 24 elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, “which are the prayers of the saints.” The motifs of prayer and incense are therefore intricately linked with the throne vision and with the living creatures, preparing the way for what is said about them in seals five and seven. When the living creatures and the elders sing their song, they refer to the Lamb who is worthy to open the seals because he was slaughtered and ransomed them through his blood (Re 5:9), mooted the motif of slaughtering and blood in seals five and seven.

In this way the two seals are not only linked, but they also take up seminal motifs from the throne vision. They develop motifs that are not found in the sixth seal. The sixth seal is foregrounded because the fifth and seventh seal form a unit in which the sixth seal is placed in the middle. But seal six was also accentuated, as we saw in 3.1, by the insertion of *kai; eidon*. Seal five and seven clearly focus on the church as the persecuted people of God. Seal six is about the judgment on the inhabitants of the earth (followed by the church scene as an expansion). They are objects of God’s wrath (7:16).

Although the audiences in seal 6 and seals 5/7 are different, there is a striking formal link between them: In seal five the souls under the altar asks how long before the judgment (6:9). At the end of the first scene in seal six, the fearful inhabitants ask who will remain standing as the judgment is being executed (6:17). The progression is clear: what is asked in vision 5 is being answered in a climactic way in vision six exactly through the question of those who want to hide from the earthquake as well as by the following scenario of the protected ones (Re 7).

In the light of these remarks it is clear that the last three seals are composed in such a manner as to group them together in a careful way through formal means and through contents. This will be confirmed by the following analysis of the first four seals.

## **5. THE FIRST FOUR SEALS**

A close reading will reveal that the first four seals display striking internal patterns:

## 5.1 Shared characteristics

The first four seals contain the following fixed and shared elements:

- Each of the first four seals refers to a living creature in exactly the same manner, continuing the almost formulaic introductory formula (*kai; ... ofte hhoixen*) to each seal:

|                           |          |               |       |                             |         |
|---------------------------|----------|---------------|-------|-----------------------------|---------|
| <sup>2</sup> kai; h̄kousa | eho;~ ek | twh tessarwn  | zw̄wn | legonto~ w̄- fwnh̄abronth'~ | ÒErcou. |
| <sup>3</sup> h̄kousa      |          | tou' deuterou | zw̄ou | legonto~                    | ÒErcou. |
| <sup>5</sup> h̄kousa      |          | tou' tritou   | zw̄ou | legonto~                    | ÒErcou. |
| <sup>7</sup> h̄kousa      | fwnhn    | tou' tetartou | zw̄ou | legonto~                    | ÒErcou. |

The first four seals stand out because of this explicit phrase that links them with the four living creatures. It is even more striking since they and this formula are not mentioned in the last three seals. The writer abandons any auditory revelation in the last three seals, thereby negatively stressing the coherence of the first four.

- The living creatures all bid (ÒErcou) the visionary to come. This call begins a visionary action. This action, as is made clear by the first seal, is initiated by the Lamb opening the seals. What happens in the opening of each seal is therefore the concrete result of the powerful presence and intervention of the Lamb from heaven, although the living creatures are the mediators (Sickenberger 1939:75). Once again the influence of the throne vision is clear.
- Another firm element in all four seals is *the horse* that is mentioned at the beginning of each vision. All four seals refer to a horse in exactly the same way, that is, after the call of the living creature and each rider is mentioned.
- In each of the four seals the horse has a colour (I eukor̄-, purrō-, mel a~-, clwrō-).
- Each horse is said to have a rider sitting on it (*kai; olkaqhmeno~ epl̄ aujton*).
- The vision concludes with the description of an activity of a rider.

The activities of the four horses take place on earth, contrasting quite strongly with the three seals that are linked with the altar before the throne in heaven (8:3). Of particular interest is that the horses “go out” (*ēxh̄l̄ qenÉ 6i2* and 3). From these links it is clear that the first four seals are not only strongly integrated in the series of seven, but are closely linked to each other. Not one of the first four seals can be separated from the others as happens when in

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secondary research, for example, the first horse and its rider is read in isolation from the others, understood in a positive way and linked with Revelation 19:11 where Christ is portrayed as a Rider on a white horse.

The decisive point is that the interpretation of the white horse and its Rider should be determined by its immediate context, not by a later textual reference. The immediate context becomes decisive and should determine the outcome of any comparison and link. This is especially the case with individual motifs linked to the first seal, like the colour of white and the use of the verb “to conquer.” The meaning of these motifs should not be determined in the first instance by their use elsewhere in the text (cf further below).

## **5.2 Internal relationship of the first four seals**

There is, however, a further aspect that deserves comment. The seals, though they should be read together, are also differentiated in many direct and subtle ways to indicate their order and mutual relationships.

### **5.2.1 Seal one and four**

Bachmann (1986:249-250), in his careful linguistic analysis of the four seals noted that of all the seals, the first and last one share most of the basic elements characteristic of the four seals. The horse and its colour, the nominative phrase about the rider and a heavenly action appear only and identically in these two seals. This is a significant observation that indicates their coherence. It certainly does not deserve his rather unmotivated remark, “das muss aber... nicht viel heissen” (250).

