

AN APOCALYPTIC TRIBUTE TO THE LAMB (REV 5:1-14)

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The force of symbolic language lies in its ability to supersede human categories. No Biblical writer exceeds the imagination and compelling imagery of the author of the NT Apocalypse. The theology of John is visual theology;¹ seeing is understanding. The audience will experience earthquakes, storms, fire, pain, joy, worship, agony and delirium, all of which serve to mediate the tension between contemporary powers that be and Christian faith, thereby affirming the might and sovereign reign of Almighty God, *ho pantokratōr*. It is within John's view, using graphic symbolism, to encourage Christians to an active, not passive, participation in history. The ability to persevere is directly proportionate to one's conviction that God indeed is enthroned and ruling over the powers.

The NT Apocalypse could well be called a "book of powers."² "Keys," "overcoming," "seals," "might," "strength," "war," "thrones," "horns," "scrolls," "angels," "swords" and "crowns" permeate the visions of John. In the struggle to live out the Christian faith in a first-century context where the role of the Roman imperium is unchallenged, John assures his audience that "the saints" will partake in the rule of *ho pantokratōr*, that "they shall reign on the earth" (Rev 5:10; 20:6; 22:5). The exact mode of mediating that rule, however, is quite antithetical to the brute Roman *kratos* exerted by the Caesar.³ It is in this mediatory role of divine imperium that the key figure of the Apocalypse, the Lamb, emerges.

I. THE FUNCTION OF REVELATION 5

1. *Revelation 4-5 in the scheme of the whole.* Chapters 4 and 5 of this apocalyptic drama mark the introduction of the Lamb. The audience is transferred in John's vision from the seven churches to the courts of the heavenly throne room to observe, in a liturgical context,⁴ the pivotal event of human

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¹ So H.-R. Weber, *The Way of the Lamb: Christ in the Apocalypse* (Geneva: WCC, 1988) vii.

² T. Osborn, *The Lion and the Lamb: A Drama of the Apocalypse* (New York/Cincinnati: Abingdon, 1922) 89-112.

³ Note the use of *kratos* or *ischys/ischyros* in the book: 1:6; 5:2, 12, 13; 6:15; 7:12; 10:1; 18:2, 8, 10, 21; 19:6.

⁴ R. Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967) 46, 58, assumes that the picture of heavenly worship in chaps. 4-5 is reflecting to a certain degree early Christian worship, a notion advanced earlier this century by W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1921) 235. The scene in chaps. 4-5 is not unlike Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1.

history along with its ramifications. Here one notes two settings pervading John's vision: the throne and the altar. Everything occurring in chaps. 4–5 transpires between these two axes.

Initially John sees a throne and "one sitting upon it" (4:2). It is noteworthy that the action of God in chaps. 4–5 is foremost one of sitting—that is, reigning and judging. Of the sixty-two occurrences of *thronos* in the NT forty-six are found in the Apocalypse, with nineteen in chaps. 4 and 5 alone. The central fact that pervades heaven is the absolute authority of God,⁵ and this authority flows *ek tēs dexias tou kathēmenou epi tou thronou* (5:1, 7).⁶ The supreme authority of God over the universe having been established, judgments thus proceed as an outworking in history (6:1–19:10). Containing a view of history from the divine standpoint, the scroll⁷ of 5:1–5, 7, 8 in essence represents the book of destiny. According to Roman stipulations the sealing of a will was done in the presence of seven witnesses.⁸ Seen as such, history, which conceals the divine purpose, is irrevocable in accordance with the will of the Sovereign Lord. For this reason John weeps, since no one was able to open the scroll and loosen its seals (5:3). The opening of these seals, which commences the judgments of 6:1 ff., is achieved only through God's chosen agent: the Lamb of Revelation 5.

2. *Revelation 4 and 5 in contrast.* Chapter 5 is a continuation of the throne setting in chap. 4 (*Meta tauta eidon. . . Kai eidon*). The links between both are strong and explicit, and the similarities are marked:

Chap. 4	Chap. 5
<i>ho kathēmenos epi ton thronon</i>	<i>ho kathēmenos epi ton thronon</i>
(vv. 2, 9)	(vv. 1, 7, 13)
<i>tessara zōa</i> (v. 6)	<i>tessara zōa</i> (vv. 6, 8, 11, 14)
<i>hoi presbyteroi</i> (v. 4)	<i>hoi presbyteroi</i> (vv. 6, 8, 14)
<i>pesountai, proskynēsousin</i> (vv. 10, 11)	<i>epesan, prosekynēsan</i> (vv. 8, 14)
<i>Axios</i> (v. 11)	<i>Axios</i> (vv. 9, 12)
<i>ektisas ta panta</i> (v. 11)	<i>pan ktisma</i> (v. 13)

Whereas chap. 4 concerns itself with the One sitting on the throne, however, the audience is confronted with two new images in chap. 5: the scroll and the Lamb. As a title, *to arnion* appears twenty-nine times⁹ in the

⁵ One need only observe the various designations for God in these two chapters to see this forcefully illustrated: *ho kathēmenos epi ton thronon* (4:2, 3, 9, 10; 5:1, 7, 13); *ho pantokratōr* (4:8); *kyrios ho theos* (4:8); *ho ēn kai ho ōn kai ho erchomenos* (4:8); *ho kyrios* (4:11). *Ho theos, kyrios* and *ho pantokratōr* embrace what *YHWH, Ādōnay* and *ʿĒl ʿElyōn* did in the OT.

