

“Revelation: The Lion, the Lamb, and the Beasts”

Revelation 5; Revelation 13:11–18

The Lion of Judah. The Lamb of God. The beasts. John’s vision takes some dramatic turns.

We stand with John in the throne room of God where we’ve witnessed all the company of heaven worshipping the LORD Almighty (Rev. 4). 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 and John, too, weeps.

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.

This is such a powerful moment in Revelation. 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.”

And strong the Lamb certainly is. The Lamb has seven eyes, all-seeing and allpresent (see Zechariah 4:10), and seven horns, all-powerful, as horns were ancient symbols of kingly power. In Revelation, there are twenty-eight references to the exalted Lamb (Jesus).

So, 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!”

How cold a heart it would be that could be unmoved by this scene. Imagine for a moment that you are a Christian who is being persecuted. What would these words say to you? Who is really in control of this world? To whom should every knee bow and tongue confess? Would this not encourage you to persevere and to trust that God and the Lamb will be victorious over the powers that persecute you, even if it doesn’t seem that way in the present moment. Remember, John’s revelation pulls back the curtains of heaven, revealing to you the truth of what is and who is. We shouldn’t be surprised that it is this scene around which Handel composed the glorious *Halleluiah Chorus* in his *Messiah*.

Sacrifice

The Lamb stands there looking as if it had been slaughtered, i.e. sacrificed. Easy to picture, though disturbing at best. Indeed, I’ve found that few topics are more perplexing and disturbing than the biblical perspective on animal sacrifice. Sure, we can handle talking about sacrifice in the sense of giving something up but all the stuff about blood and animals and death can be very upsetting to many Christians. We want to relegate it to an ancient time and culture that has little to do with us. Yet, unless we confront blood sacrifice, much of the Bible simply won’t make sense.



You see, it isn't an overstatement to say that the New Testament is an extended reflection on the meaning of Jesus' death in light of the Jewish scriptures. Why did he die? More to the point, why didn't he save himself? Who was he – really? Was anything accomplished by his horrifying and humiliating death on a Roman cross? What do we really make of this Lamb of God? What does Jesus' death, symbolized by the cross, mean for us?

From the beginning, Jesus' followers used and expanded upon the Jewish imagery of blood sacrifice. God's covenant with the Jews provided several rituals in which the sacrifice of an animal was used to deal with sins in such a way that the people could be restored to right relationship with God and their consciences healed. With Jesus though, all this becomes something new.

Recall that at the beginning of John's Gospel, upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist exclaims "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Jesus' last week is Passover week. At the Last Supper, sharing the bread and cup set the stage for the shedding of Jesus' body and blood. Like the silent lamb of Isaiah 53:7, Jesus won't even defend himself (John 19:9). The legs of the Passover lamb were to be unbroken (Exodus 12:46); Jesus' legs are not broken by the soldiers (John 19:36).¹ For the writer of Hebrews, Jesus death is the final and perfect sacrifice to which all the OT sacrifices pointed.

The meaning of sacrifice

The first Christians understood that Jesus' character extended upward to encompass God himself and downward to encompass the sacrificial lamb of the Old Testament, giving us this paradox of a lamb who is God and the mystery of God's victory over sin and death being won on a cross.

Jesus' followers understood that Jesus' sacrifice, the death of this innocent, was to set the pattern for their own lives. Paul would write about sharing in Christ's sufferings (Philippians 3:10), being given up to death for Jesus' sake (2 Cor 4:11) and bearing one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Richard Hays writes, "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."²

The point is this: our discipleship, our very imitation of Christ, necessarily entails selfgiving sacrifice. As God has done for us, in Christ's sacrifice, so we are called to do for others. As God loves us, so we should love others – even when there is a price.

Enter the beasts

In Revelation 12, we saw Michael and his angel army defeat the dragon, Satan, and cast him to the earth, where he would be confined but still free to work his evil ways on our small planet. When the scene came to a close, the dragon was standing on the shore gazing malevolently out at the sea, which was, for the Jews, a symbol of chaos. It was the place from which the monsters came.

Then, in horror, John sees a great beast rising from the sea. It has ten horns and seven heads. A crown hangs on each horn. John's description of this beast draws on the monsters in Daniel 7, in which there are four beasts symbolizing four empires which rise one after the other to threaten and persecute God's people until, at last, they are defeated by God.