Both contain additional material, different from the second and third seal:

1. mian ek twh epta sfragidwn, kai; h̄kousa eho;~ ek twh tessarwn zwōn...  
wl- fwnh̄n bronth'~,
2. thn sfragida thn deuteran, h̄kousa tou' deuterou zwōu
3. thn sfragida thn triethn, h̄kousa tou' tritou zwōu
4. thn sfragida thn tetarthn, h̄kousa fwnh̄n tou' tetartou zwōu.

Both of them, furthermore, use the Greek word for voice to refer to the living creature speaking (fwnh̄n in 6:1 and fwnh̄n in 6:7). The third seal also refers to a voice, but it is one in the midst of the four living creatures.

The first seal is presented in a striking formal manner, befitting its primary place in the first vision after the throne vision and the first of the sets of seven. It is unique among the four seals in its use of the visionary formula (eidon), in its note that *the Lamb* opens the seal, in the observation that the first seal is eho;~ ek twh tessarwn and in the comparative description – wl-

ἄνωθεν ἄνωθεν'. The elaborate phrase, *ἄνωθεν ἄνωθεν*, also underlines its introductory nature.

The contents further indicate that the fourth seal concludes the series of four in a climactic manner. The last horse surpasses the previous ones by killing in fourfold manner with the sword, famine, death and living animals (6:7). It concludes the series of four, but in an intensifying manner. What happens in the fourth seal is in some ways different from the three previous seals. Why this is so, will become clear below.

From this it is clear that the first seal and the fourth one have a special relationship, encompassing the other two as their introduction and conclusion. Before the meaning of the four seals is described in more detail, another pattern within the first four seals must be discussed.

### 5.2.2 The first three seals

Several aspects of the first three seals indicate that the first and the third seal frame the second seal. This needs more attention.

The second seal is rather unique. The pattern created by the identical phrase in seal 1, 3 and 4 (*καὶ εἶδον, καὶ ἵππου ἵππου*) is broken in seal 2 because of its omission. There is also no *εἶδον* at all in this second seal. In addition, the seal is the only one that reports action or movement of the horse through the phrase *καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἵππου*. In the other seals the horse and its colour is listed after the formula *καὶ εἶδον, καὶ ἵππου ἵππου* and nothing is said of any movement by the horse. The rider in this seal also has not got an object when he is first mentioned (like the bow in seal 1 and the scale in seal 3). In this seal the *εἶδον* appears twice (it is mentioned once in seal 1 and left out in seal 2).

Commentators draw attention to the fact that the rider “is given” an object *at the end* of the seal whilst the riders of seals 1 and 3 holds an object before any action is reported. The object that the rider holds is mentioned *after* the action ascribed to him in the concluding subsection. By switching instrument and action in this way, the middle seal is differentiated and thus further foregrounded. This grouping technique is found also in the seven letters where the four plus three pattern is implemented by switching the two elements of promise and warning at the end of each letter where it has the same function. There, furthermore, the two letters to the faithful churches, letter two (Smyrna; 2:8-11) and six (Philadelphia; 3:7-14), are also framed by their surrounding letters.

This unique character of seal 2 is stressed when its surrounding seals are compared. Seal 1 and 3 share features lacking in seal 2. They both have the striking phrase following the call of the living creature: *καὶ εἶδον, καὶ ἵππου ἵππου*. Their rider is described as having an object (*εἶδον*): The

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visionary sees a horse and a rider *with* a bow / scale. They both also refer to a voice of or in the midst of the living creatures and then, in fact, in such a way that they form the outer frame of the three. These elements all differ from seal 2.

A careful comparison of the first and the third seal shows not only that they deviate from the second seal, but also that they are formally linked by their almost identical structure. The only differences are the colour of the horse, the object of the rider and the conclusion - which is to be expected as necessary in terms of the development of the narrative. Note the following pattern:

<sup>1</sup>Kai; eidon ofte hhoixen to; ajnion mian ek twh epta; sfragidwn,  
<sup>2</sup>kai; hkousa eho; ek twh tessarwn zwon legonto~ w- fwnh<sup>ab</sup> bronth~, Ercou.  
kai; eidon, kai; idou; ippo~ leuko~,  
kai; olkaqhmeno~ epl' aujton  
e<sup>c</sup>wn tokon,  
kai; epl' aujton stefano~,  
kai; epl' qen nikwh kai; i<sup>h</sup>a nikhshæ

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<sup>5</sup>Kai; ofte hhoixen thn sfragida thn triithn,  
hkousa tou' tritou zwou legonto~, Ercou.  
kai; eidon, kai; idou; ippo~ mel a~,  
kai; olkaqhmeno~ epl' aujton  
e<sup>c</sup>wn zugon ejn th<sup>h</sup>ceiri; aujtou'.  
<sup>6</sup>kai; hkousa w- fwnhn ejn me<sup>sw</sup>atwh tessarwn zwon legousan,  
Coinix siitou dhnariou,  
kai; trei~ coinike~ kriqwh dhnariou:  
kai; to; e<sup>l</sup> aion kai; ton oihon mh; ajpikhshæ.

