

Commentary on the Revelation

- I. Prologue, 1:1-20
 - A. The Introduction, vv. 1-3
 - B. The Salutation, vv. 4-8
- II. “The Things Which Are”, 1:9-3:22
 - A. The first vision, 1:9-20
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 - 1. God and the heavenly throne, 4:1-11
 - 2. Jesus and the scroll of judgment, 5:1-14

In chapter 4, God appears enthroned in heaven as the sovereign as well as in the capacity on a judge; chapter 5 explains how God will execute His judgments. It is through His Son, the resurrected and triumphant Christ, that He will accomplish His purposes, both judgment and redemption. Again, as in the previous chapter, John finds Dan. 7 and Ezek. 1-2 as the background of his vision. For example, the idea of sealing and opening a book or scroll is only found in Daniel (7, 12).

A summary at the point of the previous chapters would go something like this: The vision of the glorified judge (1) led to the addresses to the seven churches (2-3). Similarly, the throne-room vision of 4-5 set the context for the extension and vindication of divine judgment, opening of the scroll with its seals, trumpets, and bowls (6-16), which are the means of comforting God’s people who find themselves in adverse threatening circumstance. Evil will not have the final say; righteousness and holiness will prevail through the fulfillment of God’s merciful promises of protection and deliverance, deliverance for us into a world where threats will be not more and where God’s presence will be immeasurably more real than ever imaginable.

A clue to the structure of this chapter is found in the four-fold recurrence of the phrase, “And I saw (v. 1, 2, 6, 11) indicating progressive phases in the vision.

- a. The sealed book, 5:1-4
 - 1) The vision of God, v. 1

The major issue in this verse is the meaning of “the book.” Several things can be observed: First, the function of the book is that it contains evidence, but evidence of what? Second, assuming that Daniel 12: 8-9 implies that the unsealing of a book will take place in a “latter day,” though there are instances of its partial fulfillment through the centuries (stated shadows, not ultimately fulfilled).” - Third, the connection between 5:9-10 and 5:12, songs of praise,

indicate the book has to do with a divine plan for mankind. In 5:9-10, the Lamb is worthy to redeem His people and in 5:12 He is powerful enough to do so. Fourth, the opening of the book (unrolling the scroll) leads to the judgment of God's enemies and the redemption of His people in the remaining chapters of the Revelation. Thus, the "Book" seems best understood as containing the manner through which judgment and redemption will come, judgment on unbelievers and redemption of believers. The plan had been set in motion by Christ's death and triumph, but in John's day the completion of the plan was yet future in centuries progressively to unfold. The book contains what is delineated in the remainder of the visions: the destiny of mankind and the divine conclusion to time.

The book, being in God's right hand, is a symbolic expression of strength and power. God alone holds the destiny of mankind in His "hand." That the book is written on both sides of its pages suggests its completeness. The seven seals, melted wax droppings to prevent it from being improperly opened, suggests security and certainty of the divine outworking; no one will prevent its contents from actuation. "Seven" symbolizes the idea of completeness or perfection, suggesting the totality of the divine plan with nothing to be added or deleted.

The book appears in the form of a Roman legal document, a will. A Roman will was witnessed and sealed by seven witnesses, written on the front and summarized on the back. Further, a Roman will could only be opened upon the death of the testator and the directives executed as stipulated therein. Finally, a trustworthy executor then put the will into effect. As the vision unfolds, Christ is the executor of the divine will and His death is the basis of its enactment. The promise of life forfeited by Adam is secured in the second Adam.

2) The question of the angel, v. 2

The appeal to find someone capable of opening the book is cosmic; the angel's inquiry is a rhetorical device pointing the reader to the answer.

3) The dilemma, vv. 3-4

The inability of angels or humans in heaven to open the book indicates that the fulfillment of the divine program for all time rests in the actions of God alone. John's reaction is overwhelming grief! The grief is likely over his premature impression that no one in the realm of heaven is capable of executing judgment on God's enemies and redeem His people.

b. The Lamb, 5:5-7

1) The announcement, v. 5

To arrest John's distress, an "elder (see the comments at 4:4) announces that one is worthy to open the book culminating the ages. He is described by two titles and one action.

