



Revelation - Chapter Five

III. Revelation 4:1-7:17 - The Lamb and the scroll: current and coming woes, precursors of the end (continues)

III.a Revelation 4:1-5:14 - Heaven opened: the Lamb receives the scroll (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Five

This chapter is full of emotion as there is a search of the universe for one who is worthy to open a scroll that is sealed with seven seals. Initially, it appears to John that no one is worthy so he begins to weep. Then one of the elders tells him not to worry because the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, can open the scroll and its seven seals because he has conquered.

Then John sees a lamb that appears to have been slain, he has seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent into all the earth. The lamb takes the scroll from the one who is seated on the throne and then immediately the four living creatures and the twenty four elders fall down to sing a new song. Additionally, thousands of angels and every living creature join in on this praise of the Lamb who is worthy, i.e. Jesus.

III.a.ii Revelation 5:1-14 - The Scroll and the Lamb

The theme of worthiness continues as John sees in God's hand a sealed scroll so sacred that it seems no one in the universe is worthy to open it.

The apparent absence of one worthy to open the scroll was a dramatic interlude calculated to impress on John and his hearers the unique dignity of the scroll's recipient, the Lamb, who is now introduced.

When the Lamb receives the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, who had praised God for his perfection and his creation, now sing a new song that celebrates the Lamb's redemption. As they had previously fallen before God's throne (4:10), they now prostrate themselves in worship before the Lamb, an affirmation of his deity. Incense symbolises the prayers of the saints and shows that their pleas for relief are heard and will be answered in God's providential judgments (8:3-5).

¹ Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; ² and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?'

Revelation 5:1-2

Then I saw. Having just described the ceaseless worship in the throne room of God, John indicates that the vision continues. It is unclear whether the worship of the lamb is as continuous as that of the Father but it is probably safe to assume that it does.

In the right hand of the one seated on the throne. John probably expresses this because it had long been established that God's right hand was a source of great power and authority, refer to the comments on 1:20, and the hand in which he will hold his judgement: <<*You will be sated with contempt instead of glory. Drink, you yourself, and stagger! The cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and shame will come upon your glory!*>> (Habakkuk 2:16).

A scroll written on the inside and on the back is like the scroll given to the prophet in Ezekiel 2:9-3:3, but is atypical of most ancient manuscripts, since the irregular texture of the reverse side of either vellum, i.e. leather, or papyrus made them hard to inscribe. However, such a doubly inscribed scroll would resemble a Roman will or contract deed, with the contents written in detail inside and summarised briefly outside, then sealed with seven seals, thus no one except its author could know its contents: <<*The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read, with the command, 'Read this', they say, 'We cannot, for it is sealed'*>> (Isaiah 29:11), and: <<*But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end*>> (Daniel 12:4a).

The scroll John sees could symbolise a will that is to be opened and its contents executed, reflecting the death of Christ: <<*Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive*>> (Hebrews 9:16-17); or it could symbolise God's covenant with mankind, with the covenant curses that will be poured out due to mankind's breaking of the contract. In a broader sense, the scroll contains God's purposes for history, but its seven seals prevent the full disclosure and enactment of its contents. What is clear is that it would take someone quite special to be able to break the seals and reveal the contents of the scroll, for a mighty angel proclaimed: Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?

³ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁴ And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

Revelation 5:3-4

The scroll awaited one worthy to open the scroll or to look into it, and no servant of God introduced so far, neither elders nor living creatures nor anyone else in heaven or on earth or under the earth, had sufficient authority to unveil

and implement God's secret agenda. Sensing that the church's hope stood in jeopardy, John began to weep bitterly. It is not revealed why it was so important that someone be found to look inside the scroll. Despite his tears, even John may not have known, and if he knows, he is not telling.

⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'

Revelation 5:5

The Lion of the tribe of Judah echoes Jacob's blessing on Judah, conferring leadership over his brothers: <<*Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness – who dares rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk*>> (Genesis 49:8-12).

