Out of the different ways we could understand the twenty-four elders, in my opinion, out of the four options we surveyed; the heavenly beings modeled on angelic beings- modeled on the twenty-four courses of priests from 1 Chronicles; the church in heaven raptured away or removed before the events in Revelation 4:22; chapters 4 through 22; the heavenly twenty-four elders as twenty-four representatives of Israel in the church; and the angelic beings that belong to the heavenly court. Out of these I find it difficult to pin it down to one precisely. I wonder if probably a combination of number one and number three, perhaps even four. I would find it hard to exclude four, the idea of heavenly court especially the connection with the mention of elders in Isaiah 24:23. In any case, these then would be angelic beings who would worship God and function as the heavenly representatives of God’s people on earth.

Furthermore, another interesting twist to what’s going on in chapter 4 and in chapter 5 as well, and this might help to provide us also a background for the twenty-four elders, interestingly in some of the images of the literature that depict the emperor in the context of the Roman world the emperor is often described as accompanied by lectors, or the closest thing would be body guards. So the emperor would often go places or be at certain banquets or public events surrounded by lectors or bodyguards. Interestingly according to Seutoneous the historian Domitian had 24 lectors that often accompanied him. Domitian often had these lectors would follow him or when Domitian presided over games or other events often he was accompanied by priests who intriguingly were described as wearing golden crowns. In fact in another literature in Asia Minor the imperial priests who ran the emperor cult, the priests responsible for the emperor cult were often depicted as wearing emperor crowns. So is it possible that John has
constructed an image that relates both to the Old Testament background of maybe twenty-four courses of priests or the heavenly counsel and angelic beings as the heavenly beings as the heavenly representatives of God's people. But at the same time he has used image that reflects what was going on in the Greco-Roman background so that God is actually being compared to Domitian if that is the emperor ruling. So that chapter 4 again is adding more fuel to the fire of chapter 4 being counter-imperial. Although it may be better to say that God is not so much being compared to Domitian as vice versa. Domitian is being compared to God and Domitian’s rule is being said to fall short. God’s rule is contested by the Caesar but Caesar is a poor parody of, or the Caesar is the poor imitation of God’s rule which is in conflict with Caesar.

So therefore, Caesar’s rule can be described in similar ways as God’s reign and God’s rule. Again John may be directly drawing on Greco-Roman imagery is evocative of Jewish background but is also evocative of Greco-Roman background and who is in charge. Who is really the ruler of the universe? It’s not Caesar who is surrounded by his entourage, but it is God who is seated on his throne, surrounded by his entourage of angelic beings who worship and acknowledge his sovereignty indirect contrast to Caesar.

In fact intriguingly, without going into all the details, the whole scene of chapters 4 and 5 may at one level again although we have seen chapters 4 and 5 appears to deliberately modeled on the heavenly throne room of Ezekiel 1 and 2 and Isaiah 6, at the same time chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation may also contrast with known courts scenes in the Roman world.

A series of works, starting with a couple of articles and ending with his major commentary in the Word Biblical Commentary series the first volume that covers chapter 4 and 5. David Aune has argued that much of what one finds in chapters 4 and 5 resembles what we know and what we can know about courts scenes in the Roman world. Where Aune suggests Caesar would have been seated on his throne, he would have been surrounded by his friends. Similar to these
lectors or priests he would have been surrounded by his friends. His friends and those surrounding him would have shouted words of praise and acclamation to Caesar who is seated on his throne. Now in direct parody to that God is depicted as on his throne surrounded by his followers, his friends, his court and they are now shouting words of praise and acclamation to God. So it is God who is King and Caesar is not.

So as I said it may not be so much that God’s throne is a parody of Caesar’s as vice versa. Caesar’s throne is seen to be a parody, a poor parody, and a deficient one of God’s throne. But clearly there’s anti-imperial rhetoric going on here. As John, as I said, drawing in both Old Testament imagery but also Greco-Roman imagery to contrast a scene from the heavenly throne room where God is seated on his throne and all of the residents of the heavenly throne, or the heavenly court, surround God and worship him and acknowledge his sovereignty as creator and ruler over the entire universe.