The similarities – not only in words, but in word order – create a link between the first and third seal, indicating that they frame the middle seal, from which, on the other hand, they differ so subtly. Once this is established, it is tempting to think that even in their colours they are forming a pair, albeit in contrast to each other because the white horse of the first seal is the opposite colour of the black horse in the third seal.<sup>8</sup>

The framing effect in the first three seals can be interpreted in more than one way. Here framing should not be understood as if the outer two seals are merely repetitive of one another. The third seal represents a significant

<sup>8</sup> Giblin (1991:83) also links the two colours, but rather unconvincingly as black “befitting mourning or gloomy oppression” against white, “appropriate to victory.” He does not substantiate this characterization. Black and white are closely linked in the traditions of the author: Zechariah (6:1-8) sees four chariots with four horses of different colours, the second being black and the third white – but it is the black and white horses that are mentioned first in the explanation of the vision and they both move in tandem to the North (6:6). Kraft (1974:117) observes, without any motivation, that black is an indication of hunger.



step forward in the pattern of events – which is also the case in seals five and seven (cf further below).

There is, however, a still more striking structure to be found that will actually explain the real meaning of the second seal as a middle seal: The most significant aspect of the link between the first three seals is that the second seal as the middle seal contains an explicit reference to the earth (ἐκ τῆς γῆς in 6:4). This needs to be addressed in more detail by looking at the relationship of the three first seals to the fourth seal.

It is striking what solutions are made possible to difficult exegetical problems once a framing pattern like this is recognized. Bachmann (1986:247-8; 1998:262), astutely recognized the significance of the adjective ἀλλοθεν that appears only in the second seal (6:4) before the second horse and that seems to set this seal against the previous one. He argued that this implied that the negative second horse contrasts with the first positive horse (i.e. Christ). What he did not spell out, though, is that the first and third horse relates in a special complementary way and that this needs to be recognized as well in an analysis of the text. The contrast then is not between the first and second horse, but between the second horse and both the first and third horse. The ἀλλοθεν does not imply that the following seals must be read negatively because it is not present in them. The resemblances of the first seal with the third one question such a view.

### 5.2.3 Three plus one

With the first three seals in an *inclusio*, a new pattern has developed in the series of four. The pattern of three is relative to the pattern of four (as outlined previously with seal one and four also in a framing relationship of the whole group). The relationship between these two patterns will be investigated further below.

The effect of the grouping of the first three seals is that the fourth seal is foregrounded as the climax of the series, especially since the fourth seal also functions as conclusion. If seals one to three belong together, seal four stands out in a 3 + 1 pattern. This is further confirmed by the way in which the links between the four seals and even the framing of the first three seals build up in a climactic manner.

The last seal is emphasized formally by the insertion of the word φωνῆν in the introduction – slightly different than the “like a voice of thunder” of the living creature mentioned in the first seal. The seal catches the eye because of its length, and, as mentioned above, because it actually *names* the rider – which is perhaps the most significant feature in all the seals (cf further below). In addition, *two* figures are linked with the last horse. Charles (1920:169)

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notes that “from the analogy of the preceding Seals we expect here only one Figure” and continues to argue that the addition of Hades is an intrusion. This reflects a misunderstanding of how symbolism works. In addition it fails to recognize that the two are used elsewhere in the text in almost formulaic manner (1:18; 20:13, 14). The progress in the four seals is clear from the fact that the fourth rider receives power to kill in four ways. The fourth seal, finally, is the one that frames on a micro-level the fourfold killing with a reference to the earth, thereby stressing that the action takes place there (cf further below).

#### **5.2.4 Three plus one plus three**

The first four seals also set up the scenario for what is to follow in the fifth seal. This needs to be stressed, since the fifth seal is about those who had been slaughtered (6:9) by the inhabitants of the earth (*ek̄dikei'~ to; aīma hmwh ek̄ twh katoikountwn epi; th'~ gh'~*). It also sets the scene for the sixth seal that speaks about the judgment of the groups *on earth*, as is so carefully indicated in 6:15. The first four seals are, as Giblin (1991:85) correctly noted, about ongoing earthly events that as “tribulations” take place before the end is announced or is brought about. They also explain the fifth seal where we learn more about the slaughtered faithful as they confront God with their question about the judging of their deaths that is assumed to have taken place during the first four seals.

