

The Scroll

The vision that follows is bracketed by the Lamb, it is an *inclusio* -- the slain Lamb appears in Rev 5.6 and the wrath of the Lamb is manifested in Rev 6.16. **This vision begins and ends with the Lamb.** Although Lamb imagery is also found in the following visions they introduce new topics i.e., “after these things” (Rev 7.1). Therefore the Lamb is first introduced into the throne room in Rev 5.6 and we note that the Lamb is characterised as a “slain Lamb” and the “Lamb that was slain” (Rev.5.12). At some stage this Lamb was dead but is dead no longer and carries the wounds of his overcoming. Moreover, this Lamb is able to save those who have washed their robes in his blood (Rev 7.14) they also overcome through the blood of the Lamb (Rev 12.11), this Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13.8),¹ the saints follow the Lamb wherever he goes (Rev 14.4), and they sing the Song of the Lamb (and Moses) in Rev 15.3, the Lamb overcomes his enemies (Rev 17.14), invites his followers to a marriage supper (Rev 19.9) and the Lamb becomes the temple of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21.22).

The Lamb is obviously Jesus Christ who was pointed out as such by the Baptist; “Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world” (John 1.29), Jesus encourages others to follow him (John 1.43) and Revelation shows that the faithful do follow him everywhere (even into death).

This Lamb is therefore the **Passover Lamb** slain at the Passover and subsequently resurrected. The Exodus “from Egypt” is celebrated in the Song of Moses and the Lamb (Rev 15.3). The visions that follow in Rev 5 and 6 are therefore **related to the Passover.** The vision commences at the foot of the cross and ends with the fall of Masada **42 years later the day after Passover** when 960 men, women and children committed suicide. Josephus records this;

This calamitous slaughter was made on the fifteenth day of the month Xanthicus [Nisan].²

From CE 31 (crucifixion) to the fall of Masada in CE 73 is exactly **42 years to the day.** This means that each seal is 7 years and the 6 seals cover a period of 42 years. Therefore the Passover forms the **beginning and end of this period.**

This can be schematically represented as follows:

First Seal	Second Seal	Third Seal	Fourth Seals	Fifth Seal	Sixth Seal	
7 years	7 years	7 years	7 years	7 years	7 years	= 42 years
Starts at Passover					Ends at Passover	
Lamb Slain (Rev 5.6)					Wrath Of the Lamb (Rev 6.16)	

The Apocalypse is structured around the **Jewish Festal Calendar** --- Seals (Passover), Trumpets (Atonement) with allusions to minor feasts such as Hanukkah and Purim etc. A conceptual framework of three-and-one-half years of feasts can be established.³ Despite prolific Temple imagery/liturgy occurring in the Apocalypse the impact has been marginal on interpretive approaches and the topos is barely noted in commentaries.

Recently this neglect has been addressed (1997/1999) by studies from Brigg⁴ and Spatafora(s),⁵ who investigate the use of Temple imagery in apocryphal and OT sources and the subsequent development of the Temple theme in the Apocalypse. The common feature shared by these recent works is recognition of the importance of **temple imagery/liturgy** in the Apocalypse, particularly the importance of the Day of Atonement, a feature also noted by H. A. Whittaker.⁶

The Challenge to open the scroll

^{KJV} **Revelation 5:1** And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals.

The scroll is held in the hand of the “one who sits on the throne” which is a circumlocution for God. This is the same terminology as was employed in Rev 4.2 and we noted there the abstract nature of the description referring to “one on the throne” which has a duality of function indicating both the divine presence and the personification of the covenant. At this point the covenant is about to achieve a tangible form in the person of Christ and when this happens the Lamb will be seen “in the midst of the throne” (Rev 5.6). The outworking of the covenant invested in the “one who sits on the throne” (Yahweh) is realized by Christ who “took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne” (Rev 5.7). At this juncture we have “one sitting on the throne” (Yahweh) and the Lamb standing in the midst of the throne (Rev 5.6). This is the vision that David saw; “The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool” (Ps. 110.1).

John introduces the vision with the words, “I saw”, a formula he uses 33 times to emphasise his personal involvement as an “eyewitness”. This book (*biblion*) is a scroll written on both sides and sealed with seven seals. It is found in the right hand of God himself, denoting the importance of the scroll, and the privilege associated with receiving it. In similar fashion the strong (mighty) angel of 10.9 has a small book (*bibliaridion*) in his hand. However, whereas that ‘little book’ was open (10.8), this one is sealed. Here, even the same strong angel (5.2) cannot open the scroll, only issue a challenge.

