

COMMENTARY SERIES

GENERAL EDITOR

E. Ann Matter, *University of Pennsylvania*

ADVISORY BOARD

John C. Cavandini, *University of Notre Dame*
Robert A. Harris, *Jewish Theological Seminary*
Patricia Hollahan, *Western Michigan University*
James J. O'Donnell, *Georgetown University*
Lesley J. Smith, *Oxford University*
Grover A. Zinn, *Oberlin College*

A list of the books in the series appears at the end of this book.

The Commentary Series is designed for classroom use. Its goal is to make available to teachers and students useful examples of the vast tradition of medieval commentary on sacred Scripture. The series will include English translations of works written in a number of medieval languages and from various centuries and religious traditions. The series focuses on treatises which have relevance to many fields of Medieval Studies, including theories of allegory and literature, history of art, music and spirituality, and political thought. Notes are meant to provide sources and to gloss difficult passages rather than to give exhaustive scholarly commentary on the treatise. The editions include short introductions which set the context and suggest the importance of each work.

Medieval Institute Publications is a program of
The Medieval Institute, College of Arts and Sciences



WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

THE SEVEN SEALS
OF THE APOCALYPSE
Medieval Texts in Translation

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES BY

Francis X. Gumerlock

TEAMS • Commentary Series

MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo

Copyright © 2009 by the Board of Trustees of Western Michigan University
This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The seven seals of the apocalypse : medieval texts in translation / translated with
introduction and notes by Francis X. Gumerlock.

p. cm. -- (TEAMS commentary series)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-58044-108-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Bible. N.T. Revelation--Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Gumerlock, Francis X.

BS2825.52.S4813 2009

228'060902--dc22

2009003585

Manufactured in the United States of America

P 5 4 3 2

*In memory of
Kay Denise Gumerlock,
a very loving wife and mother*



PETER AURIOL

Compendium on Holy Scripture

ON REVELATION 6-8

In [this] first vision is described prophetically the whole time from the foundation of the church among the nations, and of the persecutions of the pagan emperors, to its liberation through Constantine. Indeed this time lasted from the emperors Gaius⁴⁶ and Claudius up to and including Julian the Apostate. And this vision begins at the beginning of the fourth chapter, which begins, *After these things I looked* (Rev. 4:1), up until the beginning of the eighth chapter, where it is written, *And I saw seven angels standing* (Rev. 8:2). And this vision is divided into five main parts.

... Truly in the fifth part [from Revelation 6:1 to 8:2] the clear and firm truth of the procession of future things is explained in order, from

the emperors Gaius and Claudius up to Julian the Apostate. And this part begins, *And I saw when the Lamb had opened one of the seven seals* (Rev. 6:1), where there are prophetically designated, in order, eight notable things that happen in that time with respect to the church.

THE FIRST SEAL.

The Spread of the Gospel.

6. 2. For, first John represents and indicates beforehand the very free procession of the spreading of the gospel. And this [is represented] in the opening of the first seal, where it is said, *And behold a white horse*. Here it should be known that, according to Eusebius, the preaching of the name of Christ was spread abroad throughout the whole world in a short time under the emperors Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius.⁴⁷ For, the aforementioned emperors permitted the apostles and disciples to run to and fro throughout the whole world. There, in the beginning of the fourth chapter, [Eusebius] says that divine providence operated in the mind of Caesar so that he threatened danger to all the accusers of the Christians. In those initial times the word of the gospel ran forth quickly, as if a divinely manifested light, and a ray of the sun breaking forth, were illuminating the whole world with the brightness of heavenly light. And the prophecy was fulfilled, *Their sound has gone out throughout the whole earth* (Ps. 19:4; cf. Rom. 10:18). And throughout all the cities and all the towns immense multitudes of people were gathered into the churches, as when grain is gathered to the threshing floors in the time of the harvests. Therefore, John saw in the book of divine foreknowledge this free dissemination. And this was [designated as the] first [seal] because it was at first closed, and because Christ opened it first. Therefore, it is called the opening of the first seal.

For, the *white horse* designates the army of the apostles and disciples, who were white in doctrine and in life, like horses running to and fro very quickly. Upon it, Christ was sitting with the weapons of preaching and with the grace of the word, which penetrated them, just as he had promised saying, *Behold, I shall give you a mouth and wisdom, which your adversaries will not be able to contradict* (Luke 21:15). And because a crown of victory was given to him, *he went forth conquering and to conquer*, because he subjugated the world to his faith in the space of a short time, as was said.

THE SECOND SEAL.

The Edict of the First Persecution.