The other feature to draw attention to in relationship to part of the environs surrounding throne is this reference to “a glassy sea,” or “a sea of glass” starting with verse 4 again. “Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated among twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning. In front of the throne lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass.”

I am going to skip over the seven spirits. We have already seen them introduced. We have said that those seven spirits probably represent the seven-fold spirit of God and not seven separate spirits, but seven being a symbol of perfection and completeness. Here is the full fullness of God, the complete spirit of God.

Glassy Sea

In connection to the throne of God the one I want to focus on is actually two features, starting with this glassy sea. Probably the sea of glass furthers the temple imagery. It probably represents the basin or laver in Solomon’s temple. But
also it appears that this sea of glass may represent again a feature that we find in Ezekiel’s description of his throne vision, back in Ezekiel chapter 1, verse 22. As we said John is heavily dependent on Ezekiel chapters 1 and 2 for describing what he sees and John’s own vision in chapter 4 and 5. But in chapter 1 and verse 22 I will start with verse 19. “When the living creatures moved,” [it kind of anticipates the next group that we will look at the four living creatures]. “wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose form the ground, the wheels also rose.” Let me skip down then to verse 22. “Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse sparkling like crystal, and awesome.” So this vision of an expanse sparkling may resemble or may be the impetus for John’s glassy sea that he now sees. But again there’s probably more reason to limit it to just one than it may given the temple imagery that one finds if this the throne room scene is God’s temple than the background of the basin in Solomon’s temple would certainly provide a fitting background.

But since he is drawing from Ezekiel, Ezekiel 1:22 this sparkling expanse may also provide the background for what John sees. A further possible background would be the Red Sea. Which I will argue plays a role elsewhere in Revelation. In fact, this I think becomes more apparent in chapter 15 in verse 2 of Revelation where intriguingly you see the saints standing victorious starting in chapter 15:1 in heaven. “I saw in heaven another great marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues--lasts because with them God’s wrath is completed.” Now listen to this verse 2, “And I saw what looked like a sea of glass [from chapter 4] “mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image, and over the number of its name. They held harps given to them by God and sang the song of Moses, the servant of God.” So in chapter 15 you have this picture of the saints and the new exodus being delivered from the oppression of evil and from Satan and the beast and the oppressive Roman Empire. Now they stand victorious as Moses and the Israelites did by the sea, and they sing the song of Moses as the Israelites did. So, having
said that, this glassy sea in chapter 4 may also anticipate the Red Sea. The point of this is probably I think simply this, in Revelation the sea often is seen, and I think this was true back in the Exodus account as well, as something that is evil. Later on a beast will come out of the sea. The sea seems to be the same as the abyss from which demonic beings come, from which evil comes. The sea is the home of the dead later on in Revelation. So the sea has all kinds of negative connotations in Revelation. You can find this in Jewish literature as well. The sea is the home of the sea monster, the beast that comes to oppress God’s people. So what you find happening in chapter 4 is this sea of chaos and evil have already been calmed and defeated. So what have God’s people to fear? This sea of evil is already subdued and it is already calmed.

Not only does this anticipate chapter 15 where the people stand beside the sea, it has been calmed and subdued; but it also anticipates chapter 20 verse 21 where the sea was no more. The sea of evil has been removed so that God now brings about a new creative act in Revelation chapter 21. So the idea is all in God’s dwelling, in God’s temple, all is calm. The sea that will cause problem for God’s people in Revelation has already been subdued and already calmed by God’s very presence and by his very sovereignty.

Thunder and Lightning

The other feature to briefly draw your attention to is the thunder and lightning that comes from the throne in verse 5. “From the throne came flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder.” Interestingly, here is another allusion to the Exodus and to Mount Sinai clearly indicating a theophany. This clearly also demonstrates that chapter 4 also is a scene of God on his throne ready to judge. We’ll see again part of what happens with chapter 6 is God begins to judge this creation and wicked humanity in establishing his kingdom.

Four Living Creatures
This then provides us with the backdrop for the next group in verses 6-8 and that is the four living creatures. This is apocalyptic symbolism at its best. Again you have these creatures that have animal features and they have human features as well. One of them looks like a lion, one looks like an ox, another looks like a human being, another looks like a flying eagle. They all have six wings and eyes all over them. They are really strange creatures indeed. Again, this is apocalyptic symbolism at its best.

