

“Lamb”

Revelation 5:1–10; Revelation 21:1–8 (NRSV)

This week, we start a new six-week series in which we will focus on three images: Community, Cross, and New Creation

In 1996, Richard Hays, one of the world’s leading scholars on Paul, published *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. It has proved to be one of the most enduring and important works of the last two decades on the subject of New Testament ethics.

Hays rightly notes that we can’t simply take all the NT writings and drop them into a “blender” to get a

harmonized telling of the story of God’s redemptive work in this world. But we can, he says, identify “key images” that all the NT writings share. Hays further suggests that three focal images can guide our readings and interpretations of the NT authors: community, cross, and new creation. Here is Hays’s summary of each:¹



*The church is a counterculture community of discipleship, and this **community** is the primary addressee of God’s imperatives.* The biblical story focuses on God’s design for forming a covenant people. Thus, the primary sphere of moral concern is not the character of the individual but the corporate obedience of the church. . . . The community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God’s redemptive purposes in the world. . . . Many New Testament texts express different facets of this image: the church is the body of Christ, a temple built of living stones, a city set on a hill, Israel in the wilderness. The coherence of the New Testament’s ethical mandate will come into focus only when we understand that mandate in ecclesial terms, when we seek God’s will not by asking first, “What should I do,” but “What should we do?”

*Jesus’ death on a **cross** is the paradigm for faithfulness to God in this world.* The community expresses and experiences the presence of the kingdom of God by participating in “the koinonia of his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). Jesus’ death is consistently interpreted in the New Testament as an act of self-giving love, and the community is consistently called to take up the cross and follow in the way that his death defines. . . . the New Testament insists that the community as a whole is called to follow in the way of Jesus’ suffering. The New Testament writers consistently employ the pattern of the cross precisely to call those who possess power and privilege to surrender it for the sake of the weak (see, e.g., Mark 10:42–45, Rom. 15:1–3, 1 Cor. 8:1–11:1).

The church embodies the power of the resurrection in the midst of a not-yet-redeemed world. Paul’s image of “**new creation**” stands here as a shorthand signifier for the dialectical eschatology that runs throughout the New Testament. In the present time, the new creation already appears, but only proleptically [in anticipation]; consequently, we hang in suspense between Jesus’ resurrection and Parousia [his return]. “The whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:22–23, adapted from RSV). . . . We can never say—as do the guys in a popular beer commercial—“It doesn’t get any better than this,” because we know it will; we are, like T. S. Eliot’s Magi, “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.” The church is, in Paul’s remarkable phrase, the community of those “upon whom the ends of the ages have met” (1 Cor.

¹ Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

10:11, RH). In Christ, we know that the powers of the old age are doomed, and the new creation is already appearing.

In this series, we will focus on several NT writings using these images, considering how “community, cross, and new creation” can help us to see how we are to live. These studies will provide background and commentary.

In the throne room of God

When the fourth chapter of Revelation opens, we stand with John in the throne room of God where we witness all the company of heaven worshipping the Lord Almighty. Yet, amidst this worship there comes sadness and tears. The One on the throne holds a scroll that, unlike most papyri, is written on front and back. It is sealed with seven seals, which signifies that the seal is completely and utterly closed, for seven is the number of completion and totality. What does the scroll contain? We are not told. It could be God’s plan for creation or it could be the rest of the book. Whatever the scroll contains, there is no one, in all the heavens and the earth, who is worthy to open it, so John begins to cry.

Then, one of the twenty-four elders comes to John and tells him that the Lion of Judah is worthy to open the scroll. Thus, we’d expect that John would turn to see a lion, the symbol of power and strength, standing ready to open the scroll.

Yet, when John turns, he doesn’t see a lion at all. He sees a lamb. But not a cute, white, leaping little lamb. John sees a lamb standing there as if it had been slaughtered. (Take a moment and read Isaiah 53:7.) This is one of my favorite moments in all the Bible. John hears “Lion” but sees “Lamb.” The contrast couldn’t be more striking.