The scroll was written on both sides, an unusual, but not unheard of practice in antiquity. John no doubt intends to draw our attention to Ezek.2.10, “written within and without: and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe”. Like Ezekiel’s scroll, this one contained judgements on the house of Israel. The scroll of Zech.5.3 was also written on both sides – one side containing a curse against those who steal, the other side against those who swear falsely (cf. Rev 9.21). Zechariah’s scroll flew into the house and destroyed it. This was realized in 70 CE with the destruction of the temple. A copy of the Apocalypse scroll was probably placed in the temple by a faithful priest.

No one worthy

^{KJV} **Revelation 5:2-4** And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? ³ And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. ⁴ And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.

A challenge is now issued; in principle it is open to all God's creatures. "Worthy" does not mean "able" but rather "qualified", in the sense of having the proper qualifications to perform this special task. The logical sequence of events is reversed in the above quote, "...to open the book, and to lose the seals". Obviously the book cannot be opened until the seals are loosed. This is an example of a figure of speech known as *hysteron-proteron* which occurs several times. (Rev 3.3, 17; 5.4, 5; 6.4; 10.4, 9; 20.4-5, 12-13; 22.14).

This comprehensive way of referring to each of the three major zones of the cosmos is a way of saying "nowhere in the universe". The same three divisions of the cosmos are mentioned in the context of the Christ hymn Phil.2.10, "every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth".

The principalities and powers of heaven (angels) could not open it, for they were immortal beings in possession of divine nature. No one on earth could open it nor under the earth,⁷ not because they were dead (they could be raised), but because they were human. Only Christ qualified to open it, for he possessed both divine and human nature. But, even though he was qualified to open it, he still had to **win the right to open it**.

When no one in creation is able to open the scroll John weeps: John weeps tears on behalf of all the prophets and saints. Not because he is thwarted of seeing into the future; His frustration goes deeper than that. Until the scroll is opened God's purposes remain, not merely unknown, but unaccomplished.

John has been nurtured on the messianic hope of the Old Testament, which promised that one day God would assume His kingly power and reign openly on earth, punishing the wicked and redressing the wrongs of the oppressed. Especially in persecution God's people had longed for that day to bring an end to their sufferings, and also to vindicate their faith. For there is a limit to the capacity of faith to survive in the face of hostile fact: unless in the end right obviously triumphs over wrong, faith in a just God is utter illusion. God must "vindicate his chosen who cry out to him day and night" (Lk.18.7). John weeps with disappointment because the hope of God's action appears to be indefinitely postponed for lack of an agent through whom God may act.

To read the book neither look thereon - this is another *hysteron-proteron*. One must first look upon the scroll in order to read it. John himself saw the scroll and the seven seals on the outside, the purpose for opening the scroll is not that it can be read but so that the eschatological events can begin to take place. The reason John emphasises the reading of the scroll is to draw us to Isa.29.11-14:

And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned. Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.

Isaiah highlights man's failure to redeem himself, those who thought themselves qualified (the readers i.e., priests, scribes) could not open the scroll and the common people admitted they were not qualified (non-readers). The cross was a work of foolishness to the world, but as the apostle says, "the foolishness of God is wiser than men". (1 Cor.1.25)

It must be recognised, that in this vision John is transported **to the past**, he sees the situation from the viewpoint of the Old Testament prophets and saints. The very next verses take him to the foot of the cross and to the enthronement of the resurrected Lamb.

The implications of the vision

The vision of the scroll has profound theological implications. Firstly, it demonstrates that no one with divine nature (even God himself) was able to open the scroll. This means that God was inhibited from setting “end time” events in motion until the right candidate appeared on the scene.

Secondly, no human candidate was suitable to open the scroll. Even if Moses was resurrected he could not have opened the scroll. It required a party that was in possession of human and divine nature – an intercessor between both parties. A “new creation” was necessary. But more than this, that “new creation” was required to destroy sin completely and voluntarily submit to death the nature that is in fundamental opposition to God. Thus a new relationship is established between God and Man and a new “federal head” can now represent mankind. Humanity has now been offered a choice – to remain in Adam or be joined to God in Christ. This is the basis of atonement theology and it carries no ideas of “penal substitution” or the “Trinity”.