Clearly John draws his inspiration for this from Ezekiel chapter 1. We have already read about the living creatures in Ezekiel. But also some of the language of six wings comes out of Isaiah chapter 6. So, again, John is drawing on his prophetic predecessors to construct a scene, to make clear that exactly what he saw is in continuity with the other prophets of the past. He is sort of taking on their mantel. But now John writes in light of Jesus Christ who will appear on the scene, in chapter 5.

What you end up having then I think is this picture that John constructs. We said that the throne is the center and with broadening centric circles you have the twenty-four elders next and then I think we are to picture the four living creatures outside of them. The creatures and the elders have the same function they are to worship God day and night. They are to offer God ceased praise because he is the creator of all things and because he is the sovereign ruler over all of his creation. Given the background of Ezekiel and Isaiah, we are probably to understand these four living creatures as angelic beings much like the twenty-four elders. Again the important point that I want to stress is that it is not so important to figure out exactly and precisely who they are as it is to recognize their function—ceased praise and worship of the one who is seated on the throne.

One of the questions that could be raised is why four? To go back to our discussion of symbolism we said even the numbers in Revelation are to be taken not for their strict mathematical or numerical precision but for what they cannot symbolically. We saw number four was the number symbolic of the entire earth.
So, these four touch the four corners of the entire earth suggesting that these four living creatures are probably heavenly angelic beings that represent all of created order. This is the heavenly created counterpart of all of heavenly creation. All of animate creation and all of life is now represented by these four living creatures. These may be suggested by their identity. One is a lion, one is a calf, one is a man and one is an eagle. Again this may suggest the full spectrum of animal creation now that four living creatures is representative of that, offering up the ceaseless praise that interestingly began in anticipation of the universal praise and worship that will eventually transpire on this present earth that now, at this time, contests God’s sovereignty and the worship of God.

So the point of all of this is that all of heaven acknowledges God’s sovereignty. All of heaven, or heaven is a place where God’s sovereignty as creator and ruler over the universe is fully acknowledged by all of heaven, worshiping, offering praise and worship to God.

On Worship

Verses 8 through 11 then depict in a couple places exactly what it is that the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures say and express in their worship. Again if I can read that starting in verse 8: “Each of the four living creatures…day and night never stopped saying ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’” And whenever the creatures do this, then the 24 elders bow down and here’s what they say, “You are worthy our LORD and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and they have their being.” In other words, the point is God is worthy of worship because he is the sovereign creator of all that there is. He is the holy sovereign almighty God who is the creator of all, and who is sovereign over all of creation and for that reason God is worthy of worship.

In other words, if I can be pastoral for just a moment, when we think in terms of worship and why do we worship, sometimes we think that somehow God needs our worship, that God is simply waiting on his creatures to come and
worship. He feeds off of our worship and somehow he needs our worship. Or that God is up there watching down and waiting to make sure that we get our worship right, that we sing the right worship songs and we do things in the right way lest God goes away disappointed because he didn’t receive the worship that he wanted, or again that somehow God needs our worship to sort of boost his ego or something like that. But Revelation chapter 4 reminds us that, no, the reason we worship God is solely because he is worthy of it and because he is deserving of it. God does not need our worship. God does not need his ego boosted by the worship of his creatures. God does not need our worship to find personal fulfillment. He does not need our worship because he is so lonely or because he needs someone to recognize his worth. We worship God solely because he is worthy of it, because he is the sovereign creator of all that is; because he is the holy almighty God that is sovereign over all his creation. For that reason alone, the church must worship and should worship God who is seated on the throne.

