

The White Horse

Rev. Kurt Horigan Asplundh

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war.

Revelation 19:11

When we think of the Lord's first coming, the image is clear. We picture the Nativity scene: the stable in Bethlehem, with the shepherds crowding near to see the infant Lord wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

But what is our picture of the second coming? The images vary. Perhaps we think of the descent of the Holy City New Jerusalem, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. Perhaps we think of the woman clothed with the sun who gave birth to a Man Child. Or, do we think of the twelve disciples sent forth throughout the whole spiritual world to preach the gospel that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns, whose kingdom shall be forever and ever? The book of Revelation gives us yet another vision of the Lord's second coming: The Lord riding upon a white horse.

This is a vision of stirring power, befitting the coming of the Lord. In ancient times there was perhaps no more stirring sight than a king riding upon a prancing stallion at the head of his army of horsemen. How much more is John's vision of the rider on the white horse a soul-stirring sight? This rider is no earthly king but the KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS. His eyes are not only clear, they snap as with a flame of fire. His clothing, dipped in blood from the violence of personal combat with the enemy, is in striking contrast to the whiteness of His steed and the army that follows Him upon white horses. He leads forth the heavenly hosts, and He has a sharp sword to smite the enemies of His peace and a rod of iron to rule the nations.

This is not the first time the Lord is pictured as a king. Remember the prophecy of the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem? "Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). Thus did the Lord enter Jerusalem to be hailed as King of the Jews at His first coming. In contrast, the Lord in His second coming enters the citadel of our lives as a king, just and having salvation, but not lowly, not riding upon the foal of a donkey. He rides in splendor upon a swift and powerful white horse. He rides on, in majesty, not to die, but to reign in a kingdom that is everlasting.

The Lord has come again as the rider on a white horse, and this pictures His second coming. But the vision is not to be taken literally. It is a spiritual image. "I saw heaven opened," John wrote, "and behold a white horse" (Revelation 19:11). When heaven is opened we see spiritual realities, pictured representatively. The horse and his rider is a symbolic picture of the spiritual reality of intelligence and understanding. It may seem a strange and wonderful thing that intelligence and understanding are meant when a horse and his rider are mentioned in the Word. But, nevertheless, it is so, and many passages from the Word can be cited to confirm this truth.

The source of this representation of a horse and its rider as meaning intelligence and understanding is from the spiritual world. "When the angels are talking about what relates to the

understanding, then in the world of spirits, beneath the angels, or in the corresponding societies, there appear horses, and these of a size, form, color, attitude, and varied equipment in accordance with the ideas which the angels have concerning the understanding” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3217). We are told in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church that Emanuel Swedenborg often experienced the appearance of this representation. He would see people in the spiritual world riding upon horses, but when he asked them whether they were riding they said that they were not, but that they stood meditating upon some subject, “which made clear that riding upon a horse is an appearance representing the operation of their understanding” (*Apocalypse Explained* 364:2). Swedenborg also saw a place in the spiritual world called “the assembly of the intelligent and wise,” where spirits gather to meditate on profound subjects. When he approached this place he saw horses of various colors and also chariots with men riding in them. But these men, too, said that they were not actually riding the horses or the chariots, but that they were in profound thought and meditation (*Apocalypse Explained* 364:3). This information helps us to understand what is signified by the horses seen by the prophets and also by the horses mentioned elsewhere in the Word; namely, the things of the understanding.

Let us turn back now to the vision of the Lord as the rider on the white horse. It is a spiritual image. “I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True.... [A]nd His name is called The Word of God” (Revelation 19:11,13). This horse represents the understanding of the Word. Being a “white” horse it represents an understanding of the truth of the Word, or an “interior understanding of the Word” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 820, 298). And what is the “interior understanding of the Word” but an understanding of its spiritual sense? This the Heavenly Doctrine also states: “the White Horse’ signifies the understanding of the Word as to its spiritual or internal sense” (*The White Horse* 5). To see heaven opened, therefore, and to see the Lord riding upon a white horse is to see the Word opened by the Lord so that its spiritual sense may be understood. This is the Second Coming of the Lord! (*Apocalypse Revealed* 820).

At His First Coming the Lord “fulfilled the Law and the Prophets.” He came on earth in Person and did all those things prophesied about Him in the Old Testament. In the flesh, He lived out and acted according to all truths in the Word. Thus John wrote of Him: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The Lord is the Word. He came on earth to reveal this to people.

At His Second Coming the Lord opened the spiritual sense of the Word. That is, He revealed an interior idea of Himself by giving people an interior understanding of the Word. What is the Second Coming of the Lord? It is seeing His Divine qualities in our understanding. And how is this done? By opening to people an interior understanding of the Word through its spiritual sense. This is represented to us visually by the image of the Lord riding upon a white horse.

A white horse is mentioned twice in John’s visions recorded in the Book of Revelation. There is the white horse of our text, whose rider is the Lord Himself. There is also another white horse, one of a series of four horses and riders seen by John as the first seals of the Scroll Sealed with Seven Seals were opened. The rider of this horse was a valiant warrior with a bow and a crown who went forth conquering and to conquer, but it was not the Lord. And this horse was followed in succession by horses that were red, black, and a deathly pale color.