Here, in John's vision, the four empires/beasts are rolled into a single horror that emerges from the waves and the meaning is clear. This beast is the Roman empire. Worse, as John describes the scene it is clear that the beast is a sickening parody of the Lamb. For example, the beast from the sea has a fatal wound on its head, the Greek word for which is exactly the same word as used to describe the "slaughtered" Lamb. Just as the Lamb shares the throne, power, and authority of God (5:6,12,13; 12:5,10), so the beast shares the throne, power, and authority of Satan the dragon (13:2).

The crowds follow the beast and worship its master, the dragon, swooning at the power they seem to wield and their aura of invincibility. Yet, we know the dragon has already been defeated and John's visions will show us the rot that lies at the heart of the Roman empire. It may look good from a distance, but up close – all hideous distortion and corruption.

¹ Roman execution squads would often, mercifully, break the legs of those being crucified in order to hasten their death. The broken legs would prevent the person from being able to push themselves up on the cross to keep breathing. Typically, suffocation was the cause of death on a cross.

² from Richard Hays' book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, HarperCollins, 1996. Hays contends that there are three principal images through which the New Testament ought to be read: community, cross, and creation.

Sadly, we are told that all the inhabitants of the earth whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life will worship the beast. There is no twilight here; only the light of the Lamb and the darkness of the beast. Choose! Choose! Let's be clear here: The dragon represents Satan. The beast from the sea is Rome. John wants us to see that though the Christians may struggle against the empire, the larger struggle, the spiritual warfare, is against Satan the dragon – who has already lost but is not quite yet finished off.

The demonic trinity

The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. The dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the land.

Yes, a second beast comes into view, one that has arisen from the earth. This beast brings people to the first beast. It performs mighty signs. And it makes the people build a giant image of the first beast, a bit like a large puppet, to which the second beast “gives breath.” The people are deceived by this image and are wooed to the adoration of the first beast. How strong! How rich! How invincible! They cannot see the truth. This second beast is a false prophet—of which there have been many through the ages.

The mark of the beast

Finally, all the inhabitants of the earth are marked as belonging to the beast, in contrast with the great multitude of Revelation 7, who bear the seal of the LORD God.

The mark they bear is “666.” This is the mark of the beast. Without it, the people could neither buy nor sell anything.

Over the years, much has been made of this mark. We are told by John that it is the number of the beast. And he tells us that those who have insight can calculate this number. That seems odd, but it follows from the ancient systems for counting.

Basically, ancient cultures used letters from their alphabet as numbers, much like the Roman numerals we all learned in elementary school (“v” = 5). For example, in Pompeii there is graffiti that reads “I love her whose number is 545.” When you work through the “666” it becomes clear to most scholars that the person John has in view is Nero.³ This makes sense, as Nero was so hated and feared that he came to symbolize persecution and terror.

Thus, the imagery becomes pretty clear. The question to the reader of Revelation is this: Will you bear the mark of the beast/Nero/Rome/Satan or will you bear the seal of God? Will you embrace the world that has chosen against God or will you embrace the LORD God and his ways? Will you remain in the darkness/dragon or will you choose the light/Lamb?

The point about the mark being required to buy and sell is that choosing the Lamb may well require us to make what seem like tough choices. In John's day, engaging in trade pretty much meant buying into the Roman system. How far will we go in making our way in this world? Will we know when we have embraced oppression and injustice in order to get by or to achieve “success”? John wants us to grasp that these choices are real and ever-present, even if much of the time we are blinded to them.

So . . . if we step back from John's vision for a moment, the question posed to us becomes evident: ***Will we bear the mark of the beast or will we bear the seal of our LORD God?*** The truth is that there is no other choice. There is darkness and there is light. There is the beast and there is the Lamb. Choose.

Finally, if we embrace God, desiring to bear his seal on our foreheads, we must stand ready to proclaim God's mighty acts to the world. A seal is meant to be seen. Let those who have ears, hear!

³ Nero is by far the most likely candidate supported by the majority of historical scholars, since the letters “Neron Caesar” in the Hebrew spelling add up to precisely 666: Nun (50) + Resh (200) + Waw (6) and Nun (50) + Qof (100) + Samech (60) + Resh (200) = 666.