In the OT, the Messiah was the branch to spring from Jesse's root to restore David's dynasty: <<*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots*>> (Isaiah 11:1); and: <<*On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious*>> (Isaiah 11:10). However, now he is also called the Root of David, because Jesus is not only the royal descendant: <<*It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star*>> (Revelation 22:16), but also the source of David's rule, as Jesus has confirmed: <<*While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'" David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?' And the large crowd was listening to him with delight*>> (Mark 12:35-37). Paul also quotes the prophet's statement that the Messiah will be the 'root of Jesse', applying it to Jesus: <<*and again Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope'*>> (Romans 15:12).

The Lion is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals because he has conquered. The OT promise of a conquering Lion is fulfilled in the NT reality of one who is also the slain Lamb (v.9).

⁶ Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne.

Revelation 5:6-7

The Christ is clearly no stranger to the throne room of God for he stands between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, a position of prominence and authority. This is made clear for he was the one who went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne, in keeping with the prophet's vision: <<*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed*>> (Daniel 7:13-14 NIV).

As with Daniel's vision of Christ entering the throne room, some commentators believe this to be an image of Jesus returning from his glorious earthly ministry to a rapturous welcome from all in heaven. He now prepares for his Second Coming. When considering this, the reader needs to remember that heaven is not bound by the time constraints of earth and it is perfectly feasible that events that span thousands of years on earth can happen simultaneously in heaven.

The conquering Lion now appears as a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, as 'the living one' who died and rose again, 'alive forevermore' (1:18). The Lord's servant was led like a lamb to slaughter, bearing the iniquity of others and achieving their healing: <<*Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth*>> (Isaiah 53:4-7 NIV), <<*The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'*>> (John 1:29), and: <<*You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish*>> (1 Peter 1:18-19).

There is no discrepancy in the description of one who is the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Root of Jesse (v.5), and a slaughtered Lamb. It makes it clear that the Jewish Messiah and Jesus the Christ is one and the same person. Revelation is no different from Matthew's Gospel, which gives: <<*An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham*>> (Matthew 1:1), and identified as: <<*Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us'*>> (Matthew 1:23b), nor is it different from Paul in Romans, who identifies Jesus as: <<*descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord*>> (Romans 1:3b-4). The old Jewish messianic expectation is transformed in light of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Lamb's seven horns symbolise great power and protective strength: <<*The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold*>> (Psalm 18:2), <<*As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them. This one shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings*>> (Daniel 7:24), <<*And I looked up and saw four horns. I asked the angel who talked with me, 'What are these?' And he answered me, 'These are the horns that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.' Then the Lord showed me four blacksmiths. And I asked, 'What are they coming to do?' He answered, 'These are the horns that scattered Judah, so that no head could be raised; but these have come to terrify them, to strike down the horns of the nations that lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter its people'*>> (Zechariah 1:18-21).

His seven eyes, identified with the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth, see the comment on 1:4-6, show that the Lamb's knowledge extends through all the earth.

⁸ When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

⁹ They sing a new song:

‘You are worthy to take the scroll

and to open its seals,

for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

¹⁰ you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.’

Revelation 5:8-10

When the Lamb receives the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, who had praised God for his perfection and his creation, now sing a new song that celebrates the Lamb's redemption.

The twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb. Just as they had previously fallen before God's throne (4:10), they now prostrate themselves in worship before the Lamb, an affirmation of his deity. Paul draws both the praise for creation and for redemption into a doxology: <<*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together*>> (Colossians 1:15-17).

The golden bowls full of incense symbolise the prayers of the saints and shows that their pleas for relief are heard and will be answered in God's providential judgments (8:3-5). It also indicates that God receives the prayers of believers as a fragrant offering. Thus Paul writes: <<*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a*

fragrant offering and sacrifice to God>> (Ephesians 5:1-2). David had requested that his heartfelt prayers be accepted in this way: <<*Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice*>> (Psalm 141:2).