6.3–4. *And when he had opened the second seal*, John designates and indicates the edict of the first general persecution. I say “general” so as to exclude partial persecutions, which the faith experienced from the beginning, in Jerusalem and Judea. And Nero was the first among the Roman emperors who issued an edict for Christians to be punished, as Eusebius says.⁴⁸ And I say that he made martyrs of the most blessed apostles Peter and Paul and many others throughout various parts of the world.

Therefore, through the *horse* is understood the Roman Empire. For it is customary in scripture for horses to designate kingdoms, as is shown in Zechariah 6:2, etc. Also, the Roman empire was then *red* through its shedding of blood, because Nero had advanced into such evil that he did not hold back the sword from even his own family and servants, as Eusebius relates. He committed murders against his mother, his brother, his wives, and everyone closely related to him by blood. And he was incestuous. Or, it is called red because of the multitude of his unspeakable evils, since among all of the emperors he led the most wicked and most impious life, as is shown in the histories. Or, [it is called red] because of the flames and fire, since he wanted to see Rome burn. Accordingly, it seemed red because of the flames of the fire.

Therefore, it *was given to Nero sitting upon a red horse*, upon the Roman empire, *to take peace from the earth and that they should kill one another*, because of the people that he also killed among the Romans. Accordingly, fleeing from the people and the senate, he killed himself with his own hand. Therefore, *there was given unto him a great sword*, since it was given to him by divine permission to kill the great apostles and to stir up the first great persecution against believers.

THE THIRD SEAL.

The Just Judgment of God.

6.5–6. In the place where it says, *And when he had opened the third seal*, he indicates beforehand the just judgment of God in the punishment of the Jews, somewhat silenced by the persecution of the Christians. For Vespasian and Titus were sent by Nero against the rebelling Jews. Af-

ter Nero's death, Vitellius, Otho, and Galba reigned for a limited time, and afterward Vespasian was elected emperor by the soldiers stationed in Judea. When he left for Rome, he left it to his son Titus to procure the siege of Jerusalem, who took Jerusalem in the second year of the reign of his father.

Therefore the *black horse* represents the kingdom of the Romans under Vespasian and Titus, either because of their animosity, since the color black is a sign of animosity in a horse, or because in that time the Roman empire had blackened and exterminated Judea. Therefore *he who was sitting* as emperor at that time, namely Vespasian and Titus, has *a pair of balances in his hand*, that is, divine justice and equity. Concerning the first scale [i.e. justice], blame was attached to the Jews since they had waged war against Jesus Christ by crucifying him and by persecuting and killing his disciples. Concerning the other scale [i.e. equity], their punishment was merited. Accordingly, Vespasian and Titus were sent by God in order to punish the Jews according to the balance of justice.

And then a voice was heard saying, *A measure of wheat for a penny and three measures of barley for a penny*. This corresponds to when the Jews, for thirty pieces of silver, had sold Jesus Christ, who called himself wheat and a grain of wheat (John 12:24). Also, as Josephus wrote, Titus sold eleven hundred thousand Jews by giving thirty for a penny.⁴⁹ And the Jewish nobles are called *wheat* here, and the ignoble are called *barley*, and five Jews are able to be understood for one measure. Therefore, it says *three measures* because Titus sold ten of the more noble for a penny; however, he sold *three measures of barley*, that is, thirty of the less noble for another penny. And so five Jews are rightly put for one measure, because they have five books of the law to measure themselves, and by which they ought to measure themselves. Against this law, they killed the Lord and His disciples.

And there follows, *Do not harm the wine and oil*, because although Titus literally overturned Judea and Jerusalem, he harmed no Christian. For, Eusebius related in his third book that when the siege was nearing, the church that had been gathered in Jerusalem received an oracle from God. They were ordered to leave and to travel across the Jordan to a certain town by the name of Pella.⁵⁰ Therefore, the Christians who fled into Pella are understood as *the wine and oil* because they were unharmed. For they were full of the wine of charity and the oil of piety.

FOURTH SEAL.

The Edict of the Second Persecution.

6.7–8. In that place where it says, *And when he had opened the fourth seal*, he symbolizes prophetically, and indicates beforehand again, an edict of a second persecution, promulgated by Domitian. And so Domitian followed Titus, his brother.⁵¹ Titus, lifted up in the height of pride, talked boastfully about himself because neither his father nor his brother had taken Jerusalem, but the city had been taken by his industry and labor.

He [Domitian] led a very defiled and evil life. He immersed the apostle John in a caldron of boiling oil, sent him into exile on the island of Patmos, and incited persecution through the whole world against the Christians. Therefore, the Roman empire in the time of Domitian is called a *pale horse*, either because of envy, since Domitian also envied the glory of his father and brother, Vespasian and Titus, or because of his vileness, since just as the color pale is vile, so Domitian was vile in life.