⁶ On power, might and the "right hand" cf. Exod 15:6; Ps 44:3; cf. also Pss 17:7; 48:10; 138:7.

⁷ There are three scrolls in the Apocalypse: one for the churches (2:1), the sealed scroll of heaven (5:1–5, 7, 8), and the little scroll to be eaten by John (10:9–11).

⁸ W. Sattler, "Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln. II," *ZNW* 21 (1922) 51. This could well be the reason for Jesus' title *ho martys ho pistos*.

⁹ W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, *A Concordance to the Greek New Testament* (5th ed.; Edinburgh: Clark, 1978) 107.

Apocalypse¹⁰ and thus figures as a key in the interpretation of the book. Manifest as the only one worthy to open the seals of the scroll, the Lamb is the "essential secret of history."¹¹ It is not insignificant then that worship of the Lamb envelops the visions of judgment throughout the book.¹²

Pivotal to the structure of Revelation, chap. 5 underscores not so much the Lamb's nature as the sacrificial role he plays, qualifying him to mediate the divine purpose. Here the Lamb receives worship, is omniscient, possesses the Spirit's fulness, is slaughtered, has power, is worthy to open the seals, is messianically linked to Judah, and is ascribed the same attributes as God.¹³ The main issue of the fifth chapter is the worthiness of the Lamb.

A further element that strikes the reader is the posture of God (*kathēmenos*, 4:2, 3, 9, 10) and the elders (*kathēmenoi*, 4:4) who are "sitting" in chap. 4, contrasted with that of the Lamb in chap. 5 who is "standing" (*hestēkos*, 5:6). Calm is followed by intense drama.¹⁴

II. APOCALYPTIC LITURGY

1. *Liturgy in the book as whole.* While the mode of the Apocalypse may be apocalyptic, the movement is liturgical.¹⁵ Because the temple above all else represented the place of God's presence, it would be only natural for the cultic environment to color the description of heaven. The chief setting for much of the activity in the book, apart from the throne, is the altar.¹⁶ Herein John's depictions seem to be heavily indebted to the Psalms, Isaiah and Daniel.¹⁷ Presupposed is OT and Jewish worship in the temple and synagogue, much of which was carried over into the liturgy of the early Christian community¹⁸ and which is in keeping with Jewish tradition, since the first company of Christians who met together were Jews.

¹⁰ By contrast *Iēsous Christos* and *ho Christos* appear seven and four times respectively.

¹¹ R. Halver, *Der Mythos im Letzten Buch der Bibel* (Hamburg: Reich, 1964) 142.

¹² Note the grouping of "Lamb"-texts by N. Hillyer, "The Lamb in the Apocalypse," *EvQ* 39 (1967) 228-236.

¹³ Cf. also 7:12.

¹⁴ Suspense in 5:1 is followed by quandary (vv. 2-3), grief (v. 4), hope (v. 5), quandary and suspense again (vv. 6-7), awe (v. 8), thanksgiving (vv. 9-10), ecstasy (vv. 11-12), delirium (v. 13), and finally saturation (v. 14).

¹⁵ P. Prigent, *Flash sur l'Apocalypse* (Neuchâtel-Paris: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1974) 46.

¹⁶ Note e.g. 5:8; 6:9-11; 8:3-5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7. The twin axes between which the setting of chaps. 4-5 takes place—throne and altar—agree with the statements that the saints have been made a kingdom as well as priests before God.

¹⁷ In *Das hymnische Evangelium* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971), K.-P. Jorns has examined the liturgical material in Revelation in a more exhaustive fashion. Earlier O. A. Piper, "The Apocalypse of John and the Liturgy of the Early Church," *CH* 20 (1951) 17-18, had observed the liturgical links with the Psalms, Isaiah and Daniel in particular.

¹⁸ Its chief deviation from the synagogue is the element conspicuously present in chap. 5: sacrifice. As to the background to chaps. 4-5 L. Hurtado, "Revelation 4-5 in the Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies," *JSNT* 25 (1985) 105-106, suggests the heavenly ascent tradition, citing the OT examples of Exod 24:9-11; 1 Kgs 22:19-22; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; Jer 23:18, 22; Dan 7:9-14.

In the book as a whole, worship is a central issue. People either worship God and the Lamb, or they worship the beast and the dragon. The question is: Before whom will people bow? Seen in this light, the frequent and pronounced liturgical acclamations such as one finds in chaps. 4 and 5 have an important function: They are strong affirmations and confessions of faith. They enjoin the active participation of all beings, heavenly and earthly.¹⁹

One might easily view the Apocalypse as a re-reading of OT and Jewish liturgical practices: (1) John is in the Spirit "on the Lord's day" (1:10). (2) The saints are depicted as "priests" (1:6; 5:10; 20:6). (3) White garments are worn by the "cleansed" (6:11; 7:9, 13, 14). (4) A scroll (1:11; 5:1-5, 7, 8, 9; 6:14; 17:8; 20:12; 21:27; 22:7, 9, 10, 18, 19), (5) bowls and incense (5:8; 8:3, 4, 5; 16:1-4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 21:9), and (6) lampstands (1:12, 13, 20; 2:1; 11:4) are associated with (7) the altar (5:8; 6:9-11; 8:3-5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7). (8) Singing, praise, hymns and worship abound (4:6b-11; 5:6-14; 7:9-17; 11:16-19; 13:4, 8, 12; 14:1-5, 7, 9; 15:1-8; 16:2; 19:1-10, 20; 22:8, 17, 20). (9) Frequent reference is made to the temple or "tabernacle" (11:1, 2, 19; 15:5, 8; 16:1, 17; 21:3, 22), as well as an allusion to (10) Mount Zion (14:1). In effect, it becomes exceedingly difficult to isolate the acts of worship from the events of judgment unfolding in the book. Indeed worship discloses God's purposes, an example of which is the association of chaps. 4-5 with 6:1 ff.