They sing a new song. The concept of singing something new to the Lord reveals a heart for worshipping God and is a familiar concept in the OT: <<*He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord*>> (Psalm 40:3), <<*O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory*>> (Psalm 98:1), and: <<*Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants*>> (Isaiah 42:10). That they were each holding a harp shows there is music as well as singing in heaven.

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals. As the faithful witness, which he bore unto death, Jesus is acknowledged as the one upon whom this task falls. There is no one else as Peter had concluded: <<*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved*>> (Acts 4:12).

This is the first of only three references to petitionary prayers in the book of Revelation, the others being 6:10 and 8:3-4, and the reader cannot help but wonder whether John has in mind the routine daily prayers of God's people or specific prayers about some urgent need. The answer is not given here, but will become clearer in connection with the other two references.

For you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. This is a direct reference to Jesus' work of redemption on the Cross, where: <<*he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption*>> (Hebrews 9:12). Paradoxically, the Lion's victory is his being slaughtered as the sacrificial Lamb, ransoming a multiethnic multitude (7:9) by his blood (1:5-6), and: <<*For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body*>> (1 Corinthians 6:20). Likewise, his martyrs' faithfulness even to death is their victory (12:11).

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God reflects back to what John had written in his introduction: <<*To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen*>> (Revelation 1:5b-6). God called his people to this when he met with Moses on Mount Sinai: <<*Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites*>> (Exodus 19:5-6); with the apostle also indicating that this now applies to followers of Jesus: <<*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light*>> (1 Peter 2:9).

They will reign on the earth. The earth will not always be tyrannised by Satan and destroyed by his followers: <<*The nations raged, but your wrath has come,*

and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth>> (Revelation 11:18), <<Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!>> (Revelation 12:12), and: <<Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered>> (Revelation 13:7-8). The first heaven and earth, stained by the curse through human sin, will be replaced by a new or fully renewed heaven and earth: <<For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind>> (Isaiah 65:17), and: <<Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more>> (Revelation 21:1), in which Christ's saints will reign in righteousness: <<But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home>> (2 Peter 3:13).

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² singing with full voice,

‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honour and glory and blessing!’

Revelation 5:11-12

The choir expands from the living creatures and the elders to include myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands of angels, i.e. hundreds of millions, who acclaim the Lamb worthy of sevenfold tribute: power, wealth, wisdom, might, honour, glory and blessing. That they were singing with full voice should alert the believer to just how loud and passionate true worship should be and will continue to be in the presence of God and his Christ. The worship of the Lamb in this chapter testifies to his deity.

The number of created beings worshipping God and being in his service is well documented in the Scriptures: <<A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened>> (Daniel 7:10), <<Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?>> (Matthew 26:53), <<But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel>> (Hebrews 12:22-24 NIV), and: <<It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, ‘See, the Lord is coming

with tens of thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgement on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him’>> (Jude 14-15).

¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honour and glory and might
for ever and ever!’

¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the elders fell down and worshipped.

Revelation 5:13-14

Finally, all of creation joins in the worship with every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, perhaps alluding to: <<*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith for ever*>> (Psalm 146:5-6), and offers a fourfold doxology: blessing and honour and glory and might, to God the Father, who is the one seated on the throne, and to God the Son, i.e. the Lamb. Paul acknowledges this eventuality: <<*Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*>> (Philippians 2:9-11), which will continue for ever and ever.

And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the elders fell down and worshipped. In this, the first of John’s visions of heaven, the traditional Jewish Messiah has been transformed into the divine and sovereign Christ of Christian theology. The liturgy of the heavenly throne room concludes with the amen of the four living creatures, as the twenty four elders fell down and worshipped: <<*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*>> (John 1:29b).

What was implicit now becomes explicit: God on the throne and the Lamb in the centre of the throne are inextricably joined together as objects of Christian worship. Again and again throughout John’s visions they will be seen together as equals sharing the same throne, both as objects of fear or worship and as the decisive actors in the drama of salvation.