And there follows, that since he sat upon a horse, *the name of it was Death, and Hell followed him*. For, Domitian was literally condemned by the senate, and was killed in his palace. Nevertheless, *power was given to him over the four parts⁵² of the earth* against Christians, *to kill with four types of tortures, namely, with famine, with the sword, with death*, through which is inferred suffocation or burning, and *with the beasts of the earth* (Rev. 6:8). For, the martyrs were exposed to beasts and afflicted with the other kinds of aforementioned tortures.

It should also be known that in the opening of the four seals, it is read that the four aforementioned animals had said, *Come and see!* (Rev. 6:1). For, these four openings are spoken about in the four gospels. For, in the Gospel of Mark the spread of the gospel is spoken about in the passage, *Going into the whole world, preach the gospel to every creature. And going forth, they preached* (Mark 16:15). And, therefore, the first animal, which is Mark, speaks in the opening of the first seal, saying, *Come and see!* Indeed, in the Gospel of Matthew much is expressed about the persecution of the church, where it is said, *Then they will hand you over to tribulation, and they will kill you* (Matt. 24:9). Therefore, the second animal, obviously Matthew, speaks in the opening of the second seal. Indeed, in the opening of the third seal the third animal, namely Luke, speaks, since he speaks about the destruction of Jerusalem through Titus

and Vespasian and about the weeping of the Lord over the city, saying, *If you had known, even you* (Luke 19:42). Indeed, in the opening of the fourth seal the fourth animal, namely John, speaks. He writes about the greatest tribulation which believers were going to have in the world, which Domitian, second after Nero,⁵³ waged. Accordingly, he says, *In the world you will have tribulation, but in me peace* (John 16:33; cf. 14:27).

THE FIFTH SEAL.

Later Persecutions.

6.9–11. In the place where it says, *And when he had opened the fifth seal*, John foretold the vastness of later persecution. For, it should be known that after Nero and Domitian, who waged the first two persecutions against the Christians, Trajan mounted a third, Marcus Antonius a fourth, Severus a fifth, Maximus, who is also called Maximinus, a sixth, Decius a seventh, Valerian an eighth, and Aurelian a ninth. One may say that there were many emperors in between these, under whom also Christians were martyred. Nevertheless, these are said to have waged persecutions, because edicts against the Christians were renewed. However, some did not renew them, but if any Christians were killed in their times, it was done on the basis of their predecessors' edicts, which they had not renewed.

Therefore, in the times of those emperors, the churches and altars were not safe, but Christians celebrated and prayed in underground tombs. Therefore, because of the length of the persecution, believers wondered about divine justice, and cried out praying for vindication from the true God. And this is what John predicts here, *We saw under the altar the souls of those killed*. And what they expected was given in answer to them: *Until the number of martyrs should be fulfilled*.⁵⁴ And if it should be asked how it is said that souls are under the altar, it can be understood by reason of the holy bodies of the martyrs who were buried in tombs. In these tombs also altars were erected, since we have read that Masses were celebrated in the tombs of the martyrs.

THE SIXTH SEAL.

The Tenth Persecution.

6.12–17. In the place where it says, *And I beheld, when he had opened*, he also describes the magnitude of the last persecution. For, we have read that Diocletian waged the tenth persecution with his colleague Maximian, which also Galerius Maximus augmented, continued, and consummated.

However, this persecution was the greatest and most excessive, since Maximian began to destroy the churches in the east, and Diocletian [the churches] in the west, so that there was not a place on earth in which there was not persecution. It was also very intense, for they commanded that the churches be burned down and that the divine scriptures be set on fire and burned. And we have read that within a space of thirty days, seventeen thousand people, indiscriminate of their gender, were crowned with martyrdom throughout the various provinces. Even Pope Marcellinus succumbed to sacrificing; and afterward repenting of this deed, was beheaded by Diocletian.⁵⁵ And the Roman episcopacy ceased for three years and six months on account of the cruelty of this persecution. It was also the gravest persecution due to its length, since the burnings of the churches, the proscriptions of the innocent, and the slaughter of the martyrs went on incessantly for ten continuous years.

Therefore, this cruelty is foretold⁵⁶ by John in the opening of the sixth seal when it is said that *there was a great earthquake*. This is the commotion of the people from the east to the west. *And the sun*, Christ, *became black* and vile as sackcloth of hair in the opinion and reputation of everyone. *And the whole moon*, namely the church, *became as blood* due to the slaughter of the martyrs. *And the stars*, perfect men, so much higher than others, *fell from the heaven* of perfection, *just as a fig tree casts off her figs when shaken by a great wind*. For, at that time the wind of persecution was very great and very violent. *And heaven departed like a scroll rolled together*, since at that time the books of the divine writings were burned. *And every mountain and island were moved from their places*, since the church buildings in the desert places, in the mountains, in swampy places, and on islands—in short, those that were hidden everywhere—were moved and destroyed. And at that time there were among the number of believers in the various parts of the world, some *kings*, some *princes*, some

tribunes and nobles, some rich and strong, some servants, and some freedmen. Therefore, all tried to hide themselves in the rocks so that they might escape the persecution. And everyone wondered about the wrath of God and of the Lamb, which believers seemed to be experiencing through this, and [concluded] that God and the Lamb were permitting this persecution to be waged against them for such a long time.

