

Revelation Five (vv.1-5)

The repetition of the phrase “I saw” (*eidon*, v.1, 2) and “I beheld” (*eidon*, v.6, 11) introduces four new scenes in heaven’s throne room. Revelation 4 and 5 are closely linked. Revelation 4 describes the majesty of the throne and the One who sat on the throne – the **enthroned Sovereign**. There is no direct mention of Christ. Now, in Revelation 5, the Lamb is introduced. The key word changes from “throne” to “book” – this book, and the universal search to find one worthy of opening the book, will become the theme of the chapter – the **extended scroll**. The “*taking [off] the scroll commences a great paean of praise that expands in widening circles, right from the throne, until the whole universe is included in the celestial chorus,*” – the **expanding song**.

The Sealed Book [v.1]

v.1. Before considering the details of the verse, it is necessary to identify and define the “book” [*biblion*]. This is not a book (codex) as we know it, but rather a scroll made from either papyrus or, more likely, animal skins. There are several parallels which suggest the proper interpretation of the scroll:

- First, this appears to be a *legal* document like a title deed or will. Jim Allen says, “*Roman law demanded that a will be sealed with seven seals. Two emperors, Augustus [63BC-AD14] and Vespasian [AD9-79], left wills sealed in this way to be opened by their successors.*” This would suggest there is an inheritance to be claimed and enjoyed.
- Second, Jeremiah 32 describes Jeremiah’s buying of a field in Anathoth belonging to his cousin Hanamel. Despite the impending Babylonian captivity, he bought the field for seven ounces of silver at the direction of the Lord. A deed of purchase was signed and witnessed, with two copies of the transaction being made. One was sealed and the other left unsealed. “Both were carefully buried in an earthen vessel awaiting the day when evidence would be required to establish the rightful ownership of the land. The open copy would declare the rightful ownership but only an authorised hand could open the sealed copy and allow Jeremiah to enjoy the inheritance for which he had paid the price so long before”. Again, the parallel suggests an inheritance of land ready to be claimed by its rightful owner.
- Third, Ezekiel 2 describes a scroll written on the front and back containing words of lament, mourning and woe – these words describe the messages of judgment Ezekiel would bring through his ministry. Both Isaiah and Daniel also speak of sealed scrolls both of which contained prophetic revelation (Isaiah 29.11-12; Daniel 12.4, 9).
- In conclusion, the “book” seems to be a legal document that contains God’s programme for planet earth. Ultimately, it documents a great inheritance which belongs to Christ. This inheritance He will share with His saints. All has been secured by the death of the Lamb. RL Thomas writes, “*It is a ‘history’ of the future that gives the successive steps leading to the inauguration of the world-kingdom of Christ.*” A comparison with Luke 4 is essential. In the synagogue at Nazareth, the Lord Jesus “opened the book” at the prophecy of Isaiah and unfolded His ministry as **Saviour** (vv.17-19). Now, in this second book, He unfolds His ministry as **Sovereign** of the universe. Only He could handle both books!

The scroll was “in [on] the right hand” of the throne-sitter, implying it was resting on an open palm as if offered to one fitted to take it. The right side symbolises a position of power, dignity, and delegated authority (Psalm 110.1). That the book was “written” indicates that God’s programme is unalterably settled – it cannot be changed. God has committed Himself to writing! Being “written within and on the backside” (front and back) declares there is no space for any amendments – there is no ‘plan B’, this is a full, comprehensive account. The scroll is full of script on the inside of the scroll, and on the back side of the scroll after it has been unrolled. God has a complete plan which admits of no additions.

The book is “sealed with seven seals”. It is very likely these were seven wax seals placed along the *outside edge* of the scroll. It is only when all the seals are broken that the scroll can be unrolled and read. Before God’s programme for planet earth can be implemented, the seals must be broken, and their consequent judgments executed. The *seals* contain the judgments of Revelation 6-19, before the *scroll* unfurls the bliss of the kingdom and eternal state. Christ will execute the judgments, then implement the blessings. Once the world has been cleared of all evil by judgment, then the book “*goes on to present the vast system of blessing that God has purposed to establish on the earth for the glory of Christ and the blessing of man*” (Hamilton Smith). That the scroll is sealed with “seven seals” suggests complete security – the contents of the scroll have not been tampered with and remain secret until such time as the Lamb begins to break the seals.