But the effect of the 3 + 1 pattern is even more dramatic if the series of seven is taken into account. This pattern of 3 + 1 will bring the Rider with the name Death in the middle of the seven seals, that is, seal four will form the middle of the seven in a 3 + 1 + 3 pattern. This is the only seal in which a Rider is actually named (compare the similar, but inverse process in the middle of others series, 2:18; 14:14). The name is furthermore, highly significant, namely, Death and Hades, especially in the light of the importance of names in the book. By placing Death and Hades in the middle of the first set of seven, the author underlines their importance in an extraordinary manner (also Lund 1992:339). Even more striking is this seal in the light of the role of Death and Hades in the book as the ultimate enemies of the believers. They are the last enemies of God to be removed from the scene: even *after* the two beasts and the dragon as devil (cf Rev 19:20; 20:2, 10). They are also the first to be introduced here as they begin their work of destruction (cf 1:18)! Here then, they are heading the team that attack the believers and the world from the very beginning.

The pattern of three plus one plus three within the series of seals is not exceptional, though. It also happens in the seven letters where the middle

letter names the sender as the Son of God in the middle letter to Thyatira (2:18).

If this pattern is analyzed on another level, another interesting feature is to be observed. The 3 + 1 + 3 pattern is, because of the framing effect in the two sets of three, at the same time a series of even and uneven numbers: Seals 1, 3, 5, 7 form a series, displaying similar motifs and forms. Seals 2, 4, 6 form another series - in each case they represent the middle of the group to which they belong: seal 2 is the middle of 1 and 3, seal 6 is the middle of 5 and 7, whilst, finally and climactically, seal 4 is the middle of the first three seals and the last three seals. And in that middle, stands Death and Hades, the last and ultimate foes of the Lamb and his followers.

## **6. THE RIDER ON THE WHITE HORSE**

In the light of the above analysis, the first seal cannot be interpreted in a positive manner. Kraft (1974:114), rejecting attempts to read the first horse in terms of the Logos in Revelation 19, noted that the contents of the series speak against this. "Nun ist aber kein Zweifel, daß die Reiter insgesamt eine Serie von Plagen darstellen; es ist eine ästhetische Sünde, wenn man den Logos mit einer Plage aus einer Plagenreihe gleichsetzt. Das heißt, den Wald nicht vor Bäumen sehen." The "aesthetical sin" has not to do merely with identifying the Logos with what is clearly the first of four negative seals. It also can be understood to fail to recognize the literary esthetics that is at work in the composition of this group of seals and that is indicated so carefully in a formal manner.

In other words, the role of the first seal in the overall pattern of seven seals prevents it from being read on its own and especially in conflict with them. This implies further that its meaning is to be determined by it being part of the seven seals and not from its link with Revelation 19.<sup>9</sup> The immediate context has preference in determining meaning.

It has been argued above that the series of seals has been composed in a careful manner and that they are integrated mutually to display well-designed numerical patterns. It was also pointed out that one should expect this literary approach to be reflected from micro- to macro-level and on both paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels. In the light of this argument, one is challenged to investigate the link of the seals with the rest of the book.

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<sup>9</sup> It is also important to remember that Christ as the Lamb is the one who opens the seals. Reading the rider on the white horse as Christ implies the impossible fact that He appears twice – as the One who opens the seals and as the first seal itself (cf Sickenberger 1939:76).

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This, interestingly enough, brings the link between the two white horses in Revelation 6 and 19 to the fore once again. A broader formal analysis, taking into account their location in the book and the compositional skills of the author, sheds different light on their relationship that several scholars developed mostly in terms of material links. Such an analysis indicates that the two riders indeed can be linked without necessarily having to be regarded as identical. Just as the author contrasts salvation in the fifth and seventh seals with judgment in the sixth seal, he contrasts the two riders in Revelation 6 and 19 as mirror images – but then in an antithetical manner. The Rider on the white horse in Revelation 6 as part of a group of destructive riders stands in opposition to the rider of Revelation 19.

That they are linked is suggested by the material similarities between them: Both of them ride horses, have crowns, are involved in battle and both are linked with a group and with a sword.

It can hardly be overlooked that they are also very different. The Rider on the white horse in Revelation 19 has a sharp sword that comes from his mouth. He does not hold instruments of war in his hand or wear signs of conquest. He is not one who merely conquers, but in a much more intense manner he judges and makes war. He has not a crown (6:2), but many diadems (Re 19:12). Both riders act with a group of followers. The Rider on the white horse in Revelation 6:1-2 acts with three other horses in their course of destruction in a fearsome group that brings destruction to the world. Over against them stand the armies of heaven that follow the Rider in Revelation 19. They wear fine linen, white and pure, and follow the Rider on white horses in his fight against evil. The Rider on the white horse with his followers on white horses and in white clothes in Revelation 19 thus stands in stark contrast to the motley crew of horses and riders in the first four seals, introduced and lead by the rider on the white horse.<sup>10</sup> As impressive and powerful as the portrayal is in the case of the Rider in Revelation 19, so negative and destructive is it in the case of the Evil rider.