Thirdly, the vision must have commenced at the Passover –crucifixion/resurrection event in 31 CE not in 96 CE (66 years later). John is transported back in time to a point just before the Passover where no one can be found it is therefore impossible and inconsistent to contemplate this vision starting at any other time in history than the Passover crucifixion. The vision is therefore retrospective from John’s viewpoint.

The book of life?

Both Harry Whittaker and Peter Watkins interpret the scroll as the “book of life” mentioned in Rev 22.19 but the arguments against this theory are overwhelming. As each of the seven seals is broken, events happen; and the whole process of the breaking of the seals, with accompanying events, is meaningless unless it is somehow related to the contents of the book. By opening the scroll the Lamb does not merely disclose the contents, but puts them into operation.

Beale says, “The idea of sealing and opening books in connection with end-time happenings is found in the OT only in Daniel 12 and 7”(Beale, 339). Beale continues later in his commentary making the same point. “Most futurist commentators would disagree with my argument thus far, which has been that Revelation 5 portrays a vision of inaugurated fulfilment of OT prophecy. The metaphor of seals can be found outside Daniel elsewhere in the OT and Jewish apocalyptic, but the seals in Rev. 5:1ff come from Dan. 12:4, 9” (Beale, 347).⁸

Beale is certainly correct in his observation “Seal the book, *even* to the time of the end” (Dan 12.4). There can be no doubt that first century Christians expected the return of Christ and the realization of Daniel’s prophecies to occur during their lifetime.⁹

^{KJV} **Revelation 5:5-6** And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof. ⁶ And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.¹⁰

John’s tears are checked by what he now hears and sees. It is always worthwhile to examine closely the connection between what John hears and what he sees, and it is particularly unfortunate that in most editions and translations a paragraph break has been inserted between verses 5 and 6, so that we miss the full impact of the juxtaposition of images: **One of the elders said, ‘...the Lion....has conquered...’ Then I saw a Lamb.** What John hears is couched in the traditional messianic imagery of the Old Testament; what he sees constitutes the most impressive rebirth of images he anywhere achieves.

The Lion of the tribe of Judah is a title with an obviously martial ring, recalling the prophecy that *'the sceptre shall not depart from Judah...and the obedience of the nations shall be his'* (Gen.49.9-10). This prophecy had been adapted by the pharisaic author of the seventeenth psalm of Solomon in his portrayal of the militant Messiah, who would drive out the tyrannical and impious Gentiles and establish the reign of God with Israel as the imperial nation. The words of the elder therefore, encourage John to think that all the hopes and aspirations of the Old Testament are now on the point of fulfilment; and so they are, after being totally transformed by the alchemy of Christ. For John looks for **the Lion of the tribe of Judah** and sees **a Lamb**. We need not waste time searching through the Old Testament and other Jewish literature to find the meaning of this symbol, for John has told us what he means by it. **The Lamb bore the marks of slaughter**, which were explained by the heavenly choir: with his **life-blood** he had **ransomed for God men from every tribe, tongue, people and race**.

The Lamb is the symbol of self-sacrificing redemptive love. By this one stroke of brilliant artistry John has given us the key to all his use of the Old Testament writings (without ever quoting them). Partly because this was the language which came most naturally to him, partly because of the powerful emotive effect of familiar associations, and partly no doubt because his vision had actually taken its form, though not its content, from the permanent furniture of his well stocked mind. But to all this we must add that he believed the Old Testament scriptures to be the oracles of God, and that the same God who had spoken in partial and shadowy ways through the prophets had now spoken fully through his Son.

The Old Testament was indispensable to the understanding of the character and purpose of God, but it must be read in the light of the fuller illumination of Christ. Throughout the welter of old testament images in the chapters that follow, almost without exception the only title for Christ is **the Lamb**, and this title is meant to control and interpret all the rest of the symbolism. It is almost as if John was saying to us in one point after another: 'whenever the old testament says "**Lion**", read "**Lamb**".

Whenever the Old Testament speaks of the victory of the Messiah or the overthrow of the enemies of God, we are to remember that the gospel recognises no other way of achieving these ends than the way of the cross. Jesus Christ was the son of God but also the root of David (see Isa.11:1).