2. *Liturgy in Revelation 5.* "Living creatures," "angels" and "saints" participate in the worship of the Lamb. The function of hymnic material in chap. 5 is crucial. On the basis of a decisive past event in history (the cross and resurrection), the worthiness of the Lamb is proclaimed by the heavenly host. He is "able" (*dynamai*, 5:3, 12) to open the seals to the scroll and thus initiate judgment. Seen theologically, the Lamb's exaltation is predicated on his voluntary humiliation and sacrifice. He is acclaimed as worthy, having ascribed to him the very attributes of the One sitting on the throne:

Axios ei, ho kyrios (4:11); *Amēn,*
hē eulogia . . . ton aiōnon—amēn
(7:12)

Axios estin to arnion (5:12); *Tō*
kathemenō epi tō thronō kai tō
arniō hē eulogia . . . tōn aiōnōn
(5:13)

The hymns of chap. 5 in effect proclaim the might and lordship of the Lamb. Both throne visions of chaps. 4 and 5 conclude with worship (4:9-11; 5:9-12). Indeed, worship acknowledges that Jesus is God, the true test of the faith of a first-century Christian and hence a key in John's Christol-

¹⁹ So E. Werner, *The Sacred Bridge* (New York/London: Columbia University/D. Dobson, 1963) 265. It is of interest that in eastern (Byzantine) liturgy through the centuries, worship is marked by its characteristic involvement of both men and angels. Specific examples of such can be found in volume one of E. F. Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896) 312.15-24; 368.8-10.

ogy. Doxology fittingly concludes the introduction of the Lamb in John's throne vision. *Doxa* in the NT assumes everything of the Hebrew *kābôd*. Sacrifice, a thread running throughout the OT, is at the core of divine mystery. And having followed suit in the sacrificial tradition, the Lamb is worthy of all *doxa*. Clothed with power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and blessing, this Lamb will manifest lion-like characteristics in the ensuing apocalyptic visions.

III. COMMENTARY

1. 5:1-5. In response to John's weeping (v. 4), which is prompted by the lack of a qualified person to break the seals (v. 3), one of the elders issues a promise indicative of Israel's long-standing messianic hope: the "Lion from the tribe of Judah," the "Root of David," had prevailed to open the seals of the scroll (v. 5). Reminiscent of Jacob's prophetic blessing in Gen 49:8-12—"Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies. . . . You are a lion's cub, O Judah, you return from the prey. . . . Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to arouse him?"—"Lion of Judah" is appropriate in light of the task of mediating judgment (6:1 ff.).

As expressed in Ps 76:2, Israel derives its character and strength from Judah: "In Judah God is known; in Israel his name is great." In this Zion psalm, the enemies of Yahweh are preyed upon and plundered by Yahweh. As a ravaging lion he destroys the war materials and paralyzes Israel's enemies with awesome fury. To the kings and rulers of the nations he is absolutely fear-inspiring.²⁰ As depicted by the strong imagery of this psalm, Yahweh manifests himself as the "Lion of Judah." And it is the link to David that will guarantee Messiah's right to reign and to judge. This is the inheritance of *hē rhiza David*.²¹

The precise nature of the "scroll" (*biblion*) in 5:1 ("written on the inside and outside")²² has engendered no little speculation.²³ More important than the form, however, is the content of the document. Common to Jewish

²⁰ Note the association between the fury of Yahweh as a lion and the house of Judah in Hos 5:14.

²¹ Isa 11:1, 10; Jer 23:5, 6. The "Shoot of David" language also occurs in QL; cf. e.g. 4QPatr 3; 4QFlor 2. For reproduction of relevant texts see J. M. Allegro, "Messianic References in Qumran Literature," *JBL* 75 (1956) 174-187, and E. Lohse, *Die Texte aus Qumran* (München: Mohr, 1964) 247, respectively.

²² Some MSS (A, a number of minuscules, a Syriac version, several fathers) read *esôthen kai opisthen*. Others (P, an uncial, a number of minuscules, several ancient versions, a host of fathers) read *esôthen kai exôthen*. Still others (Origen, a manuscript of Andrew of Caesarea, a Greek minuscule) show a variation of these two.

²³ E. Riesner (*Das Buch mit den sieben Siegeln* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1949] 55) holds this to be the inner and outer side of salvation history—one visible to the eye, the other necessitating revelation. K. Staritz ("Zu Offenbarung Johannis 5.1," *ZNW* 30 [1931] 157-170) and G. Roller ("Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln," *ZNW* 36 [1937] 98-113) give evidence of early "double-documents" that allowed the use of the outer copy as a summary of the contents. E. Lohse (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes* [NTD 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966] 40) suggests that the "inside-outside" description implies a duplicate document so as to

apocalyptic is the notion that at the end time judgment books are brought out.²⁴ From the divine standpoint, history has already been "recorded."