Decisive, though, in this case is the formal analysis: they are both accorded a prominent place in the narrative. Both of them represent the beginning of a new phase: the evil rider in Revelation 6 introduces the beginning of the times of woe on earth and inaugurates the persecution of the saints. The Rider in Revelation 19 inaugurates the beginning of the time of salvation. The phrase, *Kai; eidon toh oujranon hñewgmechon*, marks a turning point in the narrative of Revelation and is specially significant – as

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<sup>10</sup> The closely knit pattern of four horses with the first rider as their introduction and as the counterpart of the Rider in Revelation 19 questions the statement of Giblin (1991:82), “Of the four horsemen, only the fourth, Death (significantly) can be considered an ‘anti-God’ figure, scilicet, as an eschatological adversary (cf. 20:14).”

Prigent (2001:538) argued so convincingly.<sup>11</sup> The Rider inverts the process that begun with the evil rider who was the partner of Death and Hades, the fourth rider. He introduces the last times in which the saints will be resurrected and will reign with Christ (Re 20) and in which the book of life was opened (20:12).<sup>12</sup>

## 7. BUILDING BLOCKS

Can one say more than this about the rider on the white horse and the composition of the book? If the rider is a negative symbol, what does it mean? Although the analysis in the previous section indicated how the evil rider should not be understood, we need to investigate one last symbol in the first seal to discover more of what the author intended it to mean.

Interestingly enough, historical information rather than literary analysis puts us on the right track towards a better understanding of this symbol and the compositional work of the author. By analyzing such information as it is presented to us in texts from that time, we discover an important building block that the author used to construct his text. In a brilliant essay, Kerkeslager (1993:117) took a clue from the traditions-geschichtliche readings of the text. He first explored the suggestion of Vos (1965) that the first rider refers to false messiahs as it is described in such texts as Matthew 24:4-5.<sup>13</sup> The text contains motifs that could identify the rider in this way: Both the motifs of the crown and the white horse suggest his counterfeit nature, because both are important characteristics of the Lamb. The rider in the first

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<sup>11</sup> Cf his interesting reference to John 1:51, which is one of the indications that the link between Revelation and the Johannine literature deserves more attention. Prigent's reading of the relationship between the two riders on white horses illustrates this need, but also its problematical side. Following Feuillet, he thinks that the first seal refers to judgment, relating the bow-motif to Ezekiel 5:16-17 and developing it in line with "strict Johannine theology" as referring to eschatological judgment. Since Christ's death on the cross, plagues of the end time characterize the world. The comments below will indicate that the bow-motif can be read in a more convincing way. The motif of judgment remains interesting, though, since the four seals could signify the judicial action of God.

<sup>12</sup> In a lucid article, Rissi (1964:416) suggests that the bow of the first rider is an allusion to Gog (Ezk 38-39) of whom it is said there that his bow is smitten out of his left hand. This suggestion fails to account for the omission of any reference to arrows in Revelation 6 and to explain the motif of the crown convincingly. Although this questions Rissi's further argument that the first rider is a figure of the Antichrist, the explanation of the identity of the rider in this essay would tend in the same direction – obviously then on other grounds. It is fascinating to see how close Rissi moves to the explanation given here when he writes (1964:418), "The effort to mislead through miracles and fire from the heaven reveals the essence of the Antichrist, who is acting through the pseudo-prophet (Re 13:14)."

<sup>13</sup> For a sober discussion of the traditions behind the synoptics and the apocalypse (already insightfully suggested by Charles), cf Prigent (2001:264-5). Of course few scholars suggest literary dependence of John on the synoptics.

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seal indicates false prophets, then, whilst “The ‘conquering’ would refer to the triumphant progress of the deception of the false messiahs” (Kerkeslager 1993:118).

Kerkeslager argues that this is, however, only a partial solution to the interpretation of the symbol. Focusing on the motif of the bow (τόξον), he points out that it was associated with prophecy. This may come as a surprise to those who regard the bow, a powerful symbol in many cultures in antiquity, as a symbol of warfare. Although it is further also known in the Old Testament as an instrument of chastisement (Aune 1998:394, referring to Dt 32:42; Is 34:6; Hab 3:9; Lam 3:12-13),<sup>14</sup> Kerkeslager suggests that the meaning has to be sought elsewhere. It is on this point that a historical investigation gives us decisive clues. “In Greco-Roman antiquity, the bow would have served as a fairly transparent symbol of Apollo, the god who was believed to inspire prophecy.” Apollo was known in Homeric texts as “famous for the bow,” “shooting a hundred arrows” and for his deadly aim.<sup>15</sup> Under the influence of the Homeric tradition, Apollo was viewed as an archer. Later classical works often referred to the deadly arrows of Apollo. Ultimately, though, he is especially known as the one who inspires prophecy. His fame is mostly linked with the Delphic oracle as the seat of Apollonic oracular utterances.

