Rev 5-6: The Lamb and the Seals on the Scroll

Introduction

So Christ has taken the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne, the scroll that contains God’s plan for establishing his kingdom. The point of chapter 5, as we’ve seen, is that Jesus is worthy, the only one worthy to take the scroll. That is because he is the slaughtered lamb, the one who was slain. He is the one who has purchased people from all of humanity to be a kingdom of priests as we’ll see and it’s based on his death, his sacrificial death on the cross as the Passover lamb and perhaps also as the suffering servant lamb in Isaiah 53 that Jesus now is worthy to take the scroll and open it’s seals meaning that he will now set its contents into motion. The rest of the chapter 5 then is actually a response to what happens in verse 7. Starting with verse 8 we begin to see heaven’s response to this act.

So 8 through the rest of chapter 5 will be the response of all of heaven and we’ve already been introduced to the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures but we will be introduced to other angelic beings that inhabit the heavenly throne room. The rest of chapter 5 will articulate their response to what happens in verse 7 with the lamb taking the scroll. Notice how often the word “take” or “receive” depending on your translation, occurs in verses 8 to the end of chapter 5. Because the remainder of this section is actually a section of hymns. We’re introduced to a couple of hymns that were sung by the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures in chapter 4 but now we’ll see more extensive singing of hymns by angelic beings as they celebrate this event in verse 7 of the lamb taking the scroll. All of these hymns function then to interpret the scene in verses 1-7 of what has just happened.

Old Testament Backgrounds

Now one important text to keep in mind what lies behind chapter 5 especially as we’ve said chapter 4 and 5 belong together. One of the things that suggests that not only the similar imagery occur such as the throne and the one seated on the throne and the
twenty-four elders and the four living creatures and some of the similar characters and features but also the fact that the same Old Testament text lies behind both of them. That is Ezekiel chapter 1 and 2 and also Isaiah chapter 6, both throne room visions of the prophets now provide the model for John’s vision.

There’s another important text that particularly comes into play in chapter 5 and that is a text we’ve already seen play a roll back in chapter 1 where Jesus appears to John in an inaugural vision to commission him to address the seven churches. There Jesus is portrayed as the exalted son of man in fulfillment of Daniel chapter 7. And in Daniel chapter 7, especially verses 13 and 14, this is what we read: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.” So Jesus here in chapter 5, approaching the one seated on the throne and now verse 14, “He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” So Daniel chapter 7 which portrays the son of man approaching the throne, the Ancient of Days seated on the throne now receives authority and power. Now he receives a kingdom from him and enters into his kingly rule. That now gets fulfilled with the lamb entering into his rule by receiving the scroll from the one seated on the throne and receiving power and authority. In fact, we’ll see that’s exactly what the hymns celebrate. The hymns celebrate the reception of power and authority and might and wisdom and glory and honor. The very things that we find anticipated in Daniel chapter 7. So this act in chapter 5 is the fulfillment of Daniel chapter 7, where now Jesus receives his kingly authority.

**Investiture Scene**

What this means is when we read chapter 5, we probably should not read this so much as or just as an enthronement scene as if Jesus now is led to the throne and now sits on the throne as much as seeing it as what David Aune and his commentary calls “an investiture scene.” That is Jesus is now invested with authority and power and this is what question three was all about: Who is worthy to receive and take this scroll and to
open it? Who has the authority, who is worthy to do so? Now Christ is celebrating this event as Christ is now invested with the power and the authority to take the scroll that is, to receive the kingdom of God and now to enact the contents of the scroll.