The Strong Lion [vv.2-5]

v.2. A “strong angel” will appear on another two occasions in the book (cf. 10.1; 18.21). The word describes the power and authority of the angel to herald an important announcement. The “loud voice” [*phōnē megálē*] denotes urgency and importance – this is a voice from which none can escape. The proclamation can reach the remotest extremities of the universe. The question is, “Who is worthy?” – worthy to “open the book” by loosing (breaking) the seals. Note. The question is not, “Who is able?” This is not merely a question of power, but moral fitness and merit. The question concerns

worth [áxios] – a word which originally meant ‘of proper weight’ and developed to include *competence* and *inherent sufficiency*. Who can meet the measure (righteous demands) of the throne? Who is competent to unfold the great programme of eternity? Only the One who was slain (v.9)!

v.3. The angel’s challenge to the universe falls on deaf ears! Not a person was able to respond. “But no one” [NET] in *heaven* (angels), nor on *earth* (the living) nor “under the earth” (the dead) was able to answer the challenge. This is a threefold characteristic division of the entire universe (cf. Deuteronomy 5.8; Philippians 2.10). No one “was able”, the *imperfect* tense showing the inability and unworthiness of all creation is a chronic and ongoing condition. “Neither to look thereon” simply means to look inside, read and disclose the contents.

v.4. With no one “found” (a search is implied, though the Greek word suggests a law court where one stands before a judge) worthy “to open the scroll or to look into it” [NET], John began weeping [*klaio*] bitterly. This is a loud, audible weeping like that of the Lord Jesus over Jerusalem (Luke 19.41). Tears are peculiar to earth (cf. 21.4) – it is startling to see John weeping in heaven, albeit he is ‘in the Spirit’. John’s grief is because it seems as if God’s purpose for the world, and consequent defeat of sin and Satan had been indefinitely postponed. Without a qualified person to take the book, “the prophecies would remain unfulfilled, the promises would remain unrealised, the hope of the ages would never be enjoyed.” Thank God, Christ is found worthy!

v.5. The only Person who is fitly qualified to take this book must be a person who is both divine *and* human. This is well illustrated by the first two chapters of Hebrews. Hebrews 1 emphasises the deity of Christ, “*unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom*” (1.8). Hebrews 2 emphasises the humanity of Christ, “*For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak... Thou hast put all things in subjection under his (man’s) feet*” (2.5, 8). God has vested the future dominion of this world in one who is equal with himself, and one who is also man. This is the emphasis of the present verse. One of the “elders” instructs John to “weep not”, for Christ can wipe away every tear (cf. Luke 7.13; 8.52). The “**Lion of the tribe of Judah**” describes the Lord Jesus as a powerful, conquering King. The title is a distinct reference to Genesis 49.9 where Judah is designated as the tribe in whom was invested the *sovereignty* of the nation (Genesis 49.10). Judah (by virtue of his greatest Son, i.e. Christ) is pictured as a young lion growing in strength (cf. Luke 2.40, 52), capturing his prey, and returning in triumph to reign. Indeed, the lion is an animal associated with strength (Proverbs 30.30) and irresistible power. Micah says of the lion he “*treadeth down, and teareth in pieces, And none can deliver*” (5.8). The “**root of David**” is a reference to Isaiah 11.1, 10. Sandwiched between these verses is a beautiful summary of the advents of Christ with particular reference to His millennial reign, for example, “*the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb*” (v.6) and “*the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, As the waters cover the sea*” (v.9). Isaiah 11.1 refers to Christ as a *shoot* out of the root of Jesse. Isaiah 11.10 refers to Christ as the *root* of Jesse. Christ is both the *shoot* and the *root*, that is, He is both the *human descendant* of David (shoot) as well as the *divine source* from which David sprang (root). This is confirmed in Revelation 22.16, “*I am the root and the offspring of David.*” As ‘root’ He is David’s ancestor and Lord, as ‘descendant’ He is David’s son (cf. Luke 20.42, 44). He is both God and man.

The Lion has “prevailed” [*aorist*] – Christ is the mighty overcomer (cf. Luke 11.22; John 16.33), having defeated every foe. The *aorist* suggests He has *already* prevailed. This He did in His death and resurrection, having conquered sin, Satan, death and the grave. The V-Day of Revelation is not future, at Armageddon, it was past, at Calvary. His, then, is the right to “open the book” and “loose the seven seals thereof”. Christ has already ‘loosed’ Lazarus from the *bonds of death* (John 11.44), destroyed (loosed) the *works of the devil* (1 John 3.8) and loosed us from *our sins* (Revelation 1.5). Now He sets about unveiling the final stages of human history.

His unchallengeable right to the throne is indicated in these verses. **1.** He has a *racial* right – He belongs to the tribe of Judah. **2.** He has a *royal* right – He is linked with the dynasty of David. **3.** He has a *redemptive* right – He shed His precious blood (v.6). **4.** He has a *resurrection* right – He stands on the other side of death (v.6).