The other important motif of the crown in the first seal is also explained more clearly by this link. Certain motifs were associated with Apollo - like the sun, crown and the bow. Emperor Gaius thus imitated Apollo by wearing “crowns (stefanoi) adorned with the sun’s rays while carrying a bow and arrows” (Kerkeslager 1998:119). The motif of crowns was also popular in prophetic circles. “Not only royalty, but prophets and those who had been given a prophetic oracle wore crowns. The wearing of the stefano~ by Apollo as conqueror of the Pythian dragon and by shamans invoking magical and oracular powers made the term even more appropriate” (Kerkeslager 1998:120).

All these remarks show the close connection between symbols for the first rider and prophecy. The first rider suggests that type of pagan prophecy that would be anathema to the prophet who wrote the book of Revelation.

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<sup>14</sup> Commentators note that there are no references to arrows in this seal, suggesting that it implies that they have been shot so that the following seals would represent these arrows. They link the symbol of the bow with Deuteronomy 32:23-25, (perhaps reworked in Ezk 5:16-17) where there is mention of God’s arrows of punishment, which are then described as famine, plague, wild animals and the sword. It is thought that the seals represent these arrows and that they are then listed in a summarizing manner in the fourth seal as the arrows shot by the first rider. The analysis showed that this is impossible, since the seals do not follow the pattern and since the four are linked only with the fourth seal – not with the previous ones.

<sup>15</sup> For references, cf Kerkeslager 1998:118-9.

The next question that must be asked in order for this solution to work is to what extent Christians had access to such a completely pagan concept of the bow and whether this is a plausible proposition for Revelation. According to Kerkeslager, the answer has to be sought in the link of Jewish traditions with such ideas. Jewish authors contrasted their prophetic work with that of Apollo and his spokespeople. A reading of pagan texts will prove his point beyond doubt. That Jews and Christians were fully aware of the oracles associated with him, would be clear from such works as the Sibylline Oracles. It is part of the challenge to Jewish and Christian authors to define their faith in terms of pagan oracles and prophecies (cf De Villiers 1999a; 1999b; 2000a; 2000b).

Other parts of Revelation contain references that confirm that the author was aware of pagan institutions that offered oracles and prophecies. Revelation 2:18-29 reflects conflict with trade guilds which were associated with Apollo. Clearest, though, is the polemic usage of his name in Revelation 9:11 (cf also Giblin 1991:101). Revelation 12, finally, displays knowledge of the mythical tradition about Apollo's birth and his slaying of the dragon. Bauckham (1993:196) drew attention to the underlying pagan mythological traditions about the Dragon in Revelation 12 as "most pervasive" image of pagan divinity in the local cults to which the seven churches were exposed. Pagan prophets, associated with Apollo, it seems, were as pervasive in this world of Revelation.

Revelation thus has references to Apollo in more than one place, confirming the plausibility of the bow as symbol of prophecy. These references polemicize against his cult and the prophets associated with it. The first seal in Revelation 6:1-2 identifies the Apollonic prophets as the preliminary "conquerors" of the end time. But the book then stresses that this is only a matter of appearances. Eventually the Rider on the white horse will remove them from the world scene that they dominated so powerfully. This confirms Revelation 12 that describes the Dragon, their leader, as "the enemy whom the divine Child will eventually slay" (Bauckham 1993:197-8).

The prophets are so abominable because of their falsehood. In one of the focal passages in the book, the New Jerusalem is depicted as the place where no one will enter who practices abomination and lies (bdeI ugma kai yeudoⲣ; Re 21:27; esp also 22:17). References to deception and false prophecy elsewhere in the book, confirm this. The author of Revelation regards it as typical of evil that it apes good - as is clear from the evil triad. The two beasts imitate Christ with a mortal wound (13:3) and with two horns like a lamb (13:11). The second beast is known as the false prophet (Re 16:13; 19:20).

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Falsehood is so dangerous because of its power over people. The second beast is a false prophet that misleads (Re 13:14) the world and determines its economic well-being. The dragon, the ultimate enemy, is depicted especially as misleading the world (Re 12:9; 20:3,10). He is so powerful that he finds a unique opportunity after the destruction of his two allies, the two beasts, to escape imprisonment and deceive the nations once again (Re 20:8) to attack the faithful. Only after this fails, he is thrown into the pool of fire to join the two beasts. Also revealing is the final description of the false prophet in Revelation 19:20: he misled people to accept the mark of the first beast and to worship his image. Falsehood leads to idolatry (cf Re 22:15).

But deception is also found within the church. The author has only strong words against Jezebel, explicitly named as a false prophet. That this enemy is important is clear from her location in the formal structure of the seven letters. The author writes about her in the middle of the middle letter to Thyatira as heart of his message to the church (Re 2:23b!). She is portrayed as the false prophet who misleads the servants of God (Re 2:20) to practice immorality and eat idol food. The warning against this is very serious: her children, who follow her, will be struck dead (Re 2:23). Clearly, false prophecy is a matter of utmost concern to the writer of Revelation.

In the light of this information, it is not surprising that the author allocates the very first symbol in his series of seven seals to false prophecy and that its colour is white. This rider emulates Christ in what Rissi (1964:416) described as a “perverted” imitation.

