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Revelation 9:16 Two Hundred Million Horses?



By Dan Maines

Revelation 9:16

The number of the armies of the horsemen was two hundred million. I heard the number of them.

† This verse is often used by futurists to claim that Revelation cannot be fulfilled in the first century, since no literal army of 200 million ever marched in history. But this assumes John's vision should be read as a newspaper report rather than as apocalyptic imagery. The book of Revelation is written in symbolic, prophetic language, just as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah employed. John "heard the number of them,"

emphasizing the visionary and symbolic nature of the army. It is not meant to be taken as a census report but as a symbol of overwhelming judgment.

† For starters there never was and never will be two hundred million horsemen, let alone two hundred million horses. The impossibility of a literal reading forces us to see the symbolic nature of the vision. The number of locust soldiers in Revelation 9:16 is not literal, just as a similarly over inflated figure is found in the Apocalypse of Daniel 2:3-4 and in Pseudo-Philo 31:2, which could not have been literal. The prophetic style often employs exaggerated numbers to drive home the scope of judgment.

† If the army of the sixth trumpet is Titus' army at the siege of Jerusalem, then what about verse 16: "The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million"? Revelation 9:16 most literally reads, "And the number of the armies of the cavalry [was] twice ten thousand ten thousands." To reach the figure "two hundred million," translators of the NIV multiplied 20,000 by 10,000. But "two hundred million" is an inconceivable and irrational number for any army in history. The phrase "twice ten thousand ten thousands" is far better understood as a symbolic way of describing a countless multitude, an overwhelming force beyond human reckoning. It is not meant to be an arithmetic equation but a prophetic picture.

† The book of Revelation consistently uses symbolic numbers to express spiritual truths. For example, the 144,000 in Revelation 7 and 14 is not a literal census of saved Israelites but a symbolic representation of the complete covenant people, twelve times twelve, multiplied by a thousand for fullness. Likewise, the 1,600 stadia in Revelation 14:20, a measurement of blood flowing from the winepress of judgment, is not to be taken as a literal river of blood stretching hundreds of miles, but as a symbolic picture of total devastation. In the same way, "twice ten thousand ten thousands" in Revelation 9:16 conveys

the vastness of the army without requiring a literal count of soldiers or horses.

† This same method of symbolic numbers is found in Daniel, which provides the background for Revelation. Daniel 9 speaks of seventy weeks that are "decreed for your people and your holy city" (Daniel 9:24). The seventy weeks are not literal seven-day weeks but a symbolic framework of seventy sevens, leading to the coming of Messiah and the destruction of the city and sanctuary. This shows that prophetic numbers were never intended to be read in a strict arithmetic sense but as divinely structured symbols pointing to covenantal fulfillment. Revelation builds on this same tradition, employing numbers not as mathematical totals but as theological markers.

† Daniel 7 also presents a vision of a beast with ten horns, which represent kings or kingdoms (Daniel 7:24). Revelation takes this very imagery and applies it again in Revelation 13 and 17, where the beast also has ten horns, explained as ten kings who would rise and give their authority to the beast. Just as no one expects to literally see a monster with ten horns walking the earth, the vision communicates spiritual and political realities through symbolic numbers. Revelation 9:16 must be read the same way: its numerical imagery is not literal arithmetic but symbolic language consistent with the prophetic style inherited from Daniel.

† Zechariah also provides a crucial background. In Zechariah 1:8-11 and Zechariah 6:1-8, the prophet sees visions of horsemen and chariots sent out over the earth. These horses are not literal armies but symbolic agents of God's judgment and activity in the nations. Revelation takes this same imagery and expands it with the four horsemen in Revelation 6, and later the countless cavalry in Revelation 9. John is not describing actual horse armies that could be numbered but is following the same prophetic tradition: horses as symbols of divine judgment, multiplied here to an immeasurable degree to stress the

completeness of the coming destruction.

† Ezekiel adds even more context with his prophecy of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38-39. There God gathers together an immense host from the nations to come against His people, described in overwhelming and exaggerated military terms. The language of shields, bucklers, swords, horses, and a vast army covers the land like a cloud. This is not a literal census of soldiers but a prophetic image of a terrifying and unstoppable invasion used to show God's power in judgment. Revelation later reuses this same Gog and Magog imagery in Revelation 20 to speak of Satan's final rebellion. The style is consistent: Ezekiel's apocalyptic war language and John's visions both use vast numbers and imagery to describe divine judgment, not to record military logistics.

† In the ancient world, numbers were used to express greatness, immensity, or divine completeness. Psalm 68:17 says, "The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands; The Lord is among them as at Sinai." No one supposes the psalmist counted literal chariots. Instead, the text communicates the immeasurable power of God's armies. In the same way, Revelation 9:16 presents a vision of an innumerable host, a symbol of judgment so vast that John could only record the number as it was told to him.

† Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, records the massive scale of Rome's campaigns against Judea. In "Wars of the Jews" (Book 6.9.3), he describes how the Roman legions, auxiliaries, and allied forces, along with countless mercenaries and noncombatants, swelled into vast multitudes surrounding Jerusalem. While Rome's actual armies numbered in the hundreds of thousands, not millions, John's symbolic vision expressed the totality of judgment coming upon the land. The language magnifies the horror to show that the destruction was beyond human escape or resistance.

† Tacitus, another first century historian, likewise testifies that the Roman forces gathered against Jerusalem were immense: "Thus the whole of the east was stirred up and sent its strength into that war" (Histories 5.1). This aligns perfectly with John's vision: not a literal headcount of 200 million soldiers and horses, but a prophetic picture of the full might of Rome and her allies unleashed on apostate Jerusalem.

† The purpose of this number is to highlight the certainty and completeness of judgment. Revelation is not telling us to expect a physical army of 200 million horsemen, or 200 million horses, but warning us that when God's wrath was poured out on Jerusalem, no force on earth could stand against it. This was fulfilled in AD 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed, just as Jesus foretold in Matthew 24:34, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

How it applies today: Revelation 9:16 reminds us not to be distracted by inflated literal numbers or futurist speculation. The vision shows that when God decrees judgment, it is unstoppable, vast, and overwhelming. Today we should see this as a call to trust in Christ, who delivers His people from wrath. We are not waiting for an army of 200 million horsemen to rise in our time. We are called to live in the New Covenant reality, confident that the old order has passed, the New Jerusalem has come, and God's kingdom is established among His people.

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

Source Index

† Josephus, Wars of the Jews Book 6.9.3 (Project Gutenberg, CCEL)

† Tacitus, Histories 5.1 (Perseus Digital Library, LacusCurtius)

† Apocalypse of Daniel 2:3-4

† Pseudo-Philo 31:2

† Daniel 7:24; Daniel 9:24-27

† Zechariah 1:8-11; Zechariah 6:1-8

† Ezekiel 38-39; Revelation 20

† Revelation 6; Revelation 7; Revelation 13; Revelation 14:20;
Revelation 17

† Psalm 68:17; Matthew 24:34

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