In 5:1–5 John is confronted with a dilemma—namely, the actual opening of the seals. The burning issue is who can mediate history, if not the One on the throne. John's intense "wailing" (*eklaion poly*, v. 4) reflects the critical impasse: human inaccessibility into understanding the divine purpose in history. John fully identifies.

2. 5:6–7. And yet the NT Apocalypse is no typical piece of Jewish apocalyptic propaganda. It is uniquely Christian in conception, for the focus of history, paradoxically, is the role of suffering in the mediation of God's purposes.²⁵ In John's vision, after hearing of the messianic Lion, he sees something quite unexpected: a lamb standing by the throne with the mark of slaughter still at the neck. The slain lamb reminds the audience that it is a redeemed community. Only through sacrifice was victory ultimately achieved (*nikaō*,²⁶ 5:3). The visual impact of where the Lamb is standing (*en mesō tou thronou*) serves also to reinforce the Lamb's role: He mediates. Thus the Lamb is inseparably connected with the divine purpose.²⁷ The way of the Lamb would appear offensive and counter to men's thinking. Here one's attention is drawn to the order of events in John's vision: (1) The audience encounters the lion (5:5); (2) the audience sees a lamb "standing" (perfect tense); (3) the audience perceives his "having been slain" (again, perfect tense). Victory is achieved (implied by *hestēkos*),²⁸ yet it was acquired via sacrifice (*hōs esphagmenon*).

In contrast to the lifegiving bull imagery typical of pagan mythology, John sees a lamb. In keeping with the OT notion of redemption by means

prevent falsification. Th. Zahn (*Introduction to the New Testament* [New York: Scribner's, 1909] 393) and W. Sattler (see n. 8) have described the scroll as a "testament" of God that includes the universal plan of redemption wrought through Christ. According to L. Mowry ("Revelation 4–5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage," *JBL* 71 [1952] 75–84) the sealed scroll is a copy of the Torah. Yet another view is held by J. M. Ford ("The Divorce Bill of the Lamb and the Scroll of the Suspected Adulteress: A Note on Apoc. 5,1 and 10,8–11," *JSJ* 2 [1971] 136–143), who suggests that *biblion* is designating simultaneously a bill of divorce for Jerusalem and a nuptial contract for the New Jerusalem.

²⁴ On the very Jewish notion of "heavenly books" cf. Exod 32:32–33; Pss 40:4; 56:8; 69:28; 139:16; Isa 4:3; Jer 22:30; Dan 7:10; 12:1; Mal 3:16; 1 *Enoch* 81:1–2; 89:62; 90:14, 17, 20, 22; 104:7; 108:3, 7; *Jub.* 5:13; 6:31; 16:9; 23:32; 28:6; 30:9; 32:21; *T. Ass.* 7:5; 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 24:1; Phil 4:3; Jude 4; Rev 3:5; 5:1–5, 7, 8; 10:8–11; 20:12.

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this motif see K. M. Fischer, "Die Christlichkeit der Offenbarung Johannes," *TLZ* 106 (1981) 165–172.

²⁶ *Nikaō* translates an Aramaic idiom (Heb. *zākā*) meaning "to attain," "to succeed," "to be worthy of" (C. C. Torrey, *The Apocalypse of John* [New Haven: Yale University, 1958] 107).

²⁷ Cf. D. Guthrie, "The Lamb in the Structure of the Book of Revelation," *VoxEv* 12 (1981) 65.

²⁸ In 7:9 the multitudes are "standing" (note the perfect) before the throne. In 7:11 all the angels had been "standing" (pluperfect) around the throne. Those overcoming the beast in 15:2 and the two witnesses in 11:4 are "standing" (perfect) in the sea and before the Lord respectively. Finally, the seven angels "stood" (perfect) before God in 8:2. Despite the frequent change in verb tenses throughout the book, the use of the perfect is fairly consistent: It underscores the durative nature of the action.

of blood, sacrifice in the Apocalypse is viewed as the mode of conquest. Further, the Lamb has died a violent death (*sphazō*, 5:6, 9, 12; 13:8). The Lamb hereby establishes a total identification with all the saints who are suffering. The impact of the Lamb will intensify the persecution motif so characteristic of the Jewish apocalyptic genre.²⁹ Others would also be "slain" (6:9; 18:24).³⁰ In 1:7 Christ is described as having been pierced, and in 19:13 he is clothed as a king, albeit with his garment dipped in blood. The motif of a king reigning through blood is indeed pregnant with irony.³¹ In his commentary on the NT Apocalypse J. Ellul writes:

Of all the animals whose death I have observed, the lamb and the ewe are the only ones who do not struggle when they are struck: at the moment when the knife cuts the jugular, the ewe relaxes and does not try to flee or kick. It gives way perfectly. It dies with a sort of acceptance. Another animal cannot be found which signifies in the same way the acceptance of death. That is why it is the only one that corresponds to Jesus: "I lay down my life."³²

Revelation 5 describes—rather, magnifies—the "paschal mystery"³³ in which all of history is rooted. Paradoxically, sacrifice alone can transform human history.

But Revelation 5 is not foremost a description of the Lamb's nature; rather, it defines his role.³⁴ He does indeed conquer in line with the lion's character, and yet his judgments are inflicted by the cross.³⁵ A rejection of the cross mandates judgment, and these events fall in history. The Lamb's wrath, contra R. H. Charles,³⁶ is not out of keeping with his character but is concurrent with the horned lamb of Jewish apocalyptic.³⁷ The horned Lamb seen by John possesses lion-like power—the perfected power of 5:6 (*echōn kerata hepta*)—to wage war, which is essential to the establishing of his kingdom (1:9; 11:15; 12:10). The dragon and horned beast (12:3; 13:1) are no match for the Lion-Lamb, who, in the fashion of the ideal ruler of Isaiah 11 who possesses the seven spirits of God, exercises his might in all the earth. The acclamation of heaven is that he shall reign for ever and ever (11:15).

²⁹ Cf. J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1984) 214.

³⁰ John may well have in mind the sword of the imperium as M. Rissi (*Time and History: A Study on the Revelation* [Richmond: Knox, 1966] 66) suggests.

³¹ Cf. L. Thompson, "A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John," *Sem* 36 (1986) 152.

³² J. Ellul, *Apocalypse* (New York: Seabury, 1977) 267.

³³ *Ibid.* 119.

³⁴ The lamb offering of Jesus' day was for the whole people; cf. P. Billerbeck, "Ein Tempelgottesdienst in Jesu Tagen," *ZNW* 55 (1964) 2.

³⁵ John the Baptist appeared to save men from the "wrath to come," pointing them to the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29, 36). By rejecting the work of the Lamb, men qualify to incur his wrath, the outworkings of which comprise most of the NT Apocalypse.

³⁶ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1926), 1. 142-143.

³⁷ For examples of the apocalyptic horned lamb cf. Dan 8:3-12; 1 *Enoch* 89:46; 90:6-19, 37; *T. Jos.* 19:8.

While commentators traditionally have held a variety of views as to the identity of the lamb in the NT Apocalypse,³⁸ a majority prefer a blend of the paschal and suffering servant motifs. Christ in the Revelation would indeed appear to be conformed to the Isaianic servant. Specific associations between Isaiah's servant songs and Revelation include a slaughtered lamb (Isa 53:7; Rev 5:6), expiation for sin (Isa 53:10–12; Rev 1:5; 5:9; 7:14), sharing of spoil (Isa 53:12; Rev 5:10; 19:17–18), prolonging of days (Isa 53:10; Rev 5:6), a bearer of the Spirit (Isa 53:7; Rev 3:1; 5:6), manifesting judgment to the nations (Isa 42:1; Rev 15:4), carrying a sword (Isa 42:2; Rev 1:16; 2:12; 19:15), bringing light to the nations (Isa 42:6; Rev 15:4), receiving homage from kings (Isa 49:7; Rev 1:5; 17:14; 19:16; 21:24; cf. also his functioning as a witness [Isa 55:4; Rev 1:5] and his representing covenant with David [Isa 55:3; Rev 5:5; 22:16]).³⁹ Yet, rather than restrict our perception of the Lamb to one lone conventional profile such as the apocalyptic horned lamb or the servant, we would suggest that John has cast the Lamb according to his own unique mold. Certainly the qualification *hōs esphagmenon* shatters any popular stereotypes that might exist among his audience.

A notable feature of the Lamb is that of his seven eyes. In 1:4 they are depicted as a flame of fire. They symbolize the Lamb's omniscience; he knows all. In addressing the seven churches Jesus "knows" (note the sevenfold *oida* in 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). The seven eyes of 5:6 are equated with the "seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth." Occurring in 1:4,⁴⁰ 3:1, 4:5 and 5:6, the "seven spirits" are *enōpion tou thronou* in 1:4–5 and, interestingly, take a place alongside God and Jesus Christ, from whom *charis* and *eirēnē* are sent to the churches. Again in 4:5 the seven spirits are *enōpion tou thronou* and presented as seven lamps of burning fire. In 5:6 they are actively sent out into the earth, while in 3:1 they are in the hand of Jesus. E. Schweizer⁴¹ has rightly identified 1:4 as the basis for explaining the seven spirits. They receive the same worth as the Father and Jesus. Hence we have here to do with the Holy Spirit himself.

If he is the individual Spirit throughout the NT, why then the description "seven spirits"? John seems to be drawing from the imagery found in Zech 4:2, 10 of the lamps and eyes of the Lord associated with the two witnesses. In the NT Apocalypse the Spirit is foremost the active Spirit.⁴² Inducing prophecy, working on behalf of the churches, burning as a fire, being an instrument in the hand of the risen Christ, operating in the world—the Spirit in Revelation is indeed the operation of God himself. John's task is to write concretely for the Church on earth. The seven spirits, then, are the "accessories to the risen Christ."⁴³

³⁸ For a survey see R. Bergmeier, "Die Buchrolle und das Lamm (Apk. 5 und 10)," *ZNW* 76 (1985) 225–242.

³⁹ For more on the association between the Lamb of the Apocalypse and the Isaianic servant see J. Comblin, *Le Christ dans l'Apocalypse* (TB 3/6; Paris-New York: Desclée, 1965) 31–39.

⁴⁰ Contra Charles, *Commentary* 11, who holds this to be an interpolation.

⁴¹ E. Schweizer, "Die sieben Geister in der Apocalypse," *EvT* 11 (1951/52) 502–503.