The rider in Revelation 6 thus is one of the most important enemies in the book. It tells of a time in which false prophets will be so powerful that they will mislead the world and even the church. They have power and continue to gain more power, but, ultimately, there will be the more victorious One who will conquer and destroy them for ever.

From this discussion, it has become clear how the bow as symbol of false prophecy provides a building block to the author to construct this first seal. Other parts of the book confirm the significance of this building block. At the same time it reveals to us how the author takes significant images from his pagan context as key images in his carefully constructed symbolic world. The interpretation of the first seal and particularly of the bow and the rider shows that such building blocks can only be understood correctly if their place in the composition is identified.



## **8. AMBIGUITY**

This is, however, still a last matter that deserves brief attention.

Kerkeslager ends his essay with the remark about the failure of modern scholars to recognize the rider as counterfeit, writing that it “displays the success of the author’s literary device” (1998:121). And Rissi (1964:407) asked, “Is there, perhaps, a connection between the special nature of this figure and the fact that he has ridden always in mysterious twilight through the centuries and even through the history of interpretation?”

The first rider is indeed a symbol with a “special nature,” riding in “mysterious twilight,” but as such it reflects conscious literary composition. The first rider illustrates the literary technique and compositional skill of the author in yet another way. The author’s ambiguity is intentional. He wants this symbol to resist immediate identification. He suggests meanings to the readers that are only gradually confirmed or challenged. He teases, so to speak, his readers to listen attentively to the message of the first seal: If anyone has an ear: let him/her heed! This is a book that requires more than listening. Thinking, understanding and reckoning are all requisites (13:18; 13:10; 14:12).

Not that the author leaves it completely open. Through his intricate compositional skills, he helps his readers to discover the unity between the seals and their mutual links. It is only when the reader passed through the increasingly menacing riders and then discovered Death and Hades in the fourth seal, that s/he realizes that the first figure is a different type of conqueror than may be thought. In similar manner Revelation 19 guides the reader further to recognize the truly victorious One, the Rider on the white horse that inaugurates the final end.

The effect is to slow down the reader to think twice about what is heard or written – and, for that matter, what is believed. Power can be misleading, whether it is the power of the emperor or of the prophets on the streets or in the church. Think twice!

It is the same process that is at work in his depiction of the Whore in Revelation 17-19: ironically, those who cry over her destruction are the ones who are unaware of her exploitative and oppressive power. It is only when one understands what it is to be a follower of the Lamb that one recognizes her true nature. The insider will understand, the outsider will be puzzled or will lament.

With this an important literary technique is mooted (cf De Villiers 1999a and b). Many of the symbols in the book of Revelation are interpreted so differently by modern scholars because they fall in the trap of the author’s deliberate ambiguity. If the author did this here in the first seal, what would

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prevent him from doing the same elsewhere? It makes us think twice about our readings of symbols in the rest of the text (cf De Villiers 2002).

The function of this ambiguous language needs to be developed further elsewhere. It is tantalizing to think that Revelation may approach the form of pagan oracular utterances which were famous for their ambiguity, especially because it was expected of divine speech to be ambiguous (De Villiers 1999b). In taking over such ambiguity, John could have been influenced by the oracular conventions of his time. God indeed “signifies” these matters through his servants, the true prophets (Re 1:1; *ešmanen*). Let the reader be attentive in order to understand God’s miraculous signs (Re 12:1, 3) and not be misled by the signs of Evil (Re 13:13, 14, 15).

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**Close reading of the seven seals:**

<sup>1</sup>Kai; eidon ofte hhoixen to; ajrnion mian ek twh epta; sfragidwn,

<sup>2</sup>kai; h̄kousa eho;- ek twh tessarwn zw̄wn legonto- w- fwnh̄a bronth-, 'Ercou.

kai; eidon, kai; ijdou; ippo- leuko-,

kai; olkaqhmeno- ep̄l aujton e~~cn~~wn tokon,

kai; ep̄loqh aujtwa~~st~~eifano-,

kai; e~~xh~~l'qen nikwh kai; i~~fa~~ nikhsh̄a

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<sup>3</sup>Kai; ofte hhoixen thn sfragida thn deuteran,

h̄kousa tou' deuterou zw̄ou legonto-, 'Ercou.

<sup>4</sup>kai; e~~xh~~l'qen a~~l~~ lo- ippo- purro-,

kai; tw~~a~~kaqhmenw~~a~~ep̄l aujton ep̄loqh aujtwa~~l~~abeih thn eirhnhn ek  
th'- gh'-

kai; i~~fa~~ a~~l~~ l'hlou- s~~fa~~kousin,

kai; ep̄loqh aujtwa~~m~~acaira megal h.

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<sup>5</sup>Kai; ofte hhoixen thn sfragida thn triithn,

h̄kousa tou' tritou zw̄ou legonto-, 'Ercou.

kai; eidon, kai; ijdou; ippo- mel a-,

kai; olkaqhmeno- ep̄l aujton e~~cn~~wn zugon ejn th̄aceiri; aujtou'.