Heavenly Temple

What I want to do then is as we’ve done in other texts is simply highlight some of the more important features of this section especially verses 8 through 12 which again is sort out the hymnic celebration of what happens in verse 7 and that is, Christ now receiving the authority to take the scroll and to open it. First of all, notice the significance once again that the temple imagery plays in chapter 5. We’ve already seen a couple of the features in chapter 4 and 5 that suggest that this is not just the picture of heaven, but that heaven is being conceived of as God’s temple. It is a heavenly temple where God dwells and one of those is the presence of the golden bowls. Notice verse 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.” The golden bowls probably suggesting those bowls that were on the table of the presence of the tabernacle in Exodus chapter 25, for example. It’s interesting that the golden bowls occur no less than 12 times throughout the book of Revelation and here again they function to indicate that this should be seen as a heavenly temple. Perhaps the angels here are meant to be the four creatures and the twenty-four elders are meant to be portrayed as having a priestly function by the fact that they hold these golden bowls. What is important is they contain incense which the author identifies as “the prayer of the saints” in verse 8. Now this will become important because later on, especially in chapter 6, in the fifth seal, the incense and later on in Revelation, the incense will be identified as the prayer of the saints which God responds to vindicate them and to show that their suffering was not in vain, to bring about vindication, that is portrayed as the prayer of the saints. So what that means is we are to see the rest of chapter 6 through 20, in a sense, as a response to the prayer of the saints which are identified with the bowls full of incense. We’ll look at that as we work through Revelations and see the golden bowls crop up and see how they function at times.
Heaven Breaking out in Worship

The second thing to notice about this section is note how in verses 8 through the end of the chapter five, heaven breaks out in worship in response to verse 7. Heaven breaks out in worship and ever widening concentric circles. So again you have this picture where the throne is at the center of all things and then the heavenly response moves outward, in ever broadening concentric circles. So note in verse 8, it’s the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures who in verse 9 sing this song “You are worthy to take the scroll. [Notice that to take the scroll, link right back to verse 7] and open its seals.” The reason is because “you were slain and with that purchased the people of God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom of priests, to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” So beginning with the twenty-four elders and the four creatures that were introduced to in chapter 4, now they were the first surrounding the throne celebrating what happened in verse 7, the taking of the scroll by the Lamb. They give the reason here clearly because he was slain and through his death he purchased salvation for humanity.

But notice second in verse 11, John says “then I looked and I 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 elders.” So now you have another layer, the myriads of angels or thousands and thousands and ten thousands upon thousands circling the throne and they also sing: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive to power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

But then finally, in verse 13, John says, “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them.” So now you have a circle that encompasses basically all of creation saying “to him who sits on the throne” in verse 13, “and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever.” So heaven bursts out in worship and ever widening concentric circle centered around the throne where eventually all things, all of creation focuses on the center, again everything flows from the center. God’s rule and everything that’s going to happen in chapters 6-22, after chapter 5, all flow from the center, from the throne, and eventually all
creation joins in worshipping. Perhaps what we see here is an anticipation of the final scene in chapter 21 and 22 where all of creation then comes under God’s rule and acknowledges God’s sovereignty.

The Slain Lamb

Number three, the third thing to say is the point of this chapter then especially in that first hymn that the twenty-four elders and four living creatures sing and also the vision of Christ back in chapter 5 verses 5 and 6 is that the Lamb is worthy precisely because through his death on the cross he has accomplished redemption for humanity. One interesting thing that we’ve already seen is the author forges an interesting concept of overcoming, or conquering. Remember we said the scene begins by John hearing that there was someone that was worthy to open the scroll, one who had overcome and had done so because he was the lion of the tribe of Judah. When John turns around to see this person what he sees is not a lion but a slain lamb.

Interestingly too, this lamb is described back in verses 5 and 6 as having seven horns with seven eyes, which again seems to connote a very militaristic image and connotes power and strength. In fact, this image of a seven horned lamb occurs elsewhere in Jewish apocalyptic literature, for example, and this is a text from one of the early apocalypses that is not found in the canonical New Testament. But a very common one and an influential apocalypse called the book of 1 Enoch. In one of his visions using animals to symbolize different persons and nations, he envisions a lamb that grows horns and has strength and great military power. This is first Enoch chapter 90. The author says, “Then behold, lambs were born from the snow white sheep and they begin to open their eyes and see and they cried out to the sheep but it is for the sheep they cried out aloud to them. Yet they did not listen to what the lambs were telling them. But they became exceedingly deafened and their eyes became exceedingly dim sighted. Then I saw in a vision ravens flying above the lambs and they seized one of those lambs and then smashing the sheep they ate them. I kept seeing until those lambs grew horns. But the ravens crushed their horns. Then I kept seeing until one great horn sprouted on one of the sheep and he opened their eyes and they had vision in them and their eyes were opened.
And he cried aloud and the sheep and all the rams saw him and they ran onto him.” I’ll stop right there but the point is note the image of the sheep with horns suggesting power and might.