"Lion of the tribe of Judah" is an allusion to Gen. 49:9-10, the prophecy of Jacob of his fourth son. The one capable of opening the book is a king, a son of Abraham. He is "king of the beasts,"

so to speak, strong and mighty.

“The root of David” is an allusion to II Sam. 7 and Isa. 11:1-10; He is kingly royalty.

“Overcome” is His great feat. Through His death and resurrection, He has triumphed over sin, death, and Satan.

2) The appearance, v. 6

Jesus appears in the heavenly scene surrounded by heavenly creatures; in the throne room of God He stands triumphant. John looked to see the “Lion,” but what he saw was a Lamb (this particular word for “Lamb” is found twenty-nine times in *Revelation* and once outside of it [John 21:15]). Says Stott, “When earth-bound men want symbols of power they conjure up mighty beasts and birds of prey. Russia elevates the bear, Britain the lion, France the tiger, the United States the spread eagle- all of the ravenous. It is only the Kingdom of Heaven that would dare to use as its symbol of might, not the lion for which John was looking but the helpless Lamb, and at that, a slain lamb (96).”

“A lamb” suggests our Lord’s office as the fulfillment of the Passover sacrifice.

“As if slain,” and yet standing tell us, that Jesus, though once dead, is alive. His death-triumph by virtue of resurrection is the ground of His “worthiness” to judge and redeem. That He is standing in the presence of God, not prostrate or worshipping indicates that He is accepted before the enthroned as one who is His equal.

“Sevens horns and seven eyes” suggest completeness or fullness (seven), strength (horns), and omniscience (eyes). This symbolism is similar to Dan. 7:13-14.

3) The action, v. 7

With the enemy defeated, Christ alone can bring to pass both divine redemption and judgment, evidenced by the fact that He can open the book. The point of the verse is that the Messiah appears before the throne to receive authority to judge, determining the outcome of history and its purposes. The dying redeemer is now the triumphant judge!

c. The consequent reaction: worship, 5:8-14

The adoration of God is a dominant theme in Revelation; He is worshipped for His holy character and His promises both to judge and redeem. Though the term “church” is not found after chapter three, the concept is clearly there in the use of the term “saints” throughout the book.

It is interesting that there are three declarations through songs of praise reminding the reading of the ascription to God of thrice holiness in 4:8. The term “worthy” occurs three times in our passage (4:11; 5:9, 12). Jesus is alone worthy to judge and culminate history because He is triumphant through death by resurrection!

1) The ascription of worthiness to judge, vv. 8-10

“Incense” is the prayers of God’s people to fully manifest His kingdom-rule ending death and persecution with His triumph.

At every major event in the Hebrew Scriptures in the life of God’s people, such as the Exodus, the people were encouraged to sing a “new” song of praise. The “New,” meaning, mostly likely, an immediately inspired, song is found in vv. 9-10 blessing God for five things:

- His substitutionary death
 - The redemptive price
 - The purchase of people
 - The making of people His worshippers (here is an allusion to Isa. 19:6 and here applied to the church)y His
 - The privilege of reigning with Christ (saints now constitute His kingdom, the realm of the lamb’s rule brought about through the redeemer’s death and inaugurated by resurrection and ascension. Christ began His reign, though not fully because sin and death still exists, with His triumph. However, it is more “not yet” than “now.” That said, the beginning of the new creation entered a new stage of its manifestation).
- 2) The ascription of authority to judge, vv. 11-12
“Thousands of ten-thousands” or “myriads” is most likely a way of stating that the host of exclaimers is innumerable.

The praise accorded both the one sitting and the “Lamb,” in content, is a repetition of v. 9; however, here it is in the third person (“to Him”) rather than the second person (“you”). In v. 9 the praise was to the “Lamb” alone (here you have a wonderful statement of the equality of God and Jesus).

Seven attributes are accorded the “Lamb” in the heavenly vision (power, riches, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing). “Seven” is symbolic of fullness or perfection!