PP <sup>6</sup>kai; h̄kousa w- UUfwnh̄n ejn mesw̄atw~~h~~ tessarwn zw̄wn legousan,

Coinix sitou dhnariou,

kai; trei'- coinike- kriqwh dhnariou:

kai; to; e~~l~~ aion kai; ton oion mh; ajdiksh̄a.

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<sup>7</sup>kai; ofte hhoixen thn sfragida thn tetarthn, h̄kousa fwnhn tou' tetartou  
zw̄ou legonto-, 'Ercou.

<sup>8</sup>kai; eidon, kai; ijdou; ippo- clwro-,

kai; olkaqhmeno- epanw [aujtou] o~~h~~oma aujtwa~~l~~ Qanato-,

kai; oladh- h̄kolou~~q~~ei met~~l~~ aujtou'.

kai; ep̄loqh aujtoi'- e~~x~~ousia epi; to; tetarton th'- gh'-,

apokteihai ejn rbmfaia/

kai; ejn limw̄a

kai; ejn qanatw̄a

kai; upo; twh qhriwn th'- gh'-.

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<sup>9</sup>ai; ofte hhoixen thn pempthn sfragida,

eidon upokaitw tou' qusiasthriou ta;- yuca;- twh e~~s~~fagmenwn

dia; ton logon tou' qeou'

kai; dia; thn marturian hj̄ eicon.

<sup>10</sup>ekraxan fwnh̄amegal h̄al egonte-,

Ew- pote, oldespoth- olagio- kai; ajl hqinor-,

oujkrinei- kai; ekdikei'- to; ai~~na~~ hmwh

ek twh katoikountwn epi; th'- gh's;

<sup>11</sup>ep̄loqh aujtoi'- eka~~st~~wa~~st~~ol h; leukh̄

kai; ej~~r~~eqh aujtoi'- i~~fa~~ ajpapausontai e~~t~~i cronon mikron,

e~~w~~- plhrwqwsin kai; oil sundouloi aujtwh

kai; oil ajdel foi; aujtwh oil mel lonte- ajpoktennesqai w- kai; aujtoiv

- <sup>12</sup>eidon ofte hhoixen thn sfragida thn ekthn,  
kai; seismo;- mega- egeneto,  
kai; olhl io- egeneto mel a- wl- sakko- tricino-, (1)  
kai; hlsel hnh ol h egeneto wl- alma, (2)  
<sup>13</sup>oilastere- tou' oujranou' epesan eij- thn ghh, (3)  
wl- sukh' bal lei tou;- oil unqou- aujth'- upo; ajhemou megal ou seiomenh,
- <sup>14</sup> oloujrano;- apecwrisqh wl- bibl ion el issomenon, (4)  
kai; pah ofo- (1)  
kai; nhso- ek twh topwn aujtwh ekinhqhsan. (2)  
<sup>15</sup>oilbasilei- th'- gh- (1)  
kai; oil megistahe- (2)  
kai; oil cil iarcoi (3)  
kai; oil plousioi (4)  
kai; oil iscuroi; (5)  
kai; pa- dou' o- (6)  
kai; eij euqero- ekruyan ebautou;- eij- ta; Sphlaia (7)  
kai; eij- ta;- petra- twh ofewn: . (1)  
<sup>16</sup>I egousin toi- ofresin kai; tai'- petrai-, (2)  
Pesete eifv hma- (1)  
kai; kruyate hma- (2)  
apo; prospou tou' kaqhmenou epi; tou' qronou (3)  
kai; apo; th'- ofrgh'- tou' ajrniou, (4)  
ofti hl qen h hmera h megal h th'- ofrgh'- aujtwh,  
kai; ti- dunatai staqhhaif

- <sup>1</sup>Kai; oftan hhoixen thn sfragida thn ebdomhn,  
egeneto sigh; eij tw' oujranw' hmiwron.  
<sup>2</sup>(kai; eidon tou;- epta; aggel ou- oi) ehw pion tou' qeou' esthkasin,  
kai; eplousan aujtoi'- epta; sal pigge-.)  
<sup>3</sup>Kai; al lo- aggel o- hl qen  
kai; ejs taqh epi; tou' qusiasthriou efcwn l ibanwton crusouh,  
kai; eplous aujtwa; qumiamata poll a;  
ifa dwsei tai'- proseuca'i- twh agiwn pantwn  
epi; to; qusiasthrion to; crusouh to; ehw pion tou' qronou.  
<sup>4</sup>kai; ajebh olkapno;- twh qumiamatwn tai'- proseuca'i- twh agiwn  
ek ceiro;- tou' aggel ou ehw pion tou' qeou'.  
<sup>5</sup>kai; eil hfen ol aggel o- ton l ibanwton,  
kai; egemisen aujton ek tou' puro;- tou' qusiasthriou  
kai; ebal en eij- thn ghh:  
kai; egenonto brontai; kai; fwnai; kai; ajstrapai; kai; seismo-.