



Remains of a mosaic from an excavated house in Thessalonica. The full image originally depicted a four-horse chariot race and was originally on the floor of a dining room (a *triklinion*).

Above the horses are two victory wreaths with inscribed "Pythia" (the games in which the chariot had won). The names of two horse games are inscribed above: Orma and Synoris.

Scholars believe the lower part of the image (which is no longer visible) likely depicted participants in a *synoris* (two-horse chariot race). The image dates A.D. 260–300.

HORSES

THEIR USE IN THE FIRST CENTURY



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THE POWER OUTPUT of an engine or vehicle is often rated in units of “horse-power.” Referring to a horse to describe the working ability of modern machinery may seem out of place. The reference, though, serves as a present-day reminder that the domestication and use of horses hold a prominent part in much of humanity’s history and development. The apostle James offered a reminder of this role in his comment: “when we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we also guide the whole animal” (James 3:3).¹

Human domestication and use of horses began long before the days of the writings of the apostle James and are older than the earliest biblical reference of Genesis 47:17, which tells of the Egyptians trading their horses for food during a severe famine. Exactly when and which society first used horses remains unclear. Cave drawings of horses dating thousands of years before the Egyptians are well documented among ancient people groups in

Europe, though these drawings are probably of wild horses rather than breeds from early biblical societies such as Mesopotamia, Canaan and Egypt.² Though brief, this first biblical reference suggests the horse was already an integral part of the everyday life of society, probably used for both general transportation and warfare.³

Of these two uses, general transportation and warfare, people most prized the horse in biblical times for its abilities in battle. People living in what is now southern Iran probably first introduced the domesticated horse to the region. The animal’s speed and maneuverability made it an ideal choice for armies; the addition of the chariot made for a fearsome combination in battle.⁴ Biblical references to the horse as an expression of a nation’s military power are numerous. The two Hebrew words most often translated “horse” are *sus* and *parash*, and refer respectively to horses pulling chariots or serving as cavalry mounts.⁵ Often, horses and chariots symbolized the military might and power of a nation’s leader (Ex. 14:9) or of an entire nation (2 Kings 7:6; Jer. 8:16). This symbolic connection between nations and horses used in war also could refer to the defeat or demise of those nations. To defeat the horses of

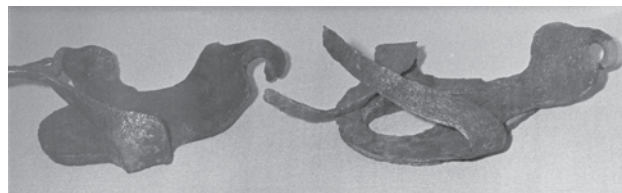
Above: Painted wooden toy horse with wheels; dates to the Roman period.

LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: James 3



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/15/27)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (569/24)

Left: Terra-cotta plaque showing a lion hunter on a horse. The horseman is wearing scale or lamellar armor and a coal-skuttle helmet. The armor shows that the man was a type of warrior known as a cata-

phract. Depicting a hunter in this type armor was unusual. Dated 3rd–1st centuries B.C.; Mesopotamian.

Above: Two iron hipposandals, dated 1st–4th centuries A.D. Hipposandals

were a form of temporary shoe that could be lashed to the hoof for use on metaled roads and simply removed when necessary. Nailed horse shoes were known but rarely used by the Romans in Britain.

an army was to defeat that army's king or nation, as typified in Israel's victorious song over Egypt: "I will sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; He has thrown the horse and its rider into the sea.... The LORD is a warrior; Yahweh is His name. He threw Pharaoh's chariots and his army into the sea" (Ex. 15:1,3-4).

Since the horse came to symbolize a nation's military, Scriptures refer to the horse and chariot in warning of the temptation to seek peace and safety through alliances and treaties with nations rather than trust in God (Ps. 20:7; Isa. 31:1). Perhaps this is why earlier Moses warned future kings of Israel not to "acquire many horses...or send the people back to Egypt to acquire many horses, for the LORD has told you, 'You are never to go back that way again'" (Deut. 17:16). King David and his son, Solomon, later chose to ignore this commandment, acquiring great numbers of horses in order to make war as other nations were doing.⁶ Solomon alone "accumulated 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen" (1 Kings 10:26), and imported horses "from Egypt and Kue" (v. 28).