Through his pedigree he was therefore imminently *qualified* to open the seals, but, nevertheless, he still had to *win the right* to open them. This he did by conquering his human nature – **hath prevailed to open** – literally **overcame (conquered) to open**. His followers are also urged to overcome (2.7, 11, 17, 26; 3.5, 12, 21; 21.7), even Jacob, symbol of unreformed fleshly Israel had to overcome (Hos.12.3-5) before he was renamed Israel (God rules).

...in the midst of the throne, and the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders – This is a Hebraism (we say between A and B, Hebrew says between A and between B). Here we have the throne surrounded by the living creatures on the one hand, and the elders on the other. The Lamb stands between these two groups. Initially the Lamb cannot be *‘in the midst of the throne’* seeing that v.7 says, *‘he came and took the scroll’*. Having done this he may well have taken his rightful place on the throne.

I saw a Lamb standing as if it had been slain – The tense of *‘it had been slain’* is perfect, meaning a past action still having effect in the present – appropriate, needless to say, as regards the death of the Saviour. Again we note the retrospective character of certain aspects of John’s vision. The references to “has overcome” and “had been slain”, plus the perfect participle in v.1, *‘opened’*. All these things took place prior to John entering heaven – indeed he could only come into the divine presence because of them. The victorious death of Christ had truly opened a door in heaven permitting access by those with faith – “we have boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the veil...” (Heb.10.19-22, cp.4.14-16)

The description of Messiah as a lamb is first explicitly found in Isa.53.7, “He was led like a lamb to the slaughter”. This was taken up by the Baptist, “Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world” (John 1.29, 36). Yet long before the concept of the suffering was present in the Passover (cp.1 Cor.5.7), and this probably is the main basis for its use here in Revelation. We recall the Passover theme observed in 1.5.

...with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth – This is John’s way of taking us to Zech.3.8-9:

Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, thou, and thy fellows that sit before thee: for they are men wondered at: for, behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH. For behold the stone that I have laid before Joshua; upon one stone shall be seven eyes: behold, I will engrave the graving thereof, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day.

Here Christ is typified by *both* Joshua and the stone. God engraves the stone (virgin birth), for, no tool of man was to be used on the altar (Ex.32.16). The seven eyes are not **on** the stone – they are focused on it, watching it closely. These are the seven spirits, or angels. After the passion these seven become the eyes of Christ. They are the seven spirits before the throne (1:4), they are also the seven stars in his right hand, sent out to care for his seven lampstands (1:20). In chapter 4.5 they are called “the seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God”. The seven spirits are then the heavenly Menorah in the sanctuary, with the seven churches forming their earthly counterpart.

In the Zechariah prophecy Joshua had his filthy garments changed – with Christ this was the clothing upon with immortality. If Joshua was obedient he was promised; “A place of access among these that stand by” (3.7 RV) – in John’s vision this becomes Jesus (Joshua) Christ standing between the elders and the throne. The Horns are a symbol of strength (Deut.33.17, Psa.18.2, 89.17, Lk.1.69) and possibly a reference to the crowns made for Joshua (Zech.6.11). The BRANCH or sprout is also used by John in v.5 and relates to his Davidic descent and therefore his legitimate claim to the throne. “He shall sit and rule upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them (the monarchy and the priesthood) both” (Zech.6.13).

^{KJV} **Revelation 5:7-8** And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four *and* twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.

And he came and took the scroll – The Greek word “took” may also be translated “received”, which is perhaps more suitable to the context. Because Christ had overcome, he, and only he, was now worthy to open the scroll. In giving the scroll to Christ, God is passing all judgement, revelation and the outworking of his purpose into the hands of his Son.

This action is symbolic for the previous verse has shown us the Lamb (immediately after his resurrection) as all-powerful (the horns) and all-knowing (the eyes). By these symbols John undoubtedly invests Christ with the attributes of deity, but he does something more important still: he redefines omnipotence. Omnipotence is not to be understood as the power of unlimited coercion, but as the power of infinite persuasion, the invincible power of self-negating, self-sacrificing love.

...the four living creatures and the twenty four elders fell down before the Lamb – The same obeisance given earlier to God is now rendered to his Son. “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son even as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him” (John 4.22).

...with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints – It is appropriate that the prayers of the saints should be included in the following praise since it chiefly concerns the theme of redemption.

A New Song

^{KJV} **Revelation 5:9-14** And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; ¹⁰ And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth. ¹¹ And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; ¹² Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. ¹³ And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, *be* unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever. ¹⁴ And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four *and* twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth forever and ever.