But once again John reinterprets that by demonstrating at least initially the horned lamb comes to conquer but he does so as a slain lamb. As one who purchases, who is worthy to open the scroll because he was slain and through his blood he’s purchased and redeemed humanity unto himself.

Deity of Christ Who Receives Worship

The next point to note is in the section and we’ve already seen hints of this in that the lamb seems to be very unique feature, a unique person. John has already sought all through earth and under the earth and all through the heavens and has found no one worthy. So now that the lamb has been found to be worthy and can simply walk up and take the scroll out of the right hand of the one on the throne, the question is raised: “What kind of person is this? What kind of lamb is this?” This is unlike any other person on earth, under the earth, or even in the heavens. But now in the rest of this hymnic section, I think we find one of the strongest statements for Christ’s deity anywhere in the New Testament. Notice that Christ receives some of the identical worship as God does back in chapter 4. For example, notice especially in verse 12 “Worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” Go back to verse 11 of chapter 4, the hymn sung to God “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 have their being.” So Jesus Christ actually receives even an identical wording, “power and glory and might and honor,” receiving the exact same worship as God did in chapter 4. Now Jesus Christ receives it in chapter 5.

What is significant about that is that he receives this praise in the context of strict monotheistic worship. That is if you go back to chapter 4, the scene in chapter 4 would not have been unusual or anything new of God. God seated on the throne and sovereign over all creation and receiving the worship of all of heaven, that would not have been strange or startling to any Jewish reader. But chapter 5 introduces a twist in such a
monotheistic context in chapter 4 where God as the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the only one worthy of worship and to worship any other thing in creation is pure idolatry. Now the author places not only Jesus Christ receiving the same worship as God did in chapter 4 by the same persons, but now also he does so by placing Jesus on the exact same throne. Look at, for example, look at verse 13 “then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in heaven saying to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb.” So now this last hymn worships both God on the throne and the lamb in the same breathe.

What is more interesting is that twice in Revelation, we see this very interesting event. It occurs in chapter 19 and it also occurs back in chapter 22, right at the very end of the book. I’ll read the one from chapter 22 at the end of the book, at the very end of his vision where an angelic being has taken John on a tour. He showed him the New Jerusalem. And now at the very end of his vision he addresses John and here’s what happens in verse 8, “I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. But the angel said to me, ‘Do not do it. I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!’” That happens twice, in other words, even this angelic being refused worship because only God is worthy of worship. So in this sort of a context where only God is worthy of worship and no other being, however exalted an angelic being, is worthy of worship how can one have Jesus Christ on the same throne as God and receiving the same worship as God?

Elsewhere it’s interesting, the author will portray, we saw this already back in one of the letters to the churches that the saints themselves will sit on the throne and rule with Christ, but something very different is going on here. The saints are not worshiped as the creature and worthy of worship. Only the lamb is portrayed as worthy of worship and on the throne of God, in a context that is strictly monotheistic. In other words, what the author is doing is that in some sense Jesus Christ then participates in the very being an essence of God. How can Jesus be worshiped without violating strict monotheism? That
there is only one God, who is worthy of worship? To worship anything else is idolatry, unless somehow Jesus participates in the very being of God. So this is the kind of thing that resulted in later Nicene Creeds and Caledonian Christology that affirmed the deity of Christ and that Jesus Christ shared, as the second person of the God head, and shared in the very essence and being of God. Without using that kind of language we find that idea here already in having Jesus Christ being the object of worship, the same worship that God receives without in any sense violating strict monotheism.

New Song: Kingdom Inauguration

Another point to emphasize in verse 9 is it’s interesting that the psalm that the living creature sings and the twenty-four elders sing is called “a new song.” This word “new” or “newness” is significant because it reflects an important idea that God through Jesus Christ, is going to establish a new creation which happens in chapter 21 in verse 22. But already by singing a new song, it’s as if Christ has inaugurated a new creation through his death on the cross and through establishing a kingdom of priests which again in chapter 22 of Revelation it ends by God’s people functioning as kings and priests. They function as priests in God’s presence and they reign forever and ever. But already that new creation has been inaugurated through Jesus Christ’s death and by purchasing humanity to become his kingdom of priests. Already the new creation has been inaugurated and this text celebrates that but it also anticipates the consummated new creation in Revelation 21 and 22 where in chapter 21 verse 1 is “I saw a new heavens and a new earth.”

Kingdom of Priests

Another significant element of this section is one that we’ve already seen and that is the salvation that God provides for his people, the establishment of his kingdom that issues from the throne and from the scene is to be understood as a new Exodus. That is the verse I just read again, Jesus is “worthy to take the scroll because he was slain and by his blood he purchased men for God or people for God from every tribe, language and people and he’s made them to be a kingdom of priests.” We saw this back in chapters 1, 5, and 6 in the epistolary introduction in Revelation and now it’s repeated here. In other
words, the slaughtered lamb, the slain lamb, which we said probably recalls both Isaiah 53:7 “The slaughtered lamb and the suffering servant passage, but also the Passover lamb, by Jesus’ blood he ransoms humanity; he frees them as he did his people in the Exodus.

Then he frees them from bondage and leads them to become a kingdom of priests. He establishes them and creates them to function as a kingdom of priests. This language of “kingdom of priests” we said indicates a connection with Exodus 19:6 where God leads his people out of Egypt and establishes them to be his kingdom of priests, which itself goes all the way back to Genesis 1 and 2. Adam and Eve were to function as kings and priests. They were to rule over all creation as God’s representatives. They were to be priests in God’s presence and to worship him. Now Israel was called in Exodus 19:6 to do the same thing and now God’s people, his universal, transcultural people from every tribe and tongue and language are now meant to function as kings and priests in fulfillment of God’s intention for the Exodus. Now this note the very end of verse 10 says this kingdom of priests is to serve God and they will reign on the earth.

Already/but not yet Aspect of Our Reign

Now interestingly as hopefully most of you know, the New Testament comes down in a number of manuscripts, we don’t have the original copies of the New Testament text, we don’t have the original manuscript that John wrote but we have copies of copies of copies. In fact, we have a number of copies and sometimes those manuscripts differ slightly and through a process called textual criticism scholars have been able to, with a high degree of confidence, restore what most likely it was John wrote. Most of the differences are rather minor, but some manuscripts actually have the present tense that is “they reign on the earth.” Others have the future, “they will reign on the earth” and so the question is: Is this an anticipation of a future reign or is this an anticipation of a present reign? Whatever the case, again, throughout Revelation I think it makes it clear that it’s a both/end because already God’s people are a kingdom of priests. Already God has created a kingdom of priests that represent his rule on earth.

However, this text perhaps may focus more on the future fulfillment of that,
especially in texts like Revelation 20 in verse 4 and 6, in the passage on the millennial kingdom where those who have suffered and have been beheaded come to life. Now they are raised to life and they reign with Christ for a thousand years, presenting a fulfillment of this text. They said also chapter 22 in the new creation, the fact that 22:5 ends by saying “and they will reign forever and ever.” So this section, this last line of verse 10, “they will reign on the earth” may be an anticipation of chapters 20, and 21 where in the future God’s people will reign with Christ on this earth and in chapter 22 in a new creation forever and ever. But it’s important to realize that Revelation elsewhere does suggest that already God’s people reign because already Christ has created through His death on the cross has purchased people and created a kingdom of priests.

This verse created in a kingdom of priests and suggesting they will reign on the earth. This probably also reflects Daniel chapter 7 when Daniel interprets that vision that he had of the son of man coming to the ancient of days to receive a kingdom, to receive authority, glory, and power, and all people bowing before him. Interestingly, in verse 22, starting in verse 21 he says, “as I watched this horn was raging war against the saints and defeating them until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints and the most high and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.” So even Daniel 7 includes the saints also possessing the kingdom. Now we see not only then does Christ have the authority and possess the kingdom in fulfillment of the son of man, prophecy in Daniel 7 but now also his people will reign in a fulfillment of Daniel 7, they also will possess the kingdom and will reign on the earth. We said this ultimately gets fulfilled in Revelation 20 in the millennial kingdom text and even beyond that in the new creation in chapters 21 and 22.