So in a sense Revelation 4 and 5 remind us then of a true reality that transcends our earthly reality. It reminds us of who is really in control. It reminds us of who is really worthy of our worship in a context and in an environment where that is contested and in a world that refuses to acknowledge God’s sovereignty. Revelation begins with a vision that is truly real and true that transcends our earthly reality. At the same time, Revelation 4 and 5 anticipates a day when all of creation will acknowledge God’s sovereignty. That’s when all of creation will worship God as the creator of all that there is. Where God’s will will be done “on earth as it is in Heaven.” Chapters 4 and 5 then reminds us that what takes place in heaven has yet to be, but will be, accomplished here on earth despite the fact that earth contested and earth is a place where that is resisted. But in advance of that, Revelation chapters 4 and 5 remind us that we join heaven now in worshipping God. In light of the LORD’s prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” although we still await that. Revelation 21:22, when the church gathers to worship in Revelation or in the first century or in any
other time, the church joins in heaven in acknowledging God’s sovereignty in already worshipping God and acknowledging that God is the sovereign ruler over all of the universe in a world that contests and refuses to acknowledge it.

Also chapters 4 and 5 by providing this vision of worship expose and overthrow all our modern day idols. Anything that would compete with the worship and sovereignty that only God deserves. It reminds us to give the worship and the allegiance to anything or anyone or any group or nation or entity to give them the worship and allegiance that only God deserves is nothing less than idolatry.

A couple of other interesting things about this text, first of all, just to again debunk a modern day popular notion. I was raised with this notion that one day when we get to heaven we will cast our crowns at Jesus’ feet. There are even some songs that reflect us casting our crowns at Jesus’ feet. The only place you would find that notion is Revelation 4:10. They lay their crowns before the throne. Who is it that is laying their crowns before the throne? It’s the twenty-four elders. Who are the twenty-four elders? If we are correct the twenty-four elders are angelic beings and there’s no picture in the New Testament of God’s people casting their crowns or throwing their crowns at Jesus’ feet. It is the angels here in chapter 4 doing that. Again, that may be true. It is just to realize that if a proper understanding of chapter 4 of Revelation, it is not the saints, it is not God’s people that cast their crowns before God’s feet, but this is an expression of the twenty-four elders who are angelic beings, representatives of God’s people so maybe the implication could be God’s people do the same thing one day, that may be true. But primarily, in chapter 4 it is the angelic beings who surround God’s throne and worship him, who cast their crowns. They do that, there’s at least at this point, not primarily a reference only taking place in the future as well.

The other thing is, chapter 4 also provides a glimpse of, or an anticipation of what is going to happen in chapter 21 and 22; especially, the final hymn that the twenty-four elders sing in chapter 4, but also the hymn that the living creatures
sing. But this last hymn, “You are worthy, our LORD our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being.”

Interestingly, as we said earlier, the emergence of the rainbow, if it alludes as most scholars think, to Genesis chapter 6 and the rainbow that represented God’s covenant and God’s commitment to creation, putting it all together, it seems to me that the fact that God is celebrated and worshiped as the Creator of all things anticipates or suggests the fact therefore that God is fully able and powerful enough to perform new creative acts, especially the new creation, Revelation 21 and 22. So already, and again this may be wrapped up with the rainbow as a demonstration of God’s faithfulness to his creation, as the sovereign creator of all things and worthy of worship, God is able to bring about a new creation which he in fact will do in Revelation 21 and 22.

Revelation 5: Continuation of Chapter 4

So, the fact that God is seated on his throne surrounded by his heavenly entourage who render him ceaseless praise and worship, who acknowledge his sovereignty as the sovereign ruler over all of creation, as the sovereign creator of all; now we are prepared to move on to chapter 5. This sets the tone for chapter 5. As we said, chapter 4 provides the backdrop for, or provides the setting, for what one finds in chapter 5.

So chapter 5 then is a continuation of the vision in chapter 4, and as we have already mentioned it is linked by the image of the throne. The same throne that chapter 4 begins with and the one seated on the throne begins chapter 5 in verse 1 where John says, “Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne…” This is the same image mentioned at the beginning of chapter 4. Now as I did with the beginning of chapter 4 I want to read chapter 5. I want you to let the images roll before your eyes so you can visualize what is going on, as John has seen and is now recording. So Revelation chapter 5 in verse 1.
“Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. 2 And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’ 3 But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. 4 I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. 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 triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.’ 6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had 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 him who sat on the throne. 8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people. 9 And they sang a new song, saying:

‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. 10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’ 11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 12 In a loud voice they were saying:

‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’
Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!’