We think we know what power and might are, but Jesus Christ has revealed that the truth is far from our expectation. It is the Lamb who conquers. Craig Koester writes, “What John hears about the Lion recalls promises from the Old Testament, and what he sees in the lamb reflects the crucifixion of Christ. Both images point to the same reality. According to the Old Testament, God promised to send a powerful and righteous ruler. These promises are not rejected but fulfilled through the slaughtered yet living Lamb, who is not a hapless victim but a figure of royal strength.”

It is the Lamb who takes the scroll from the hand of God, causing all the elders and cherubim to fall down before the Lamb in worship, singing their acknowledgement that the Lamb, and the Lamb alone, is worthy to open the scroll. Then angels too numerous to count join the elders and the cherubim in their worship of the Lamb. The crescendo presses forward as all the creatures of all the cosmos join in the praise of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb. Finally, the four living creatures say “Amen!” The crucified Lamb of God has triumphed and now rules.

The Holy City is us!

One of the things that should surprise you most about Revelation is that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes to earth, not vice versa. Even more surprising, the city is the “bride adorned for her husband,” i.e. the community of God’s people, aka the church. The story doesn’t end with God’s people being spirited away to some distant spot in the cosmos, but with heaven coming to earth. I am pretty sure this is not how many Christians envision eternity. Don’t we head off to spend eternity in our true home, the “place” we came from? No. That is Plato creeping back into things again. In Revelation, the City of God, the new Jerusalem, the Holy City, comes here! The city, the bride, comes down out of heaven (21:10). N. T. Wright, another of the foremost New Testament scholars of our day helps us to grasp this crucial aspect of John’s vision:

Heaven and earth, it seems, are not after all poles apart, needing to be separated forever when all the children of heaven have been rescued from this wicked earth. Nor are they simply different ways of looking at the same thing, as would be implied by some kinds of pantheism. No: they are different, radically different; but they are made for each other in the same way (Revelation is suggesting) as male and female. And, when they finally come together, that will be cause for rejoicing in the same way that

a wedding is: a creational sign that God’s project is going forwards; that opposite poles within creation are made for union, not competition; that love and not hate have the last word in the universe; that fruitfulness and not sterility is God’s will for creation.

What is promised in this passage, then, is what Isaiah foresaw: a new heaven and a new earth, replacing the old heaven and the old earth, which were bound to decay. This doesn’t mean, as I have stressed throughout, that God will wipe the slate clean and start again. If that were so, there would be no celebration, no conquest of death, no long preparation now at last complete. As the chapter develops, the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, is described lovingly: she is the new Jerusalem promised by the prophets of the Exile, especially Ezekiel. But, unlike in Ezekiel’s vision, where the rebuilt Temple takes eventual center stage, there is no Temple in this city (21:22). The Temple in Jerusalem was always designed, it seems, as a pointer to, and an advance symbol for, the presence of God himself. When the reality is there, the signpost is no longer necessary. As in Romans and 1 Corinthians, the living God will dwell with and among his people, filling the city with his life and love, and pouring out grace and healing in the river of life that flows from the city out to the nations. There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed, in God’s eventual new world. So far from sitting on clouds playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.²

So we should never forget that at “The End,” stands not an event or even a place, as wonderfully as that place might be depicted in John’s visions. Standing there is a person, the Lamb, Jesus the Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the substance of our hopes and the embodiment of God’s promises.

Daily Bible Readings

(More from Revelation)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday	Revelation 1	The opening vision of Christ
Tuesday	Revelation 4 & 5	The great throne room vision
Wednesday	Revelation 7	The great multitude of God’s people
Thursday	Revelation 19:1-10	The marriage of the Lamb (Jesus) and his bride (the community)
Friday	Revelation 21	The new heaven and the new earth – New creation!
Saturday	Revelation 21:1-7	The river of life

² Wright, T. (2007). *Surprised by Hope* (116–117). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge