

# The Lamb and the Seven-Sealed Book

by John F. Walvoord

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*The Lamb, Jesus Christ, is declared worthy to take the seven-sealed book and to open the seals thereof, and is worshiped by the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, the angelic hosts, and every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea.*

**Scripture:** Revelation 5:1-13

**Topics:** "Jesus Christ", "Redemption"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on Revelation 5:1-14, focusing on the vision of the throne of heaven where a book with seven seals is held by God. The search for someone worthy to open the book emphasizes the importance and comprehensive nature of its contents. The Lamb, symbolizing Jesus Christ, is declared worthy to open the book, showcasing His victory, authority, and redemptive sacrifice. The heavenly beings worship the Lamb, acknowledging His power and redemption, while all creation joins in praising God and the Lamb for eternity. The scene in Revelation 5 sets the stage for the unfolding events of the tribulation and highlights the significance of accepting Christ's salvation and focusing on eternal values.

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## Transcript

5:1-4 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. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.

Chapter 5 of the book of Revelation continues the vision of the throne of heaven given in the preceding chapter. John is now introduced to an item of central importance, namely, a book which contains the prophecy of impending events to be unfolded in the book of Revelation. The book is actually a scroll (Gr., *biblion*), which is given prominence in the scene by the fact that it is in the right hand of God who is on the throne. The importance and comprehensive character of the revelation contained is indicated by the fact that the book is written on both sides of the parchment. Further, the document is made impressive by seven seals, apparently fixed on the edges of the scroll in such a way that the seals must be successively broken if the scroll is to be unrolled and read. Stauffer observes that the Roman law required a will to be sealed seven times as illustrated in the wills left by Augustus and Vespasian for their successors.<sup>133</sup>

John's attention is especially directed to this book by the pronouncement of a strong angel. The adjective "strong" (Gr., *ischyros*) means "mighty or powerful," and hence indicates that an important angel is selected for this pronouncement. J. B. Smith comments on the "strong angel" as follows:

The vision opens with three notes of emphasis: a strong angel--only twice more is reference made to a strong angel in the book, viz., 10:1 and 18:21 (Greek). The angel proclaims--not merely says. The word signifies to announce as a herald. With a loud voice denotes urgency and great concern... . Who is the strong angel making the challenge? The answer is, doubtless, Gabriel, the one who ordered the closing and sealing of the book to Daniel.<sup>134</sup>

The proclamation itself is given with a loud voice, literally, a loud sound (Gr., *phone*,). The angel raises the question "Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?" John then records in verse 3 that no one in heaven, in earth, or under the earth was able (Gr., *edynato*, meaning "have the power or authority") to open the book. It is evident that the contents of the book are impressive in character and require the power of God for their revelation as well as for the execution of their program. John records that he wept much because no one was found worthy either to open and read or even to look upon the book. The purpose of this dramatic presentation of the seven-sealed book was to impress upon John the importance of its contents and of the revelation contained therein.

#### The Lamb Declared Worthy to Receive the Book (5:5-7)

5:5-7 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. 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. And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne.

As John weeps because in all creation no one is found worthy to open the book, one of the elders is recorded in verse 5 as telling him that he shall not keep on weeping, for one is worthy to open the book, namely, "the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David." The allusion to "the Lion" is a reference to Genesis 49:9-10, where it is predicted that the future ruler of the earth shall come from the tribe of Judah, the lion tribe.

Reference to Christ as the Root of David stems from the prophecy of Isaiah 11:1: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (cf. Isa. 11:10). It is declared that He "hath prevailed" (Gr., *enike*,, *sen*, meaning "to conquer"). In the Greek the verb comes first in the sentence for emphasis. Hence, translated literally it is "Behold, he has conquered, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David."

His victory is such that He has the right not only to take the book but to open it and loose the seven seals thereof. The Scriptures seem to distinguish between opening the book (which would involve beginning the process of unrolling the scroll) and the complete authority to break all the seven seals successively. It implies that Christ is completely worthy and has full authority and sovereignty in respect to the contents of the seven-sealed book.

With this introduction John fixes his gaze upon one portrayed as a Lamb standing in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures. The Lamb is described as having been slain and then raised from the dead and as possessing seven horns and seven eyes. As J. Vernon McGee contrasts the lion and the

lamb characteristics of Christ, he states that the lion character refers to His second coming, since the lion speaks of His majesty. As lion He is sovereign; as lion He is Judge. The lion speaks of the government of God. The lamb character refers to His first coming, for the lamb speaks of His meekness. As lamb He is Saviour; as lamb He is judged. The lamb speaks of the grace of God.<sup>135</sup> As far as the book of Revelation is concerned, however, Christ is referred to as the Lion only once, here in 5:5, in contrast to the many times He is identified as the Lamb. The purpose of the use of the term "lamb" seems to be to identify the glorified Christ of Revelation with Christ the Lamb of sacrifice in His first coming.

The horns seem to speak of the prerogative of a king (cf. Dan. 7:24; Rev. 13:1). The seven eyes are identified as "the seven Spirits of God" sent forth into all the earth (cf. Zech. 3:9; 4:10). Though this may be a reference to seven angels, the preferable view is that it is another reference to the sevenfold Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit was sent by Christ into the world (cf. John 16:7).

Taking the contents of these verses together, the Lamb is represented as one sovereign in His own authority, omnipotent in power, and worthy as the Redeemer who died. Merrill C. Tenney says that the title Lamb

stresses particularly His redemptive aspects since it is modified by the phrase "as though it had been slain" (5:6, 9, 12; 13:8). Never is the exact word "Lamb" used of Christ outside of Revelation, although a similar word meaning "sacrificial lamb" occurs in four passages elsewhere (John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19).<sup>136</sup>

Walter Scott observes,

The term lamb occurs in the Apocalypse twenty-eight times; the word employed signifies a diminutive animal Arnion, not Amnos, as in the Gospel (chap. 1:29, etc.). The word lion is only once applied to Christ in this book.<sup>137</sup>

Consummating the revelation of His person and authority is the declaration of verse 7, that He takes the book out of the right hand of the One sitting upon the throne, who is clearly God the Father.

In the act of receiving the book from God the Father, it is made evident that judgment and power over the earth are committed to Christ the Son of God. Daniel 7:13-14 is a parallel passage. There Daniel reveals the ultimate triumph of Christ when the kingdoms of the world are given to Christ. Daniel declares,

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

In that future day complete authority over the world will be realized by Christ, an authority which He will exercise both in the judgments which precede His second coming and in His reign for one thousand years which will follow His second advent. Once again in the book of Revelation the focus is upon Christ, the central character of the book and the One whose glory is supremely revealed in the unfolding pages of its prophecies.

The Living Creatures and the Elders Worshiping the Lamb (5:8-10)

5:8-10 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 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; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

The importance and significance of the scene which John saw in heaven are recognized on the part of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. By their obeisance and worship of the Lamb as recorded in verse 8 it should be clear that the Lamb is not merely a prophet or an exalted angel but none other than the Lord Jesus Christ in all the majesty of deity, even though portrayed in His sacrificial role as the Lamb who died on the cross.

In connection with their worship of the Lamb, it is mentioned that the creatures and the elders have harps which are symbols and instruments of divine worship, and that they possess and pour out golden vials full of odors which are declared to be the prayers of the saints. The same Lamb of God who suffered the abuse of the soldiers and the scoffing of the crowd as well as the agony on the cross is here being given His rightful worship. Apart from the trumpet, the harp (lyre) is the only instrument mentioned in heavenly worship and was employed commonly in the worship of the Old Testament. There is no direct statement that they are played on this occasion, but this is the implication.

The golden vials or bowls filled with sacred perfume or incense represent the prayers of the saints according to the text. Here in heaven the importance of prayer in the earthly scene is inferred. Later in the book testimony is made to the continued witness on earth of those who trust in Christ during the time of dreadful tribulation. Their prayers are said to be as sweet incense before the throne of God. The role of the elders seems to be one of sympathetic presentation, not that of a mediator of earthly prayers. The symbolism of bowls of incense representing the prayers of the saints is reflected in Psalm 141:2 where David cried to the Lord, "Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice."

Along with their worship and the use of the harps and the incense, they sing a new song in which Christ is declared to be worthy because of His work of redemption and His transformation of men into kings and priests. Bloomfield expresses the wonder "that someone has not written a great oratorio on Revelation. The references to songs, trumpets, and chants provide an important aspect of the moving scene of the book of Revelation."<sup>138</sup> Swete believes that the reference to "kings and priests" which occurs two other times in Revelation (1:6; 20:6) may have been part of an early hymn which had the line "Thou hast made us a kingdom, priests to God and our father, and we shall reign on the earth."<sup>139</sup>

In the comment on Revelation 4:4 it was observed that there is difference of opinion as to the identity of the twenty-four elders. In 5:9-10 additional light is cast upon their character. If the text of the Authorized Version is correct, the twenty-four elders in their new song declare that God has redeemed them by His blood out of every kindred, tongue, people, and nation and has made them kings and priests. If the twenty-four elders are actually redeemed by the blood of Christ, it is clear that they could not be angels but must be redeemed men.

Some ancient versions of Scripture give a different rendering. In keeping with this variation in text, the song herein recorded is translated in the American Standard Version of 1901 as follows:

Worthy art thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation, and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests; and they reign upon the earth.

If this latter rendering is the proper one, it leaves undetermined whether the twenty-four elders are men or angels. It records only that they pay tribute to the Lamb, as the One who was slain and who purchased men from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Such a song would be worthy of angels as well as redeemed men.

The fact that there is a variation in texts in this passage, however, by no means determines beyond question that the text used by the Authorized Version is incorrect. This is still debatable, although most textual scholars of the twentieth century prefer the revised text.<sup>140</sup> Even if the revised text is accepted, however, though it removes absolute proof of the human origin of the twenty-four elders, it does not constitute specific proof that they are angels. It merely leaves the matter open. In view of the fact that the twenty-four elders are pictured as having crowns of gold and clothed in white raiment, as if they are already a complete people judged and rewarded, the weight of evidence still is in favor of considering them as representatives of the church, the Body of Christ. The alternative suggestion that they are angels, however, is possible. Adherents of this view point out that the "crowns" could be representative of government of the universe in which angels participate (cf. Col. 1:16). Probably most New Testament scholars today interpret the elders as angels.

The controversy over the text should not obscure the marvelous symphony of praise that is here ascribed to the Lamb. It is declared to be a new song, that is, a song which could not have been sung prior to His redemptive act, a song over and beyond an ascription of praise to His person or a recognition of His attributes. Here He is declared to have the right to rule, not simply in virtue of His deity but in His victory over sin and death in His act of supreme redemption. The right to the book has been secured by conquering death and providing a complete sacrifice for sin. The act of redemption is declared to be worldwide in that every kindred, tongue, and nation has been redeemed and has transformed sinners, who once were under the wrath of God, into kings and priests who will reign with Christ on the earth.

The song of redemption recorded in this chapter would be entirely normal for saints but would be rather unusual if the angels were involved. Nowhere else in the Bible are angels pictured as singing since sin entered the world. In the early joy of creation before it was spoiled by sin, Job refers to the time "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). The morning stars here are commonly identified with the angels. Since Adam's sin, however, there is no further record of angels singing. On the occasion of the birth of Christ, the angels praised God, but this seems to have been a recital of words of praise, not given in the form of a song. The fact of the wonderful redemption that is in Christ Jesus by which sinners of all kindreds, tribes, and nations can be redeemed and enter into the blessing of saints is the occasion for the new song of redemption; and whether sung by men or angels it is a worthy ascription of praise and worship addressed to the Lamb of God.

The peculiar purpose of God for His church is intimated in verse 10 of the Authorized Version in that the twenty-four elders are declared to be kings and priests who shall reign on earth. Here again it is more natural to refer this to men than to angels. The peculiar privileges of the church are clearly indicated. The church is a priesthood rather than having a priesthood, and is a royal family rather than merely being ruled by a king. The members will not be so much subjects of the kingdom as they will be reigning with Christ on the earth. Here again is intimated the purpose of God to consummate and fulfill the prophecies of an

earthly kingdom in which Christ will reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. The phrase "on the earth" is significant as referring to the earthly millennial reign of Christ in which the church will participate. The Greek preposition *epi* is properly translated "on" or "upon." In this glorious earthly scene to follow the dark hour of the tribulation, the church will share the glory of Christ as joint heirs with Christ and sharers of His sovereign rule.

#### The Worship of the Angels (5:11-12)

5:11-12 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; 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.

John introduces the exaltation of the Lamb in verse 11 with the familiar words "And I beheld, and I heard." Forty-four times in the book he declares that he beheld or saw something and twenty-seven times he declares, "I heard." The tremendous scene left a lasting impression upon John. In concentric circles with the Lamb in the center surrounded by the living creatures and the twenty-four elders, the angelic hosts are seen on every side numbering ten thousand times ten thousand, an innumerable throng in one mighty symphony of praise. They joined in 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." The sevenfold attributes ascribed to the Lamb sum up their worship and adoration. This great chorus of praise is a prelude to the mighty scenes which will unfold, when in succeeding chapters, the seven-sealed book is unrolled. The twenty-four elders sing, and the angels chant their praise in this impressive scene.

#### The Worship of All Creation (5:13-14)

5:13-14 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 for ever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

To this mighty chorus in heaven is added the praise of every creature on earth and under the earth and in the sea. John hears them all joining in blessing and praise to the One on the throne and to the Lamb. Climaxing the scene of worship, the four living creatures pronounce their amen, and the twenty-four elders once again fall down and worship. The closing expression of verse 14, "that liveth for ever and ever," is omitted in some manuscripts, but the reference is clear in any case. With this tremendous awesome introduction, the ground is laid for the unfolding revelation beginning in chapter 6, when the scene shifts once again from heaven to the earth.

The beauty and wonder of the scene in chapter 5 are in startling contrast to the dark clouds of divine judgment portrayed as falling upon the earth in the tribulation as revealed in the chapters which follow. The scenes of earth are always dark in comparison to the glory of heaven. The Christian engulfed by temptation, persecution, and trial can take heart in the fact that our Lord also suffered and was tried, and that He in triumph ascended on high having completed His earthly work. Those who follow in His steps while in the world may endure many afflictions, but they are assured that they will share with the Lord His glory and His grace throughout all eternity.

The scene of chapter 5 can be considered as prophetic of future events in which the church of Jesus Christ bearing witness in the world today will be in the presence of the Lord in heaven. Those who have received Jesus Christ as Saviour and who have entered into the blessings of His redemptive work will be numbered among the tens of thousands pictured in chapter 5 as giving their worship and praise to the Saviour. That which John contemplated in prophetic vision will be an actual part of the future experience of the saints of God as they wait with Christ for the consummating events of the age and the establishment of His kingdom.

With the introduction provided in chapters 4 and 5 which give us the heavenly side of the picture, the narrative in John's vision now turns to the earth in chapter 6. The same Lord and Redeemer who is the object of worship and praise on the part of the saints is also the righteous Judge of the wicked earth and the One by whose authority the terrible events of the tribulation unfold. In the light of these future events, how important is the decision that faces every human soul. Today is the day of grace as the Scriptures make plain. Those who hear and respond to the divine invitation have the promise of blessing throughout eternity and deliverance from the time of judgment which will fall upon those who neglect to enter into the safety of salvation in their day of opportunity.

For many Christians heaven is an unreal place. Even Christians tend to be occupied too much with the things of this present world, which can be seen and touched and felt. Too often goals in life have little to do with eternity's values. Though to the ordinary Christian the privilege of a vision of heaven such as was given the Apostle John and the Apostle Paul is seldom granted, what they saw has been plainly written in the Word of God, and we can see through their eyes the glorious picture of the majesty which surrounds the Lord in heaven. By comparison to the heavenly scene, earth is revealed to be temporary and transitory, and its glory and glitter are tarnished. As far as the heavens are above the earth, so far the glory of heaven transcends what the natural eye can see in this world.

Revelation puts earth and heaven in proper perspective, the scenes of earth ending in the tragic denouement of the great tribulation, and the scenes of heaven fulfilled both in the millennial glory and in the eternal state. The true occupation of the child of God should be one of praise and worship of the God of glory while awaiting the fulfillment of His prophetic Word.

133 Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, pp. 182-83.

134 *A Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 112.

135 *Reveling Through Revelation*, I, 47

136 *Interpreting Revelation*, p. 174.

137 *The Book of Revelation*, p. 135.

138 Arthur E. Bloomfield, *All Things New*, p. 17.

139 Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 82.

140 Cf. the excellent discussion in support of the revised text of Revelation 5:9-10 by N. B. Stonehouse, *Paul Before the Areopagus*, pp. 95-101.

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