The four living creatures said, ‘Amen,’ and the elders fell down and worshiped.”

So chapter 5 as we said is a continuation of chapter 4, but it functions as the climax of chapter 4. Chapter 4 provides the setting for chapter 5. This is what chapter 4 is driving at. This is where the action takes place in chapter 4. This is the main focus of these two chapters. We have already seen that there is continuity between the two because some of the same images were still in the heavenly throne. We have already noted the one seated upon the throne. We have in reading this chapter seen the four living creatures emerge again. We have seen the twenty-four elders emerge again. So we have the same setting the throne room of God but two additional features emerge in this visionary segment in chapter 5 that are highly significant for understanding what goes on in this chapter.

The two new features or characters are the book of the scroll and the Lamb. These are the two focal points of chapter 5, the scroll or book and the lamb that John sees. The vision revolves around these two things. So chapter 5 begins with God holding, a God who is seated on the throne, the sovereign ruler of the universe, holding the scroll in his hands. Obviously, any sane reader of this chapter would wonder, we haven’t seen this scroll before, I wonder what is in the scroll? What is contained in it? Why is God holding this scroll in his right hand? The right hand is a symbol of authority and power. Why is the one on the throne holding this scroll in his right hand, what does it contain? Why is it significant?

Possible Backgrounds of the Scroll

First of all, the image of a scroll could have multiple backgrounds in a number of scrolls and documents that would have been familiar in the Greco-
Roman world such as a document written on either side known as an epistograph, or wills or testaments. There’s a number of things that John’s scroll could resemble. But at the heart of it, John’s scroll primarily recalls Ezekiel’s in chapter 2 starting in verse 9. This is Ezekiel 2 and 9, which is part of Ezekiel’s throne room vision starting in chapter 1 that John draws on. Now in chapter 2, verse 9, “Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me.” Now listen o this, “On both sides of it were written words” So Ezekiel sees a scroll that has writing on both sides which resembles exactly what John’s is. There are obviously some differences. John has seven seals, and it is not unrolled before him, at least in this scene it is not. Ezekiel associated it primarily with words of lament, mourning and woes, more of a judgment theme. John doesn’t tell us exactly what was in the scroll.

As we said, there’s all kind of evidence of scrolls in the Greco-Roman world. The other Old Testament background from Daniel 12--Daniel sees a sealed scroll. So, all of this provides the background for this scroll that John sees in God’s right hand that is written on both sides. Again, one popular notion is that “well, what this scroll is, this scroll is to be understood as a testament, that is a testament that is to be sealed until the death of a person. Jesus Christ’s death now enables him to open the testament and divulge it’s content. Others have drawn attention to other types of scrolls or documents in the Greco-Roman world, and you can look at commentaries, to read all the different types of descriptions. Whatever it is, and again I would reiterate the primary model comes from Ezekiel 2 and Daniel 12, and also John may be drawing on the image that has resonances with the Greco-Roman world.

But whatever it is, the most important issue is perhaps what is contains and in my opinion, and I would be in agreement with a number of others that suggest something similar, probably this scroll simply contains God’s plan for establishing his kingdom on earth. It is, or maybe, God’s plan for bringing both salvation and judgment to the earth. That is, remember, we said part of the issue with chapter 4
is, how is the scene in heaven where God’s sovereignty is acknowledged, where God rules over all of creation, where all of heaven worships, how does that get acknowledged and realized on earth? The scroll is the plan for how that will happen. It contains the plan for establishing God’s kingdom on earth. It contains God’s plan for bringing about judgment and salvation on this present earth. Now God’s sovereignly holds that plan in his hands, symbolized by a scroll. Again, I don’t think we should see it as a literal scroll especially since later on the Lamb is going to come and take it. How do you envision a lamb coming and taking the scroll at least literally. So again the scroll functions as a symbol of God’s plan to establish his kingdom through judgment and salvation upon the earth.