THE SEVENTH SEAL.

The Peace of Religion.

7.1–3. In the place where it says, *After these things I saw four angels*, where the seventh chapter begins, John foretells the end and termination of the whole persecution, the peace of the Christian religion, and the time of tranquility.

First, he introduces the perverse attempt of four tyrants. For, as we have read, after Diocletian and Maximian laid aside their imperial positions in one day, Galerius and Constantius were made emperors.⁵⁷ And Galerius instituted two Caesars, one in Italy by the name of Severus, and the other in the East by the name of Maximian. But in the city of Rome, Maxentius, the son of Maximian, was made emperor.

But Constantius and Helen bore Constantine the Great, who was made emperor after the death of his father, and he assumed the position jointly with the emperor Licinius, who one may grant was at first peaceful toward the Christians,⁵⁸ but afterward became a persecutor.

Therefore, the four angels of Satan, messengers and ministers of persecution, were Maximian in the East, Severus in Italy, Maxentius in Rome, and Licinius in Egypt and Alexandria. And thus they stood upon the four corners of the earth, as John says, and they held the winds, that they should not blow on the earth, because after Diocletian and Maximian, believing teachers could not preach on the earth, nor in the sea, nor on any tree, that is, to any believers.

Then he introduces the triumph of the liberator. For we have read of Constantine, that first at Marseilles he beheaded the colleague of Diocletian, Maximian, who again aspired for control of the empire. Then, marching on Rome against Maxentius and solicitous about war, he had a vision from heaven that he should conquer in the sign of the cross. And with the sign of the cross shown to him, it was said to him through

angels, "Constantine, in this [sign], you will conquer!" And, therefore, he made the sign of the cross on his forehead and put it on his military banners. And having been strengthened for war against Maxentius, he triumphed. And when he came in triumph to Rome, the senate erected an image in his honor, and ordered that a banner, with the cross of the Lord on it, to be put to the right of his image, and under it to be written, "This is the sign of the invincible living God." Therefore, this Constantine is the other angel ascending from the east, because he went to Rome through revelation and divine or angelic inspiration, having the seal of the living God. And he cried out against those four angels who were ministers of nefarious persecution, about whom was spoken. Indeed, he cried out, striking fear and waging war so that they would not harm the earth, or the sea, or the trees, that is, any Christian, until all were sealed on their foreheads through the free reception of baptism. For, he passed an edict that every person throughout the whole Roman world was free to be baptized and signed with the cross, and that churches were able to be built, and everywhere images of the crucifix could be depicted on them. Also, he too was baptized and sealed publicly.

Then he [John] put the number of those sealed, that is, the number of the children of Israel, up to the place where it says, *They shouted with a loud voice saying* (Rev. 7:10). For, that number signifies the multitude of the faithful, who believed from all of the tribes of Israel and were baptized. [He put this number] not so much [to indicate the exact number of the] many who believed, but because the number carries a mystery and is a number of completion.

7.9–10. Then, in the place where it says, *After these things I saw*, he puts an innumerable gathering, namely, of those who believed from the Gentiles. After this, in the place where it says, *They shouted with a loud voice saying*, he foretells the free worship of the liberated believers, which from then on they offered to the divinity. For, churches were built and praises were given to God and to the Lamb through angels, that is, through bishops and priests throughout the whole world.

7.13–17. Lastly, in the place where it says, *And one of the elders answered*, he puts forth a figure and a type of the whole aforementioned vision, showing that the whole multitude, about which already has been spoken, signified believers and Christians, who from then on were free to serve Christ throughout the whole world without any persecution from

the pagans. And, therefore, he says that *the sun will not shine upon them nor any heat of persecution, and there will be no tears in their eyes.*

THE SEVENTH SEAL.

The Persecution of Julian the Apostate.

8.1. Eighth and lastly, John foretells a very brief residue of persecution. For, we have read that Constantine's sons—Constantius, Constantine [II], and Constans—succeeded the most Christian emperor, Constantine.⁵⁹ And Constantius favored the Arians. And Constantine II called Julian the Apostate to the office of emperor, who turned from Christianity to paganism, and persecuted the church. And he *brought about in it silence* from divine worship. But since he only ruled for a year and eight months because he was killed in the war against the Persians, his persecution is compared to *half an hour.*