Let us compare what these horses and their riders mean with the white horse upon which the Lord was the rider. This examination may clarify our idea of the Lord's Second Coming.

All of these horses signify an understanding of the Word, but with variety according to the colors of the horses mentioned. The "white" horses signify the understanding of the truth of the Word, or the interior understanding of its letter. What is "white" signifies what is of truth. The red, the black, and the pale horses, on the other hand, signify a perverted, falsified, and destroyed understanding.

The succession of the first four horses seen by John is a picture of a succession of states within the church. In the beginning of the church there was an understanding of the truth of the Word—the white horse. This understanding enabled the people of the church to go forth to conquer the evils of life. So it was that the rider on this horse carried a bow and wore a crown of victory, for he went forth "conquering and to conquer."

In the second state of the church the understanding of truth that had led the first rider to victory was lost, destroyed by lusts of evil. This state is represented by the dusky red horse whose rider took peace from the earth. So it is that love of evil destroys the blessing of spiritual peace.

A third state of the church followed which is pictured by the appearance of a black horse and his rider. In this state truth is turned to the blackness of falsity. The understanding of the Word is falsified, giving people a completely false sense of values. The rider of this horse carried a pair of balances, often a sign of wisdom and justice, but here a mockery of true wisdom and justice. In this state of the church spiritual truths and principles are thought to be of little value, for they are not sought for application to life. So it was that a voice cried out: "A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny" (Revelation 6:6). The smallest coin was all that was offered for the wheat and barley which are ingredients for the bread of life.

When the church has reached a state of lack of good and lack of truth from the Word it is pictured by the fourth and final horse of the series, the pale horse whose rider's name was "Death." This represents the complete profanation of any understanding of the Word. The pale horse is in stark contrast to the first or white horse for it signifies its opposite spiritual reality. As a lifeless corpse is pale, so the church without an understanding of the Word is pictured by a pale horse. The rider's name was "Death." A church, or an individual, dies spiritually when all understanding of the Word is lost.

This succession of horsemen, depicting the successive decline of the church that departs from the Lord was a prophecy that has been fulfilled with the Christian Churches. These have actually passed through states of decline and have lost all true understanding of the Word.

The prophecy is also a personal warning. The successive states may be applied in an individual sense. Our own understanding of the Word may have passed from purity into obscurity, obliterated by a vain trust in the powers of our own understanding. Our understanding of the Word, consequently of religion and of life, may come from the Lord, or it may come from ourselves and the light of our own intelligence. Such self-intelligence is also signified in the Word by horses. Remember the fate of the horses and chariots of Egypt as they pursued the

Children of Israel across the Red Sea. These horses and chariots of Egypt represent the false reasonings and understandings of the natural person. It was such reasonings and understandings that the Lord meant when he warned that “a horse is a vain hope for safety...” (Psalm 33:17), and nor shall he who rides a horse deliver himself” (Amos 2:15). “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses,” wrote David in his Psalm, “but we will remember the name of the Lord our God” (Psalm 20:7).

In contrast, the understanding of the Word revealed by the Lord, as the rider on the white horse, stands forever true. Unlike the four horsemen described before, whose reign was brief and disappointing, the new understanding of the Word, which is given by the Lord Himself, cannot fail. This white horse, distinct from the earlier one, is not to be replaced by a red, a black, or a pale horse. When the Lord reveals the interior understanding of the Word, its doctrines of charity and faith are secure. As we read in Revelation: “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Your dominion endures throughout all generations” (Psalm 145:13). The New Church, established by the Lord through an opening of the spiritual sense of the Word, is to stand forever as the crown of all the churches.

The spiritual sense of the Word has been opened by the Lord Himself, and the interior understanding of the Word is disclosed by this. This, the Writings teach, “is the coming of the Lord” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 820). Yet it remains for every person of the church to receive the Lord in His coming. Our understanding of the Word is imperfect, partial, ever prone to error. As much as we strive to be a rider on a white horse, still we fall into states of red and black, and our understanding is dimmed by the intrusion of self-will and self-intelligence. When these states of obscurity occur, which they will, we can yet turn to the Lord in His second coming. As never before, the truth is disclosed in the Word, making the Lord God Jesus Christ a visible and ever-present God.

It is said that the rider on the white horse was followed by a heavenly host upon white horses. These represent angels of the New Christian heaven, who are conjoined with the Lord in the interior understanding of the Word, and thus in pure and genuine truths (*Apocalypse Revealed* 826). If we are to join this great host to follow the Lord, we too must be instructed in genuine and pure truths by Him through the Word. Pure truth is not given from any other source, we are told, than from the Lord through the Word. The Lord has opened the way for people to follow Him, for the Word is no longer a closed book. Its truth may be known by all who seek to know it.

It should be the hope of every one to join this heavenly host. The Word says, “Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand....’ ‘I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star.’ And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let him who thirsts come. And whosoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (Revelation 22:10,16,17).

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 66:5,12-23; Revelation 6:1-8 and 19:11-16; *Arcana Coelestia* 2762:1-4