



## The Book of Revelation

### Revelation 4-5: Heaven Opened: The Lion and the Lamb

When he was a boy David Bartlett came to know Edgar J. Goodspeed, a distinguished New Testament scholar and translator. Goodspeed had retired from Chicago to Beverly Hills and had made friends of his neighbors. "I've told Cecil B. DeMille," said Goodspeed, "that he ought to make a movie of Revelation. It's really not simply a book to write about; it's far too spectacular for that." DeMille was famed in the mid twentieth century for making movies with huge casts and spectacular effects, and Goodspeed was suggesting that the book of Revelation was spectacular enough to warrant de Mille's Hollywood touch. Certainly, from chapter four on we get a sense of the dramatic way in which our seer seeks to unfold the future and the providence of God.

In particular we notice three things about chapters 4 and 5.

First, these chapters are steeped in imagery. Of course, any attempt to show us the Holy One depends heavenly on the author's use of imagery and on our use of imagination. The almost arithmetic attentiveness of the author's description—all those fours and sevens and twelves—should not tempt us into confusing the blessed excesses of poetry with the measurable and quantifiable realities of every day.

Second these chapters are grounded in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes the author quotes quite a passage directly; more often we can find allusions in the language of Revelation to Old Testament language or reconfigurations of Old Testament images in the imagery of these verses.

Third, Revelation 4 and 5 contain several hymns, several passages of doxology or praise. In part this is appropriate punctuation for the heavenly vision of God flows inevitably into praise of God. In part these passages suggest that the whole function of this book is not only to prepare the readers for the future but to entice the readers and hearers to praise the God who was, and is, and is to come.

With chapter 4, Revelation shifts from an earthly to a heavenly perspective. Now the seer is not simply addressed by an emissary from heaven, he is caught up into heaven. From 4:1 through the end of Revelation those who hear or read this book are brought into an almost God's eye view of their world and their history.

It is also evident that heaven is not separate from earth. John is to include the vision of what he sees in the letters he sends to the seven churches. The vision of heaven provides for the earthly communities a vision both of comfort and judgment. And as we all see the concerns of the earthly communities are caught up into the worship in heaven. Revelation looks to a new heaven and a new earth but even in the present time the boundary between heaven and earth is permeable.

Like the prophet Ezekiel, John of Patmos is taken up to the heavenly council, and like Ezekiel he relies on highly pictorial symbols to hint at what he sees. (See Ezekiel 1 and 10 and also Isaiah 6. The image of the beasts draws heavily on Ezekiel, that of the angels heavily on Isaiah.) Notice how flexible the imagery is in Revelation. The Christ who appeared in 1:1 as the transcendent Son of Man appears in chapter 4 as a lion and in chapter 5 as a lamb. The divine is perceived differently according to the faith and imagination of the believer and according to the theological and pastoral questions that the writing addresses.

By drawing on the images of Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6 John of Patmos not only provides details for his heavenly vision that will resonate with those readers who know something of the Old Testament. Implicitly at last he identifies himself with those two major prophets for whom the vision is also a call. John's words, like those of the ancient prophets, will not only declare God's judgment they will enact God's judgment—and God's promise, too.

The beginning of the vision: Revelation 4

The voice that John hears is the voice he has heard as he prepares to write the seven letters 1:10. There the voice is "like a trumpet"; here the voice is accompanied by a trumpet. We deal as much with metaphor as with description. The trumpet will be heard again not just for the seer but for the world in Rev.8:6 (see also I Thess. 4:16, Matthew 24:30-31)

The Spirit was present for the dictation of the letters. Now the Spirit is the agent that moves John from his place on Patmos to his place in the heavenly realm.

We note the reticence with which the author describes God's own self. We have references to the throne and a description of the one who sits there as gemlike in perfection. We know who is around the throne and we get the stage effects of lightning thunder and a rainbow—perhaps an echo of the rainbow of the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9.

Not only the Spirit is present but a host of the seven spirits. Surely one spirit is for each church to whom John writes. The seven are also a numerological sign of the perfection of the heavenly vision. They are torches because they bring light; they are spirits because they bring knowledge. They are the messengers of the God who can scarcely be described.

The twenty-four elders may represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. In any case they are distinguished from the spirits and almost certainly represent earthly persons now translated to heaven. The fact that they are dressed in white may suggest that they partake of the divine glory. (See Rev.1:14, 7:9, 20:11)

The four creatures, drawn in large measure from Ezekiel with wings from Isaiah, suggest the wholeness of creation both human and nonhuman,

The four creatures join in antiphonal song with the twenty-four elders, the larger choir. In Philippians 2 and Colossians 1 we almost certainly have traces of hymns sung in first century Christian churches, and it is tempting to think that the songs the heavenly creatures sing may echo the songs the congregations of the seven churches sing on the Lord's Day.

Though the one sitting on the throne is not described, his attributes are made clear in words that fit both the Old Testament witness and the new. God is the one who reigns forever and ever. God is the one who created all things—presumably including the beasts and the elders.

When the elders cast down their crowns before the one on the throne and sing of God's worthiness and power the early readers perhaps think of the ways in which emperors and lesser monarchs seek to demand loyalty.

The Lion who is the Lamb: Revelation 5

God holds in God's right hand a book with seven seals. The New Revised Standard Version calls this a scroll and it seems likely that this allusion to Ezekiel and the

designation of the seals suggests that what the lamb is to open is a scroll full of revelation.

This is a book of poetry not code-breaking, so the associations of the “book” are manifold. It reminds us of the Torah given by God to Moses. It reminds us of a last will and testament which was often sealed with seven seals. It reminds us of the scroll that Ezekiel was told to eat in Ezekiel 2. It reminds us of the book of letters and visions that John of Patmos is sending to the seven churches in Asia Minor.

It is clear from the context that when the book is opened it will not only reveal what is to happen in the last days, it will set those events into motion. So when the seer weeps he weeps not only because he is frustrated by ignorance but because the divine time seems to have stood still.

The angelic voice then promises a solution to the problem of the seven seals by making a messianic prediction: “The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered.” The language is clearly language that anticipates a Messiah, or describes the Messiah. There is much reference in this book to those who conquer (Rev 2:11, 17, 26: 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11) and we will seek to understand the word better as we explore those larger contexts. Our first impression may be that the Lion of Judah will come with military might, but it is to be remembered that those who read of this vision already know the story—they are not being introduced to this Lion for the first time and therefore they are not perhaps as shocked as commentators think when the lion turns out to be, also, the lamb.

The “also” is important. As with much good poetry we are asked to hold two quite different images in our minds simultaneously. The Christian story is full of these juxtapositions. The least who is greatest; the last who is first; the child who is King; the crucified Messiah.

John does not put these images together to disabuse his readers of a falsely triumphant messianic hope. He puts them together because as his readers well know they belong together in the story.

And of course, this is no ordinary lamb. Slain in sacrifice, as the Christian tradition holds, he also has seven horns—a sign of rulership—and seven eyes, a sign of wisdom and omnipresence. This is an awe-inspiring lamb which is why the creatures raise their voices and the elders bring out their harps.



*Van Eyck, The Ghent Altarpiece: Adoration of the Lamb (1432)*

All the cosmos is joined in the song. The elders bring to their worship the prayers of the saints on earth. The host of heavenly angels joins. And then not only the saints but every created being joins the song.

The book of Revelation will point us toward redemption, but already in its heavenly vision and its earthly song it celebrates redemption. Revelation is a call to patience and to courage. It is a call to worship, too.

**Focus Text:** Rev 4:1-11

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