⁴² F. F. Bruce, "The Spirit in the Apocalypse," in *Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament* (ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1973) 335.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Chapters 4–5 reflect an eastern notion that had penetrated the empire, and 5:7 with its focus on the activity at the throne is highly illustrative. Nero had built for himself a rotunda that represented the cosmos. This structure rotated day and night⁴⁴ (note the ministry of the living creatures in 4:8 and of those coming out of the tribulation in 7:15 [it continues “day and night”]; in contrast, consider the torment for those worshiping the beast in 14:11 as well as for the devil himself in 20:10 [it endures “day and night”]). The middle region of the rotunda was the region of the sun (cf. 21:23; 22:5). Roman poets appealed for Nero to take his seat exactly in the middle of the universe, because otherwise the cosmos would lose its equilibrium.⁴⁵ From this position the emperor judged, determining the fate of men.⁴⁶ He thus became the cosmic god of fate, the *fatorum arbiter*, *ho pantokratōr*.

As John views the throne, his attention is riveted on the action transpiring between *ho kathēmenos epi ton thronon* and *to arnion*. All of heaven is standing poised as the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”⁴⁷ receives the scroll. Because of sacrifice the Lamb is clothed with authority and mediates history, into which he came.

3. 5:8. The Lamb’s receipt of the scroll triggers a response: Worship is evoked from the living creatures and elders (cf. 4:4–10), and this worship is linked to the saints on earth. Here heaven and earth are joined before the Lamb. Verse 8 is reminiscent of an ancient cultic scene in the Jerusalem temple, with the choir of Levites in psalmic praise and the priest offering incense at the altar (cf. 1 Chr 6:32; 6:49; cf. also Ps 66:15).

The “four living creatures” seen by John in the midst of the throne are reminiscent of the throne vision in Ezekiel 1. They issue forth ceaseless praise to the One sitting on the throne in a manner bringing to mind Isaiah 6. The author’s focus in 5:8 is the involvement of the elders in worship (in 4:10 they had cast their crowns before God). Unlike typical Jewish apocalyptic depictions of the throne of God,⁴⁸ the elders are a unique feature of John’s Revelation. Their prominence in the book (4:10–11; 5:8, 14; 7:11–13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4) is significant, and their description in chaps. 4–5 is suggestive of the mode of the Jewish Sanhedrin, which convened in a semicircle.⁴⁹ Consistent with the OT and rabbinic *zāqēn* whose function was representation, the elders of the Apocalypse appear to represent the Church in heaven.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ H. P. L’Orange, “Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World,” in *The Sacral Kingship* (Leiden: Brill, 1959) 487.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Rev 13:8.

⁴⁸ Only in 2 *Enoch* 4:1 do we find anything remotely resembling “elders,” where reference is made to “rulers of the stellar orders” (see E. Isaac, “1 [Ethiopic Apocalypse of] Enoch,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha—Vol. 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* [ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983] 111).

⁴⁹ J. W. Bowman, *The Drama of the Book of Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955) 43.

⁵⁰ Cf. J. L. McKenzie, “The Elders in the Old Testament,” *Bib* 40 (1959) 522–540.

Further, the elders of 5:8 are enacting a "priestly" function.⁵¹ Each is holding a zither (*kithara*) and a golden bowl full of incense in which is said to be the prayers of the saints. The *kithara*⁵² appears again in 14:2 and 15:2 in a worship context.⁵³ Incense occurs again in 8:3–4 and 18:13, the former describing a cultic scene in which prayers are mingled with incense and offered upon the golden altar. In 5:8 and 8:3–4 the "prayers of the saints" are given this cultic association. Psalm 142, a prayer of David, makes the same connection: "Let my prayer be set before you as incense; may the lifting of my hands be as the evening sacrifice" (v. 2).

In a very Jewish and earthly pattern, then, worship emerges in Rev 5:8. The saints on earth join with the heavenly host in falling down before the Lamb.

4. 5:9–10. "And they sang a new song." Praise erupts from those around the throne as a result of the Lamb's action. Five times in the Apocalypse *ode* is associated with the Lamb, and in each instance it is linked to the notion of redemption.⁵⁴ Not infrequently in the OT the "new song" in Israel's worship acclaimed Yahweh's new acts of salvation (e.g. Pss 33:1; 40:4; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa 42:10), having as an antecedent the song of Moses from Exodus 15.⁵⁵

The "new song" of 5:9 is a triple acclamation. The Lamb is praised as being *axios*,⁵⁶ and this truth is established by his three actions performed in history: *esphagēs*, *ēgorasas*, *epoiēsas*.⁵⁷ Notably all three verbs are aorist, underscoring the emphatic historical moment of the salvation event in Christ. *Spazō* belongs to the cult environment and is reminiscent of the portrait of the servant in Isa 53:7 (LXX): *hōs probaton epi sphagēn ēchthē*. Though possessing a somewhat different character in the NT Apocalypse, the Lamb of John the Baptist's proclamation "bears the sin of the world"

⁵¹ From the text one could argue that it is *hoi presbyteroi* (masculine), not *ta zōa* (neuter), exercising the priestly function (the masculine *hekastos* would agree with this).

⁵² The *kithara*, an instrument having thirty to forty strings stretched over a shallow horizontal soundboard and played with the fingers or a plectrum, was related to the lyre and associated with hymns since the time of Homer.

⁵³ It is interesting to note that in both Judaism and early Christianity there existed a primacy of vocal over instrumental music. This is perhaps due to the free use of instrumental music in the mystery cults of Asia Minor and Greece. Such caution is reflected in a statement of Pseudo-Cyprian in *De spectaculis*, app. 5 (cited in Werner, *Sacred Bridge* 317), in which we find justification for such reserve: "The fact that David danced before God is no excuse for those Christians who sit in the Theatre . . . since then harps, cymbals, flutes, tympana and other instruments sounded for the glory of God, not of idols. Through the scheme of the devil, holy instruments have become illicit."

