

The Lamb on the Throne (Revelation 4-5)

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One simple way to think about what happens in the book of Revelation from chapter 4 onwards is to recall the first few lines of the Lord's Prayer –

Your name be hallowed,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

The last phrase there - 'on earth as in heaven' - goes with all three petitions:

Your name be hallowed on earth as in heaven
Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven.

John's visionary prophecy essentially answers the question: How is God's kingdom going to come on earth as in heaven? So initially John is taken up into heaven to see that in heaven things are as they should be: God's name is hallowed, his will is done, his rule prevails completely. That's chapter 4. Then in chapter 5 John begins to hear how this state of affairs will come about on earth to, in the world where God's name is dishonoured, his will is contested by evil in many forms, and it can easily look as though what rules, what has ultimate power on earth are the systems of military, political and economic injustice and oppression.

Revelation, you will know by now, is full of images, images crafted and deployed with great literary subtlety and brimming with meaning. Some of the images come and go in different parts of the book, but there are also key images that act as a focus of meaning right through the book. I'm going to concentrate on two of these key images that appear in chapters 4-5, because, although there's a lot of detail that I don't have time to explain, the essence of what these chapters say is focussed on the two images – of the heavenly Throne and of the Lamb.

So initially John is caught up in vision to the heavenly throne room from which God exercises his supreme rule over the universe. The throne is not described but everything happens on and around it. It's the symbol of God's sovereignty. He himself is 'the one who sits on the throne' – a title for God that John uses right through the book. And around the throne are the four living creatures, angelic figures who worship God continuously – the angelic priests, if you like, the universe's central worshippers. Also around the throne are the 24 elders who have thrones of their own but spend all their time getting down off their thrones and laying down their crowns before God's throne. They are the angelic rulers of the heavenly places, and what they are doing is constantly acknowledging God's sovereignty. Unlike the systems of domineering power on earth, they know that their own power derives from God. So here is throne, the sovereign authority of God, the centre of everything, as it should be. Here in heaven God's name is hallowed by the living creatures, his will is done by the 24 elders, his kingdom rules uncontested by evil.

But it cannot be, surely, that God's rule is confined to heaven. The chapter ends with the song of the 24 elders. As they lay their crowns before the throne, they sing:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power.
For you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.

God is creator of all things, rightful king of all things. In other words, life in the world God created can only be good and fulfilled if it is lived according to the intention God had in creating it. Evil spoils creation. But, as John's readers are only too well aware, the world seems to be dominated precisely by the forces that contest God's will, the systems John later calls the destroyers of the earth. If God is truly the creator and lord of all, then he must overcome evil and secure the lasting good of his creation by establishing his kingdom in reality.

In the right hand of the one who sits on the throne is a sealed scroll. This contains an account of how that is going to happen. It contains the revelation that John's book of Revelation exists to reveal. So it needs to be opened. At first seems there is no one who can do that. But then John is told: 'Behold, the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll.' He hears about a lion, but then what he sees is a lamb. Apparently it is the lamb who has conquered. What's going on here? What has the lion to do with the lamb?

I guess anyone can see that the lion is a much more obvious symbol for a conqueror, someone who has won a military victory, than a lamb. And in fact the Lion of Judah was a well-known symbol of the Messiah that many Jews expected – the heroic leader who would fight a war to liberate God's people from their pagan oppressors and so establish the kingdom of God on earth. That other title, the Root of David, would also have much the same significance. John's imagery here is evoking the notion of a militant Messiah. But what he then sees is a lamb, a lamb 'as if it had been slaughtered' – in other words it's a sacrificial lamb whose throat has been slit to kill it and allow its blood to pour out on the altar. A slaughtered lamb that nevertheless lives – because it's standing, and standing on the throne of God, no less. The messiah John sees is one who has won his victory over evil not by force of arms but by sacrificial death.

This doesn't mean John is simply replacing one image with the other, the lion with the lamb. The lamb *is* the promised Messiah of the Jews and the lamb *has conquered*. It's just that he has not done so by perpetrating violence but – astonishingly – by suffering violence. By juxtaposing lion and lamb John's vision forges a remarkable new image – a symbol of victory by sacrificial death – that John will continue to use throughout the book.

We're told a little more about the Lamb – that he has seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the world. The horn is a common biblical image of power and the eyes are a biblical image of God's all-seeing knowledge of all that happens in the creation. They are symbols, if you like, once again of God's sovereignty – God's sovereignty now, not just in heaven, but going out into all the world to claim it as his own. This sovereignty is the

horns and eyes of the Lamb. The power of God's sovereignty that goes out into the world to establish his kingdom is that of the slaughtered lamb. Evidently not the sort of power we usually ascribe to kings and rulers. By redefining the Messiah as someone who conquers not by violence but by suffering and death, John's vision has also redefined God's sovereignty. Since the decisive victory in God's campaign against evil on earth is the lamb, the kind of power that his victory has set loose in the world is the sort of power a sacrificial lamb has, a nonviolent power to win God's enemies over to his side.

You might have thought Revelation was a book of violent vengeance and judgment. There is a lot of violent imagery and language. But here in this key symbol, the lamb, that imagery has been transmuted into a non-violent meaning. If we read Revelation's imagery carelessly, we are bound to misunderstand it and may find the book offensive. We have to read the imagery carefully – we have to be alert to its Old Testament resonances – we have to be open to what is being said quite subtly and precisely by this unfamiliar language of symbol.

Let's go back to the basic question: How is God's kingdom going to come on earth? We have learned that Jesus Christ, the lamb, has one the decisive victory through his death. He is now enthroned with God on the throne of the universe. The power that goes out from him is God's power to extend his victory through all creation. How does that happen? Well, we learn something else about the lamb in chapter 5 that is to be crucial for the message of the book. The lamb's sacrifice has created a people, an international people drawn from all the nations of the earth. Later John will see a vision of them. The point is not just that they are the products of his victory, the kingdom on earth so far, the people who truly acknowledge God's sovereignty. They are that, but they are that in order that they should be the way the lamb extends the kingdom of God far beyond them.

When Jesus Christ addressed the seven churches John wrote his book for, at the end of the message to each church there were the words 'To the one who conquers...' (and some aspect of future salvation is mentioned in each case). 'To the one who conquers...' The messages themselves do not tell their readers what this means. How are the Christians of the seven churches going to conquer? Now in chapter 5 we have the answer. They are to conquer in the same way Jesus Christ has conquered. They are followers of the lamb who must follow his way to victory. They are the people by whose suffering witness to the truth of God the nations will learn who the true God is and come to worship him and to welcome his kingdom in all the earth.

By using that phrase 'suffering witness to the truth of God' I have run ahead of our chapter to things that become clearer as the visions unfold later. The followers of the lamb we will learn must witness to God in the dangerous and intimidating world of a mighty empire intent on stamping out this subversive element. Many may expect to follow the lamb's way literally to the point of martyrdom. But the point is not the death itself so much as the witness they bear, the witness they refuse to renounce even at the cost of their lives. It is by that sort of costly witness that, in a world of lies and delusions, the kingdom of God will go out into all the world.

In conclusion, I sometimes say to people who find Revelation very difficult and don't know how to start understanding it: begin with the hymns. There are a lot of them, and a lot of the message is encapsulated in the hymns. Most of them are not difficult to understand; they don't need all the explanation many other parts of the book need. So if you want to think a bit more about this passage, you might, for a start, just read the hymns. There are five of them in chapters 4-5. And a good way to be really *get* the message would be to pray the hymns yourself.