The Angel

The next figure that kind of appears although the angel, although he does not play an important role, at least by himself in the rest of Revelation 5, the next figure is an angel. We have already suggested and talked about the fact that angels are a part and parcel of apocalyptic literature. You read Jewish apocalypses and you find angels doing various things, and playing various roles in apocalypses in terms of the vision that the seer had and you see the same thing happening in Revelation. Later on we will see the angel taking John to see certain things. John is often in dialogue with angelic beings. Twice he is tempted to bow down and worship an angelic being. But here the angel appears to John and in this vision he plays the role of articulating the main problem of chapter 5 that has to be solved. So the angel’s voice raises the main problem in the form of a question. And that question is this: Who is worthy to break the seal and open the scroll? So the question or issue is, here God is seated as the sovereign creator of the universe, the scroll is in his hand, the scroll that contains his plan for establishing his kingdom on earth, for bringing about salvation and judgment: God is sovereignly holding that scroll. Now the question is: Who in the world is able to walk up and simply take the scroll out of the right hand of the Almighty God, the sovereign creator of all the universe and to open it and divulge its contents and to set its contents into
motion? That is the main question. When the angel says, “who is worthy,” and John says, “Who is worthy to open it and look inside of it?” The idea is not just reading it, that someone would unroll it and read it and roll it back up and say, “that was interesting, let me tell you what it was about.” The idea is by unrolling it and unsealing it someone is able to divulge its contents and to set the contents of the scroll in motion, which are God’s purposes of establishing his kingdom on earth. It is not to be read like any other book on earth. The contents are to be set in motion.

Now in an attempt to answer this question John goes on a universe wide hunt to try to find suitable person to do so. Again the question, “Who is worthy to open the scroll?” that is the main question this chapter answers. This is the main problem that is raised. Where can we find someone worthy to go up to the one seated on the throne, the sovereign creator of the universe, who holds the scroll in his right hand, the symbol of authority and power; who has the authority to go up and take that scroll and then to open it, and enact its contents? So John goes on a universe wide hunt to find a suitable person to do so. What I find interesting here John becomes a participant in his own vision. He is not just seeing a vision now, he actually becomes a participant in his own vision and he goes on a journey, although the text doesn’t tell us exactly how he did so. But the text says he goes through a journey all through the universe as a participant in his own vision to look for someone who can open the scroll. The scope of his search is completely exhausted. He goes to the heavens, all the heavens, including this throne room, the heavenly throne room. He searches through all the earth. To add to that, he searches under the earth. In other words, this is meant to suggest that John leaves no stone unturned. His search for someone worthy is completely exhaustive. The problem too is not so much to figure out physically and geographically where these locations are, the point is this is universal and this is exhaustive. The entire scope of the universe including heaven and I take it that the heavenly throne room, is ransacked to find someone who can walk up and take this scroll and open it and
set its contents in motion. Why I say that too, will be important for understanding the rest of the vision. It is important that John does not even find anybody in heaven. Heaven is full of all kinds of exalted angelic beings, but John does not even find any one in heaven. Among all these heavenly beings, twenty-four elders and four living creatures and what ever other exalted powerful angelic being exists in the heavenly realm, including all the other heavenly parts of the universe, John finds no one who is worthy. Even in heaven where you might expect to find one. One might not expect on earth or under the earth, but even in heaven where one might expect to find someone powerful enough and worthy enough to open the scroll, John finds no one who can open it. Notice three times John emphasizes, no one was worthy to open the scroll. He could find no one that was fit and suitable to take the scroll out of the right hand of God, open its seals and set its contents in motion.

Because of that we are told that John weeps and begins to cry. The construction here in Greek is rather intense. This is not just John’s over in the corner whimpering, it’s an outright weeping and crying, despair because he cannot find anyone to open the scroll. John is freaking out because he can’t find someone to come open the scroll. My question, I have always read this text and wondered, why is that? I have always passed over this as a vestige of apocalyptic literature that’s just what happens, John weeps to add some suspense, to add some interest in the narrative. But when you think about it, why does John weep? If this scroll contains God’s plan to establish his kingdom and to bring about judgment and salvation, if John can’t find anyone to open the scroll, and again he hasn’t. He has searched the universe over every nook and cranny and found no one worthy. If he cannot find one worthy then there is no salvation for God’s people. If God cannot find anyone worthy then there is no vindication for God’s people that are suffering. If John cannot find anyone worthy there is no justice on this earth. If John cannot find anyone worthy, the church’s suffering is completely vain and their sacrifice, even those that have sacrificed in death, it is in vain. If John does
not find anyone worthy there is no hope for God’s people there is no justice in the world; there is no salvation for God’s people.