⁵⁴ In 5:9; twice in 14:3; twice in 15:3.

⁵⁵ Later in rabbinic tradition the "new song" was the last of ten songs of Israel and became linked with the new age (S-B, 3. 801). This was based on an understanding of Isa 42:10, which follows on the heels of a description of the *ēbed YHWH*. The servant was to bring *mišpāt* to the Gentiles (42:1–4). The language of Rev 15:4 is strikingly similar: "For all the nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous judgments have been made manifest."

⁵⁶ A similar use of *axios* is found in 4 *Ezra* 12:36 (late first century A.D.): "You alone were worthy to experience the secret of the Most High."

⁵⁷ Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus* 52, suggests that due to the formulaic expression this *axios*-hymn may have already become formalized.

(John 1:29). His sacrificial role, at the very least, is intimated. In contrast *agorazō* belongs to the environment of the marketplace and, specifically, the slave market.⁵⁸ It calls to remembrance the obligations of the "kinsman-redeemer" (*gō'ēl*) described in Lev 25:24-28, 47-54; Num 35:12, 19; Ruth 2-4. These responsibilities included payment of all charges and legal claims regarding the property, or party in question, the avenging of any wrongs suffered by his kin, and the possibility of marriage as a means of redemption.⁵⁹ The "redeemer" is qualified if he is next of kin. Both *agorazō* and *sphazō* are united by one element, the purchase price: *en tō haimati sou*.

The third sphere of the Lamb's activity is an extension of *agorazō* and *sphazō*: "He made them a kingdom and priests unto God," a reaffirmation of 1:6 ("he made us a kingdom, priests unto God and his Father"). The sacrifice of the Lamb carries both royal and priestly implications and calls to mind the promise of Israel in Exod 19:6: "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Both kingly and priestly elements surface throughout the book. On the one hand, the Revelation has to do with war, subjugation and reigning. Doubtless the writer has the imperial cult in view. Yet it is framed throughout in worship and liturgy. The Christian participates in both—war⁶⁰ and worship, royalty and priesthood.⁶¹

Already in 1:5-6, Christ's royal and priestly work are presented side by side. His very appearance in John's vision seems to incorporate both. While wearing the golden sash across the chest (v. 13) and issuing forth a sword with which to conquer (v. 16), he is also wearing the priestly garment, the *poderes* (v. 13).

Finally, v. 10 expresses the work of the Lamb in eschatological terms: *kai basileusousin*⁶² *epi tēs gēs*. The faithful will reign with the Lamb in the future. The promise agrees with statements made later in the book as well: "They will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him" (20:6);

⁵⁸ J. Jeremias, *Der Opfertod Jesu Christi* (CH 62; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1963) 17. Cf. Paul's use of the notion in Gal 4:5.

⁵⁹ Contrary to A. Deissmann (*Licht vom Osten* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1924] 273 ff.), according to whom a slave would be sold by a master to a deity and thus become consecrated to and protected by that deity, W. Elert ("Redemptio ab hostibus," *TLZ* 72 [1947] 267) argues that the ancient slave analogy does not adequately fit Christ since the price paid by him was too steep for comparison.

⁶⁰ On sacral kingship in ancient Near Eastern culture and its application to Jesus see P. Besskov in *Rex Gloriam: The Kingship of Christ in the Early Church* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1962). Note the combining of kingship and priesthood in Psalm 110 and Zechariah 3-4.

⁶¹ The appearance of both notions of kingship and priesthood in Heb 7:14 is ironic. Judah was not known for its priestly function: "For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah, out of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning the priesthood."

⁶² Though witnesses are not conclusive in the reading of *basileusousin* over against *basilousin*, it would agree with 20:6; 22:5. Furthermore *basileusousin* concurs with the "already-not yet" tension existing throughout the book. B. M. Metzger (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [Stuttgart: UBS, 1975] 736) holds *basilousin* to be decidedly secondary. The lengthy comparison of ancient versions to Exod 19:6a given by E. S. Fiorenza (*Priester für Gott* [Münster: Aschendorff, 1972] 101-131) is impressive but unnecessary. She ignores internal evidence for adopting a reading. On how the ancient versions of Exod 19:6 have been translated see R. B. Y. Scott, "A Kingdom of Priests (Exodus xix.6)," *OTS* 8 (1950) 213-219.

“they shall reign forever and ever” (22:5). *Basileusousin* is significant in John’s Apocalypse. It has historical as well as theological consequences.

5. 5:11–12. *Kai eidon*, which introduces v. 11, marks a shift in perspective once more. Now the angels, standing on the periphery in vv. 9–10, join in the chorus of praise around the throne. Worship is swelling. John’s description of the angels, *myriades myriadōn kai chiliades chiliadōn*, is consistent with apocalyptic language⁶³ and resembles the scenario found in Dan 7:10.

Justification for the second *axios*-hymn is also the Lamb’s work: He is *esphagmenon*. Although the angels have not experienced redemption (indeed they long to peer into such),⁶⁴ they have nonetheless witnessed it. Hence they participate in ascribing to the slain Lamb attributes of perfect honor. These are qualities that cause the very glory of the Caesar to pale by contrast: *dynamis* (“power”), the inherent capability or authority that can be exerted;⁶⁵ *ploutos* (“wealth” or “riches”), the effect or result of his might;⁶⁶ *sophia* (“wisdom”), the depth of resource whereby the universe is governed;⁶⁷ *ischys* (“strength”), wielded force;⁶⁸ *timē* (“honor”), a worth far exceeding that of the Roman emperor; *doxa* (“glory”), the robe of kingly majesty.⁶⁹ An almost identical list of attributes, with the exception of *eucharistia* for *ploutos*, occurs in 7:12 in the context of Lamb worship. These qualify the Lamb and reconcile his portrait with that of the Lion in 5:5. In truth, he is perfect deity.

6. 5:13–14. John views the swelling of praise to the fullest limits of all creation in v. 13.⁷⁰ *Ta panta* of 4:11 now return to praise the Lamb. Immediately after the ascribing of divine attributes to the Lamb (v. 12), praise is sung both to the One on the throne and to the Lamb. In position they appear as equals. And added to the list of attributes found in v. 13 is *kratos*, that sovereign, irresistible power that was usurped by the imperial cult in John’s day.⁷¹

At the conclusion of the vision, the focus of what John is seeing moves back to the throne from all creation. The living creatures respond in heaven’s liturgy with *amēn*, while the elders are falling down and worshiping, a scene that resembles that of 4:10. Equally common to an OT as well as rabbinic milieu, *amēn* reinforces that confessions or oaths are valid.⁷²

⁶³ Also 9:16. Cf. Deut 33:2 (LXX); Dan 7:10; Ps 68:17; Jude 14.

⁶⁴ 1 Pet 1:12.

⁶⁵ J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1886) 159–160.

⁶⁶ Cf. “Zum gottesdienstlichen Stil der Johannes-Apokalypse,” *NTS* 3 (1959) 112.

⁶⁷ Prov 8:14–16.

⁶⁸ Thayer, *Lexicon* 309.

⁶⁹ Ch. Brütsch, *Die Offenbarung Jesu Christi: Johannes-Apokalypse. 1: Kapitel 1–10* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1970) 263–264.

⁷⁰ Cf. Ps 103:22; Psalm 148.

⁷¹ The Latin *imperium* represents the Greek *kratos*.

⁷² So P. Glaue, “Amen,” *ZKG* 44 (1925) 184.

Around the throne the "royal council"⁷³ has deliberated and given an affirmation. At times ending a prayer⁷⁴ and, frequently, a psalm,⁷⁵ *āmēn* can also be doubled in OT usage for emphasis.⁷⁶ In the synagogue *āmēn* constituted the most common benediction pronounced by the rabbis.⁷⁷ Hence it was only natural that it should be carried over into the liturgy of the early Christian Church.⁷⁸ *Amēn* is used similarly in 1:6; 7:12; 19:4. John will even personify the term, giving it a titular function: *Tade legei ho amēn, ho martys ho pistos kai alēthinos* (3:14).

Upon the response of the creatures the elders, representative of the saints on earth, fall down before the Lamb. Praise and worship have saturated heaven's courts, spilling out to the reaches of the universe. Now a hush moves over the participants. The only response left is to fall down at the foot of the throne before the One who is worthy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Revelation 5:1-14 represents a high point in the apocalyptic visions of John. A paradoxical figure appears at the throne of heaven: the Lamb. He embodies the notions of royal power and splendor—and yet, curiously, he also embodies priestly sacrifice and atonement. His actions in history (his violent death and rising) trigger a wave of worship and praise that spills over from the region of the throne to the utmost limits of all creation. Heaven and earth seem to participate in this eruption of exultation. The Lamb is touted as worthy of all majesty and honor equaling that of the One sitting on the throne, which would cause even the grandeur of the first-century imperial cult to pale by comparison. With the demonstration of the Lamb's "worth-ship" by opening the seals to the scroll, the stage of John's apocalyptic drama is now set for the outworking of the Lamb's imperial might: judgments upon the earth (6:1 ff.).⁷⁹

⁷³ H.-P. Müller, "Die himmlische Ratsversammlung: Motivgeschichtliches zu Apc. 5,1-5," *ZNW* 54 (1963) 254-267.

⁷⁴ E.g. Neh 8:6; 1 Chr 16:36.

⁷⁵ E.g. Pss 41:14; 72:19; 89:53; 106:48.

⁷⁶ E.g. Num 5:22; Neh 8:6.

⁷⁷ Glaue, "Amen" 186.

⁷⁸ Note its use in the NT as a doxology: Rom 1:25; 9:5; Gal 1:5; Eph 3:21; 1 Tim 6:16; 2 Tim 4:18.

⁷⁹ Utilizing the imagery and theology associated with the Lamb, the writer is projecting identification and encouragement in the task of perseverance for the first-century Christian community, which must express its faith in the context of the Roman powers. One cannot but sense the tone of exhortation toward faithfulness and consolation pervading the whole of the Revelation. Indeed, the lasting appeal of the book is its message, which spans the generations in terms of relevance and impact. This differs considerably with the conclusion of E. S. Fiorenza (*The Book of Revelation* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985] 199), who, concerned about "androcentric language and its socializing function" and specifically the apocalyptic use of "harlot" imagery as a means of perceiving women wrongly, writes that these (i.e., John's) symbols do not any longer persuade Christians to loyal faithfulness to the point of death. Much to the contrary, we would argue that a modern reading of the book, regardless of culture or distance in time, still engenders patience and faith on the part of the saints—that is, where the Lamb, as opposed to a particular political agenda (of which, for example, "inclusive language" might be viewed as symptomatic), remains central to the reader's perspective.