Another important feature is this language still found in verses 9 and 10, this language of people from every tribe and language and people and nation. This is also language that seems to primarily come out of the book of Daniel. In fact, you find a similar list of words that refer to people, not just Jewish nations, but people generally, Gentile and the nations, you find that sort of language in several places in Daniel. For example, starting in chapter 3 and verse 4 and 7 he says, I’ll back up and read 4, that was
“then the herald loudly proclaimed ‘this is what you’re commanded to do’” and this is in the context of Nebuchadnezzar requiring everyone to bow down to an image. “This is what you’re commanded to do, O peoples, nations, and men of every language, as soon as you hear the sound, then you bow down.” Then later on in verse 7, “therefore as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations, and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image.” Then, for example, in Daniel chapter 7 in verse 14, which is significant because John is drawing on Daniel 7 in this text. Daniel 7 says the son of man who comes to the Ancient of Days to receive a kingdom, “He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all people’s, nations, and men of every language worshiped him.” Interestingly, you’ll note that those had three categories. If you read the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Daniel, it actually includes four, just like Revelation does. Again Revelation has a four-fold, “every tribe language, people, and nation,” and the Greek translation, the Septuagint, the LXX, of Daniel also includes a four-fold division.

People of God

What is interesting about that is, what John does then is introduces an important theme throughout the rest of the chapter that has a two-fold significance. First of all is the people of God. Now that Christ will redeem and fulfill his promises through and make a kingdom of priests, they are no longer restricted to national Israel but now it is a transcultural, universal people of God consisting of every tribe and language and people and tongue including Israel, but not limited Israel any longer. Now faith in Jesus Christ is the criteria for which one becomes a member of the true people of God. So all throughout Revelation we’re going to see this happen over and over again where promises given to Israel in the Old Testament now are fulfilled not solely through national Israel, but through a universal transcultural people of God, people from every tribe and language and tongue. We see that here in the fact that Exodus 19:6 “Making a kingdom of priests” now is fulfilled by a people of every language, tribe, and tongue.
Kingdom Transfer

The second reason why that is significant is because in order for God to establish his kingdom, we said that part of Revelation is to show how God’s sovereignty and his rule that is acknowledged perfectly in heaven and realized in heaven, how does that finally get worked out on earth? What that means is there must be a taking away or a transfer of the kingdom of Satan and of this world and of the human rulers and authorities such as the Roman Empire that is transferred to God and to the Lamb, Jesus Christ. That also means though, that God must also rescue those who are under the rule of Satan and under the rule of the wicked empire such as Rome and now he must transfer them into his kingdom. So what that means is all the nations now, an important theme throughout Revelation, who find themselves under the bondage of Satan and under the oppressive regime of Rome and human kingdoms now are rescued from that and transferred under the rulership of God and the Lamb. That’s what’s going on here in verses 9 and 10. God has purchased people through Jesus Christ and now has made them his kingdom and priests for himself to represent his rule, to represent his presence in the earth. So this transfer of the kingdom from Satan from the beast to God and the lamb also entails transference of its subjects of the people of all of the nations under the rule of Satan and the beast now to become a kingdom of priests for God and for the Lamb.

It’s interesting too that some form of this phrase “nations, people, tribe, language, etc.,” occurs seven times in Revelation. So this is probably deliberate, not coincidental. John has repeated this phrase seven times. We find it here in chapter 5 in verse 9, we’ll find it in chapter 7 in verse 9, in chapter 10 and verse 11, in chapter 11 and verse 9, and chapter 13 in verse 7 in the context of the beast rule over the earth. Then it will be used in chapter 14 verse 6, and finally chapter 17 and verse 15. So those seven times you find some version of this fourfold phrase that we find here in chapter 5 in verse 9, “people from every tribe and language and people and nation.”

He is Worthy: Seven-fold Praise

Finally, the last thing I want to say is interestingly, in Rev 5:11, and 12 especially verse 12 which constitutes the hymn that was sung in praise and honor of Jesus Christ
celebrating the fact that he is worthy, along with God himself; he is worthy to be worshiped by all of creation and he’s worthy to take the scroll and open it and set its contents in motion. Notice the ascriptions given to him: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Note interestingly that this is seven-fold. Note that there are seven elements that are mentioned I’m in chapter 5, verse 13, “power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” There are seven elements given, again probably to indicate the fullness and perfection of the worship and praise given to Christ and the praise that he deserves.

It’s intriguing you can find numerous parallels to this in the Old Testament, one of the more intriguing ones is the prayer of David in 1 Chronicles 29:11. I’ll read verse 10 as well, “David praised the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly saying, ‘Praise to you, O Lord, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and on earth is yours.” And you can find other similar praises but intriguingly you have, I think not coincidently, but intentionally, but not only allusions not only to the New Testament but praise given to God and now to Christ but it’s intriguing that it is seven-fold. Again, probably playing off the number seven, indicating perfection and completeness.

Revelation 5

Now interestingly, to contrast that with the next and last hymn that is sung in verse 13 where all of the creatures in heaven and in earth and under the earth come and they now sing to the one sits on the throne and to the Lamb. Here’s what they say, “praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever,… Amen.” It’s interesting that this praise is only four-fold. There are only four items mentioned although they overlap with what has been said to the Lamb before. But it’s intriguing only four are mentioned. I would suggest again perhaps that this is intentional. Four being the number that suggests the entire earth such as the four corners of the earth. We talked a little bit about that with four being symbolic of all creation. That would be sitting here because in the beginning of
verse 13 it’s all of creation that gives praise to God, so it’s natural that number four would play a role. There would be four elements corresponding with all of creation, the entirety of creation, now worships God. Again this probably anticipates the universal worship and praise of God that is obvious in and present in the new creation in chapter 21 and 22.

So chapter 5 has demonstrated that God is the creator of all things and because of that, because God is the sovereign creator of all things and sovereign overall his creation, for that reason he is worthy of worship. Therefore all of heaven surrounds the throne of God, the symbol of his power and authority and sovereignty, all of creation surrounds God recognizing his holiness, his sovereignty over all of the created order. But it is important to realize God has not abandoned his creation. The assumption in a sense, between chapter 4 and 5 is that sin has somehow tainted and marred his created order.

So that chapter 5, assuming sin and assuming evil, assuming that Satan is now the ruler of the world, assuming that the beast now controls things, in the first century in the form of the Roman empire. Evil, wicked, oppressive regimes rule this earth with Satan as the main impetus behind that. But chapter 5 tells us God has not abandoned his creation. Instead, God has now acted to reclaim and redeem his creation. Primarily focused on his people, but we’re going to see in chapters 21 and 22 eventually the physical earth as well. So God has not abandoned his creation but through the sacrificial death of his son he has overcome. God has set in motion a plan to reclaim his creation to set right, to rescue it from the oppressive powers of Satan and evil and the beast and to restore it to its intended goal in a new creative act that we find consummated in chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation.

Opening the Scroll (Rev 6)

So then, having looked at chapter 5, the scene is now set by having someone who is worthy to take the scroll and open it. Jesus Christ through his sacrificial death is worthy now to take the scroll and open the scroll that contains God’s plan for judgment, salvation, and establishing his kingdom. The stage is now set for Revelation chapter 6. Again, chapter 6 we should understand as a continuation of chapter 5. And that is because what happens now in chapter 6 is the seals that are sealing the scroll from chapter 5 are
now opened and as each of the seven seals are taken off the scroll, something will happen in chapter 6.

Features of Rev 6

The other interesting thing about chapter 6 is that the scene is now going to shift. In chapters 4 and 5, the scene was a heavenly one where John as we saw in the beginning of chapter four, is summoned up to heaven and permitted to have a glimpse of the heavenly throne room and to see the worship that takes place and the acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty, and to see something of the unfolding of God’s plan, for the redemption and salvation and reclaiming his creation and his people for himself. John has been privileged to see that. Now the scene shifts back to earth as this scroll that he saw in heaven now begins to get unsealed by the lamb who is worthy to do so. The scroll begins to be unsealed and we begin to see how both judgment and salvation, but especially judgment will now issue from the throne and from the seal, again as Christ holds it and begins to open its seals as a result of his death and resurrection and his authority and ability to do so.

Now what is unique about the chapter 6 which narrates the opening of six, of the seven seals from the scroll in chapter 5, and we’ll see this happening elsewhere, but in chapter 6, only six of the seals get unleashed. The seventh seal actually does not get opened until the beginning of chapter 8. And in between there is chapter 7, that functions as most commentaries say, it functions an interlude. There’s probably some truth to that, although I would not want to say that it’s a digression that has nothing to do with the seals. That would be incorrect as well. We’ll look at chapter 7 and talk a little bit about its function when we get there. But when we read chapter 6, as we will in a moment, the first thing you note is that only six of the seals actually get opened or unsealed and the seventh one does not get taken off until the beginning of chapter 8 and then there’s that intervening chapter, chapter 7 that we’ll talk about later.

Another interesting feature of the 7 seals in chapter 6 is that the last one seal number 6 in verses 12-17, seems to bring us to the end of history. It seems to bring us right up to the final judgment, which theologians call the second coming of Christ. We
talked a little about this in the introduction to Revelation; the book in a sense could stop here temporally. It would be a very unsatisfying ending because it says nothing about the salvation of God’s people. Chapter 6 ends in the judgment scene, but it seems to bring us to the very end of the world, of the second coming of Christ. Although, as you know, we still have several more chapters to go--18 more chapters in Revelation. But as we said, Revelation seems to temporally to cycle. That is it gives you different images and gives you different perspectives of John’s day culminating in the wrap up in history, seeing that in light of the backdrop of God’s intention for the end of history and for his final consummation of history and his plan for ultimate judgment and salvation. We find that already taking place here. We’ll look more at that in just a moment.

Another important feature to understand is the first four seals seem to go together, as most people recognize. They’re united in from two perspectives. Number one, the fact that only the first four seals are identified as horses and we’ll look at why that’s the case. So literally the first four seals are joined together because all four are represented by four horses. Then second, logically they seem to go together as we’ll see in just a moment. That is, logically the first four seals seem to be intertwined. They seem to result from or be related to each other as well and we’ll look at that.

Relationship of Seal, Trumpet and Bowl Judgments

Before we look at chapter 6 in more detail and read, again I want to read chapter 6, but I want to raise briefly a question that we might deal with a little bit in more detail when we get to chapters 8 and 9 and also chapter 16. One thing that you’d note when you read Revelation, a prominent feature of the book is that it seems, at least in the center of chapters 4 through 22, sort of in the center of this section, one of the prominent features is the three-fold repetition of seven plagues in the form of seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. The seven seals found here in chapter 6 and chapter 8 and then chapters 8 and 9 recount the seven trumpets, seven trumpets are blown and more plagues take place. Then finally, in chapter 16, we find seven bowls poured out. So this threefold series of sevens in the form of seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls seems to play a crucial role in this section of Revelation. And one of the questions that rises is:
what do these refer to? What do these three series of sevens refer to and how do they relate to each other since their all in the series of seven, since they’re all plagues, judgment plagues that take place on earth and strike the earth and humanity? Especially when we get to chapters 8 and 9 and 16, we’ll see that there is a little bit of overlap with the seals and the judgment that takes place in those two sections. So the question is: what are these and how do they relate to each other?

One possibility in explaining the relationship is to see these three sets of seven, again we’re talking about the seals, trumpets, and bowls in chapters 6 through 16; one way to look at it is that these series of judgments happen in chronological sequence. That is, first of all the seals happen when they are finished, the trumpets then take place and when the trumpets are finished, then the bowls take place. So, there is a progression between the three groups of seven. Some would even say that they could even function in the telescoping manner. Remember when we said the seventh seal does not get unleashed until chapter 8. But chapters 8 and 9 then contain the trumpets so some have suggested the seventh seal actually contains the trumpets. Then you’ll note the seventh trumpet does not get opened until later on in chapter 11 and some have suggested the seventh trumpet then actually contains the seven bowls so it’s sort of like a telescope that each one contains the rest of the sections in it as you pull it out. So many have seen the seals, trumpets, and bowls as indicating a chronological sequence: first the seals take place, followed by the trumpets, followed by the bowls.