- 3) The ascription of praise for the triumph, vv. 13-14
The third hymn reiterates the point of the previous hymn explaining that it is because of Christ’s death and resurrection that He is worthy to open the book of judgments. The point is that divine sovereignty in creation is the basis of sovereignty in judgment and redemption.

There are four attributes accorded the “Lamb” here (blessing, honor, glory, and dominion).

Applications:

1. What is most interesting to me is that what appears to be defeat from one perspective is triumph from another. The near-perspective on Jesus is to see what appears to be an ignominious, suffering end of a wonderful and innocent man caught in the cruel clutches of the political and religious establishment. The distance perspective is that the path of

suffering was His path to triumph and ours. What does this tell us about the kind of perspective we should have on events that swirl around us? As with Jesus, and the overall moral point of the Revelation, is that the path to glory is a road through the valley of suffering. This is the lesson the churches needed to hear. Do you need it also?

2. Jesus has the right to judge our world righteously because He alone is the righteous one. While all others about the throne of God bowed and worshipped the one upon the throne amid flashes of light and clashes of thunder, Jesus took as the equal to God and accepted from His extended hand the right to bring justice and judgment to the world. All of that is worth our meditation! Jesus alone is king of kings and Lord of Lords! His death purchased our right to be included in His kingdom; His rejection is the ground of exclusion from it. Do you not stand in magnificence of the majesty of Jesus? Can you adore Him enough?
3. In Christ alone, the meaning of the OT is revealed because He is the subject of the volume in shadowed form. All the predictions concerning the one who is the hope of mankind are fulfilled in Him. Do you read the OT looking for Jesus or is that volume a book of intriguing, disconnected stories? The entire Bible has one central theme: the sovereignty, beauty, and glory that alone belongs to God revealed in triumph over God's enemies through the striking down of Christ and His victory through and over death to gather a people for Himself to dwell among them, to reign among them, forever and ever in a world devoid of all the effects of the failure of the first Adam. Do you read the Bible from God's perspective?
4. The book that only Christ can open, and has opened through His death and resurrection triumph, is a volume of two topics. One is that of judgment; Jesus has procured the right to render the final verdict on the sinfulness of mankind, curb its ravages so that it does not consume the race now, and eliminate it entirely when the second volume is completed, the volume of Christ's redeemed. Christ alone is worthy to open the book of judgment because of His divine character; He is worthy to open the book of redemption alone because He alone suffered the curse that purchased our salvation. Jesus will eliminate evil someday so that all that will remain is holiness and perfection. Do you look forward to that great day? Do you get excited that the one you love will no longer be spoken of in derogatory terms? Do you look forward to the new heavens and earth for His sake?
5. Christ appears in the great enthronement vision of John with two titles and one single accomplishment. He is portrayed as a "lion of Judah" suggesting supremacy in the animal kingdom and here a metaphor of universal, unequaled strength and power. Further, He is a king, the root of David, David's greater son and His lord. The text expresses His accomplishment in those capacities; He alone has overcome. His strong one, this king, has proven to be so because through death He has won the victory over death. The songs of those about the throne center on His accomplishment making Him alone qualified to open the books and bring time to an end. Do you meditate regularly on the implications of all this in your life, the life of your family, the plan you have for the future?
6. The appearance of Jesus in the presence of God, the only one being able to "stand" before God and take from Him a sealed book and unfold its contents is a lamb! Who could have ever imagined that a lamb, actually a slain lamb, could have any prominence before God? It, however, was not a mere lamb-figure; it was the Lamb of God, the servant of God, the gift of God. What does this tell us about how to think about life? It tells me that our God does the unexpected, the shocking. Who would imagine that God would make everything right through a slain lamb (a docile creature)? Do you live your

life expecting the normal to happen only? Is the God you love absolutely trustworthy, who acts in generosity, but does the unexpected?

7. If our passage tells us anything, among the many things, it reveals the wonder that you and I are reigning with Christ now in a qualified manner because evil is present in God's kingdom, but someday you and I will reign with Christ in a perfect place. Can you imagine treating us as worthy to reign with His slain, but alive son? Can you be pessimistic about life when a transformation has begun that someday will bring to you glory and honor wholly undeserved and unmerited? Do you live your life looking back or looking forward?