This new song is probably the same one as “the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb” (15.3). The theme is exodus redemption. It is, as it were a new song set to an old familiar tune. This is the song that the children of Israel sang unto the Lord in Exodus chapter 15, but now it finds its true expression. It is not only the song that is ‘new’ but we have a ‘new name’ (2.17, 3.12), the “new Jerusalem” (3.12, 21.2), the “new heaven and earth” (21.1), and finally, God makes “all things new” (21.5). Psalm 98 begins as follows: “Sing to the Lord a new song; for he hath done marvellous things: His right hand, and his holy arm, hath gotten him the victory”. The song can be described as new for two reasons; first it is addressed to Jesus, and second it includes the Gentiles among the redeemed. Previously it had been Israel alone who constituted the kingdom and priests to God (Exod.19.6).

You are worthy to take the scroll – the same words are used of God himself: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (4.11). The force of the language is in no way diminished when the Lamb is addressed, the words used in 4:11 concerning praise for the Father's physical creation are used here to praise the Son (and so also the Father) for the new spiritual creation.

...you redeemed to God by your blood – The verb translated “redeem” (agorazo), in plain terms signifies purchase (cp., agora, “market place”). Ownership is indicated by “to God”, and the price – “your blood” (cp.1 Cor.6.20). John also applies the language of Dan 7.14, 18 to the redemptive death of Christ, which has “enthroned” Christians as kings and priests. John has overlaid the existing language of Daniel with the ‘kingdom and priest’ language from Exod 9:6 (which he also used in 1.7; 20.6). The reference in Dan 7.9 to thrones that were set in place becomes the 24 thrones on which the heavenly elders sit. (Rev 4.4).

Revelation 5.9-11	Daniel 7
Every tribe, tongue, people, and nation	All peoples, nations, languages [14b]
...and made them a...	...to him was given [14a] The holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom. [18]
....kingdom and priests and they will reign on the earth	Dominion and glory and kingship [14a] His dominion an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away [14] And possess the kingdom forever [18]
The number of angels was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands	Thousand thousands ministered unto Him and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him [10]

The language used in chapter 4 for God, is continued into chapter 5 for his Son. Now an innumerable host of angels join the cherubim and elders in the praise of the Lamb. The fact that seven expressions are used (v.12) no doubt indicates the perfection of the one addressed. Each of the seven is found of Christ elsewhere in the New Testament: power (1 Cor.1.24), riches (2 Cor.8.9), wisdom (1 Cor.1.24), might (Eph.6.10), honour (Heb.2.9), glory (John 1.14) and blessing (Matt.21.9). To bring the anthem of praise to a climax every creature in heaven, on earth and under the earth and in the sea ascribe blessing, honour, glory and might to both Father and Son (v.13). “And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the elders fell down and worshipped.”

End Notes Chapter 5 pages 70-82

¹ An obvious reference to the “Jewish Cosmos”, the Jews slaughtered a Lamb at Passover in order to Exodus from Egypt.

² Flavius Josephus. The Works of Flavius Josephus. Translated by. William Whiston, A.M. Auburn and Buffalo. John E. Beardsley. 1895. (J. BJ 7.9.1) On page 603 of the edition by Kregel Publications (Grand Rapids Michigan, 1981).

³ This is linked to the triennial reading cycle of the Old Testament.....see [Feasts of the Apocalypse](#).

⁴ Robert A. Brigg, Jewish Temple Imagery in the Book of Revelation, (Studies in Biblical Literature, Vol 10: Peter Lang Publishing,1999)

⁵ Spatafora(s) observes that, “All other studies and commentaries appear to analyse the individual recurrences, but they fail to see a relationship between them”. Andrew Spatafora and Andrea Spatafora, From the ‘Temple of God’ to God as the Temple: A Biblical Theological Study of the Temple in the Book of Revelation,(Pontificia Univ. Gregoriana:Italy,1997),7-9

⁶ H.A. Whittaker, Revelation: A Biblical Approach, (Lichfield: Staffs, 1973), 104-5

⁷ Under the earth is the equivalent of Hades (Sheol) or the abyss – see Ezk.32:21

⁸ G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999)

⁹ See, First Century Expectations *CEJBI*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2014 [Access here](#)

¹⁰ For the following paragraphs *ad loc.* George Bradford Caird, The Revelation of Saint John, (Hendrickson Publishers, 1966),73