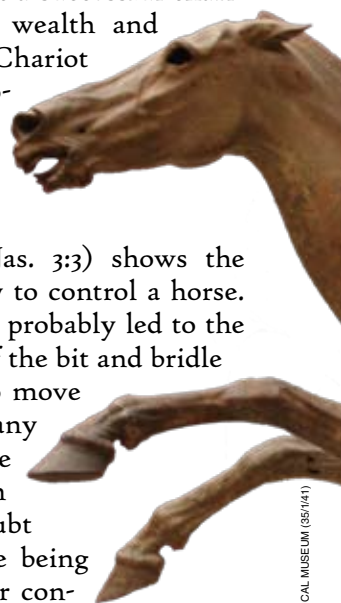
Horse ownership was a privilege enjoyed mainly by people of royalty and nobility (1 Kings 1:5; Esth. 6:9-11; 8:10; Ezek. 23:23) or as a military resource. The donkey and mule, however, were the animals of choice for working and riding among both the nobility and common folk.⁷ Archaeological finds tend to reinforce this conclusion, as horses were often buried alongside either warriors or persons of nobility.⁸

In the first century, the Romans made unique contributions to the use of horses for the military and for pleasure. They improved the way horses were shod by attaching a piece of metal to the horse's hoof with leather straps, making the horse more suitable for riding and for battle.⁹ As an offshoot of their use in the Roman army, horse and

chariot racing became a sport in which the common person could participate. The sport was so popular in Roman society that a successful charioteer could earn substantial wealth and become a hero to his fans. Chariot racing "became the major professional entertainment in Roman times," and the *circus maximus* in Rome seated up to 255,000 spectators.¹⁰

The apostle's reference (Jas. 3:3) shows the importance of a rider's ability to control a horse. The use of the horse in battle probably led to the invention and development of the bit and bridle as riders needed to be able to move their mounts quickly. Many works of art from this time depict horses in battle with their mouths open, no doubt struggling with the bit while being ridden harshly.¹¹ The need for control also led to refinements in the saddle, which not only helped a cavalry rider stay on his horse, but provided a stable platform from which he could shoot a bow or fend off an attacker.¹² Given the Roman army's reputation and the popularity of chariot racing, the topic of controlling a horse lent itself naturally as an illustration to support the apostle's thought. Centuries earlier, the psalmist used this same imagery to emphasize the virtues of a life lived under proper control (Ps. 32:9).

Given the horse's primary use as an instrument of war, the Bible utilizes the horse to communicate a religious truth. As mentioned earlier, the horse can symbolize misplaced trust and a sense of strength in a worldly power as opposed to trust in God's ability to save or deliver. The image of a rider controlling a horse with the whip (Prov. 26:3) or of a horse charging headlong into battle (Jer. 8:6) gives practical insight to the Scripture's warnings about refusing the



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/ NY

Above: Dated 27 B.C.–A.D. 68, terra-cotta plaque depicts the mythological King Oinomaos mounting the chariot driven by Myrtilos, his charioteer. The plaque relates to the story of the hero Pelops winning the hand of Hippodamaia, the daughter of King Oinomaos. Pelops won the race by bribing the king's charioteer. The plaque offers details of a racing chariot in the first centuries B.C. to A.D.

Left: View of hippodrome (arena for horse racing) track at Tyre. Over a quar-

ter of a mile in length, this was one of the largest known hippodromes in the Roman Empire. The stands held about 20,000 spectators.

Inset left: Bronze statue depicting a young jockey. The statue was retrieved in pieces from the shipwreck off Cape Artemision in Euboea. The young jockey of the galloping horse will have held the reins in his left hand and a whip in his right. The boy's expression indicates both agony and passion. Dated 140 B.C.

Lord's guidance and living recklessly.

Biblically, the appearance of armies on horseback often implied a sure judgment (Jer. 50:37,42; Ezek. 26:10; Hab. 1:8). Likewise, the Book of Revelation foretells of God's judgment using the imagery of charging horses fitted for battle (Rev. 9:7-19; 19:14). The horse, often prized as a tool of war, a symbol of royalty, and an expression of human pride, symbolically will be devoured in testimony to the ultimate sovereignty of God. John, writing from Patmos foretold: "Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he cried out in a loud voice, saying to all the birds flying in mid-heaven, 'Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of commanders, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of their riders, and the flesh of everyone, both free and

slave, small and great'" (Rev. 19:17-18). **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
2. Roy Pinney, *The Animals in the Bible: The Identity and Natural History of All the Animals Mentioned in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1964), 90-91.
3. Oded Borowski, *Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1998), 99.
4. *Ibid.*, 100.
5. Pinney, 90.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Borowski, 111.
8. Bernadette Arnaud, "Equus on Ice," *Archaeology* [online], January/February 2000 [cited 6 January 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.archaeology.org/.
9. Borowski, 101.
10. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 94.
11. Andy Beck, "Bitless, Treeless and Barefoot," *Horsetalk* [online, cited 6 January 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.horsetalk.co.nz.
12. *Ibid.*

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