Another important view and common view that depends on seeing Revelation as sort of the cycle that repeats itself is what is known as the recapitulation view. That is all three of these series of seven, the seals, trumpets, and bowls, are referring to roughly the same events during the same time period. Greg Beale, in his commentary on Revelation, holds this approach. He argues that when you look at them carefully, especially the trumpets and bowls, the reason why many of them are similar is because they’re referring to the same events. And he would say the same is true with the seals in chapter 6. So the seals, trumpets, and bowls are not referring to different events, different judgments and different time periods. This is part of the cyclical nature or recapitulation of Revelation.
That is, it’s simply three different perspectives on, what Beale argues, is the whole sweep of church history, all of church history starting in the first century leading up to the second coming of Christ can be characterized by these judgments that God pours out on the earth. So what we’re to understand is these are not in chronological sequence, but repeating, from again different perspectives, different ways at looking at the same events. One might compare it to looking at an event or a play in a football game or baseball game or basketball game or soccer or whatever from different perspectives. You see the event in real time but then the camera crew will slow down in an instant replay and they’ll give you another picture of that. Then maybe from a different angle and zoomed up they will give you another view. It’s all the same event and same play but from different perspectives. That may be one way to understand this way of looking at the seals, the trumpets and the bowls.

Another way of looking at it and one that I will prefer, but we’ll look at this in more detail when we get to chapters 8 and 9 and 16, is what could be called a “progressive view.” That is, it kind of combines one and two. There is some overlap between the three, but there’s also a progression temporally and intensity that is probably the seals in chapter 6, represent events that will characterize the entirety of church history starting in the first century and I’m going to argue that in a moment when we look at chapter 6. The seals, we’ll see that these things are already characterizing God’s judgment on the Roman Empire. So already the seals are taking place and will do so until the coming of Christ. However, the trumpets then would portray events that overlap to some extent with the seals but probably more intense and a little more from a closer perspective to the end, the second coming of Christ. And then finally the bowls in chapter 16 are to be portrayed as primarily taking place even more intensely and even from a closer perspective to the end to the second coming of Christ, characterizing the judgment’s that will be poured out, leading up to the day of the Lord and till the end. So understanding at that way there may be some progression or there’s some overlap as far as time and judgment, but there is an intensification and a progression temporally. So it’s as if the author starts with the seals and looks at God’s judgment leading to the end, then
he backs up but from a closer more intense perspective and describes God’s judgment that will lead to the end. Then once more backs up but from an even more intense final perspective looks at God’s final judgment that he pours out right before he consummates history at the very end.

A couple things that might suggest this is number one, if when you read the trumpets or the seals, trumpets and bowls, note that they all seem to take you to the very end. Notice that Revelation chapter 6, the final seal, seal number six as we said and as we’ll see when we look more closely at this section, takes you to the end, to the day of the Lord, the day of God’s wrath and the wrath of the Lamb. So already you’re at the very end and the same is true with the trumpets in chapters 8 and 9. The seventh trumpet in chapter 11, gets blown in chapter 11. And they use language to suggest that you are at the end; God’s kingdom, Christ’s kingdom has finally arrived. Then chapter 16 obviously brings you up until the end as well. So in other words, all three series bring you to the end but each one from a more intense and a closer perspective to a little bit to the very end, the consummation of history, the final judgment of God upon the earth.

The second thing is notice the fractions that are used. The seals in one place, end up harming a fourth of humanity, whereas the trumpets end up harming a third of the earth and a third of humanity, slightly larger numbers. When you look at the bowls in chapter 16, there are no limits to the judgment. So again there seems to be a progression, both temporally and in intensity as well. And again, the fourth and one third are not to be taken with strict mathematical precision but as we said, fractions suggest intensity but limitation and limit in what they can do and so these are the four, so we don’t need to add up how much and how big the population is today and envision exactly, precisely one fourth of them and then what’s left over, then one third with the trumpets. That’s not the point. The one fourth and the one third suggest intensity but limitation. But the limitation becomes less so that the bowl judgments have no limits at all and God’s final pouring out of his judgments before the end of the world and the second coming of Christ.

One other item to say about these is that the number seven probably suggests that we should not take these as seven literal judgments that take place in that order; that first
this one happens and then this one. Again seven being the number of perfection and completeness, the perfect and complete judgment of God expressed in the seals and the trumpets and bowls. So, the seven again suggest not necessarily seven sequential judgments but seven playing its typical symbolic function and role.

All of the seals then in chapter 6 will prepare for and function as a sort of a prelude to the final time of judgment and I want to talk about that again later, but all of these are simply warning shots, anticipations of the final judgment that is yet to come and we will read about that in chapters 19 and 20.

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