The Lion of Judah

So John weeps, and no wonder he weeps. One of the twenty-four elders that we were introduced to back in chapter 4 then interrupts John’s weeping with good news. There is someone worthy who has been found. There is someone worthy to open the scroll. That is the person that the twenty-four elders introduce as the lion of the tribe of Judah.

Now what I want to emphasize here, this will become important, is that John only hears about this. The elder tells John in a speech that there’s someone. So John hasn’t seen this person. The elder simply says there is someone worthy, it is the lion of the tribe of Judah. Using Old Testament imagery from Genesis chapter 49 and verse 9 and also Isaiah chapter 11 and verse 1, this is imagery of the tribe. The Messiah came from the line of Judah and a lion as well. This is the one the angel says, this lion from the tribe of Judah, from the root of David is again a theme from Isaiah. This person has triumphed or conquered, the same word used back in chapters 2 or 3 of the church overcoming. Now this lion from the tribe of Judah, a clear reference to Jesus as the Messiah, has overcome, or conquered or triumphed, depending on your English translation. Now he is able because he has overcome and triumphed, he is able to open the scroll and the seven seals in order to divulge its contents.

Now it is interesting the author does not tell us specifically at this point how the lion from the tribe of Judah has overcome. One would expect through a display of might and power, perhaps military power, one who is depicted as a lion and from the tribe of Judah. So as one might perhaps read this and expect he must have overcome through a display of might and power. Therefore he is now able to overcome; he is now able to take this scroll out of the right hand of God, and to take away its seals and divulge its contents, and to set the content in motion. And again that is a reminder that the scroll contains God’s plan of establishing his
kingdom on earth, bringing about salvation and judgment.

What follows is one of the greatest paradoxes in the book of Revelation, if not in the entire New Testament, and maybe in the entire Bible. The elder has introduced John through speech simply communicating to him and telling him that there is someone, there is a lion from the tribe of Judah, the root of David, who has already overcome, perhaps conjuring up ideas of military victory and might. This person has overcome and that’s what John hears.

The Lamb

Now what happens is... what John sees next is anything but a conquering lion from the tribe of Judah. Instead, when John turns around he sees the Lamb standing as slain. He sees the Lamb who looks as if it had been slaughtered. The fact that literally the text says, “appears as slaughtered.” By that John doesn’t mean that he looks like he was slaughtered but wasn’t; he more likely means that the lamb looks like he was slaughtered because he actually was. But now he stands alive before John, but he still looks like he was slaughtered because he actually was. So John is not questioning saying that he looks like he was slaughtered by the really wasn’t. But what is intriguing is the paradox or the tension between, John hearing the solution: there is a lion from the tribe of Judah. But when he turns to see the lion from the tribe of Judah he doesn’t see a lion. He sees just the opposite, he sees a lamb, and moreover a lamb that has been slain or slaughtered.

Probably the background of this is the Passover lamb of the exodus and as well as the suffering from Isaiah chapter 53, the lamb that was slaughtered. But the paradox is startling. A lion that now looks like a lamb. This will be important. Actually, this introduced an important principle that we will see elsewhere in Revelation. It will help us make sense of a couple other places in Revelation that have been disputed as far as how you interpret them. Again, British scholar Richard Baucham has done more than anyone else to highlight this theme and show its significance. That is, the importance of Revelation is that you often find a juxtaposition throughout Revelation of what John hears and what John sees.
Several times John will hear something followed immediately by what John sees. Often what he sees interprets from a different angle what it was he heard. So here, what John hears is a lion from the tribe of Judah who conquers; but what he sees then is not, so these are not two different entities. He sees the same thing from different perspectives. But what he sees further interprets what he heard. He hears there is a lion from the tribe of Judah who has overcome, but when he turns to see he doesn’t see a lion of Judah, he sees a lamb that has been slain.

The question then is, how has the Lamb overcome? How has the lion from the tribe of Judah overcome? How is this lamb worthy to take the scroll? It’s through his suffering and death. How has God conquered and won the victory? How has the Lamb overcome? He overcomes through his suffering and death. He conquers through his sacrificial death and because of the death and the resurrection of the Lamb, because he is the one who has died and is now above. He is worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals and divulge its contents something that no one else could do, therefore setting the events in motion.

So unlike the Roman Empire, it’s as if John wants to present an alternative vision of conquering. The Roman Empire conquers by the sword, they conquer by violence, they overcome by military might and by extending their empire. Now by contrast John presents a vision of conquers that is completely counter to that. That is Jesus Christ overcomes through his suffering, death and sacrifice. It’s his resurrection that vindicated him. So this makes him worthy to take the scroll. In fact, this then also becomes a model of how his churches are to overcome.

So then back to chapters 2 and 3 there was a promise made to those who had overcome. How were they to overcome? How were they to conquer and be victorious in the same way the Lamb does? Through his faithful suffering witness. Through their faithful sacrificing witnessing the church will overcome in the same way the lamb does.
The Climax of Rev 5

What happens next then again you begin to find a number of verbs of action, indicative verbs that carry the words and the scene along. In verse 7 we find what I think is the climax of chapter 5. This is what everything is leading up to. Finally, the Lamb, in verse 7, came and took the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne. This is the climax of the scene. In fact, the verb tense of the verb “took” is in the perfect tense in Greek, which is one of the tenses an author can use to foreground an activity to make it standout from everything else. And that is exactly what John is doing here by using the perfect tense form of this verb “took.” John wants this to stick out. This is the climax. This is the centerpiece of chapter 5. This is what the whole vision has been leading to. This is the solution to the problem raised by the angel. Who can take the scroll? Here he is, the Lamb who was slain who has conquered through his sacrificial death is now worthy to come and take the scroll from the right hand of the one who is seated on the throne.

Now one of the questions that this raises is who is it that can simply walk up to the one who is seated on the throne and snatch the scroll from his hand? Remember this is the sovereign God who is seated on the throne, who holds the scroll in his hands, the plan for establishing his kingdom on earth for judgment and salvation. Who can simply walk right up and snatch the scroll from his hand? Who is worthy and fit enough to do that? And notice too, that it’s interesting that the Lamb, and this is related to something we have mentioned previously, it is intriguing that the lamb just sort of emerges from the throne. You don’t see an all of a sudden as you see in some interesting scenes like in science fiction movies. You don’t see a crowd parting and some warrior walks up to the throne. You don’t see the lamb coming from outside or simply, “O, I missed that person standing over there” and then the Lamb comes and enters the throne room. Instead, the Lamb just sort of emerges from the center of the throne. He doesn’t come from the outside.
Furthermore, we have already said remember John has looked everywhere including in heaven. So it is not as if this is someone John missed. John looked throughout heaven and O, it’s not presented; O, he missed the Lamb. Somehow he failed to see the Lamb. No, he has looked all over the place. He has looked throughout the heavens and he has found no one. And that raises the question, who is this person who can simply walk up to the throne and take the scroll out of the right hand of the one seated on the throne? And who is this person who emerges from the throne when John has already looked throughout the heavens and even the most exalted and angelic beings is not worthy to take the scroll. Who is this person who emerges from the throne and now takes the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne?

The point I think is that this is no ordinary figure. This is someone who is greater than anyone else in the universe. Even the highest and exalted and most powerful angelic being, this is none other than God himself. This is someone who the divide between God and all of creation, this person stands on the God side of the divide. This is someone who shares in the very being of God. This is someone who is unique and none other than God himself, as I think the rest of Revelation chapter 5 will demonstrate.

But now that the crucial event has happened, now that the dilemma has been solved, who is worthy to open the scroll? Now someone has been found worthy, but kind of ironically through his sacrificial death and resurrection and now that the event of taking the scroll has happened, now that the dilemma has been solved, we are now prepared for the rest of the chapter where heaven is going to respond to this unique event.

Next time we will look at heaven’s response to the lamb taking the scroll and preparing to open it and act on its contents.

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