
Revelation 5 – Lion and Lamb – Genesis 49:9-10 and Isaiah 53:5-8

The Book of Revelation begins with several introductions. Chapter 1 contains two introductions (verses 1-8 and 9-20). The letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3 are also an introduction to the rest of the book. And chapters 4-5 together form an introductory vision of heaven: before the action unfolds, we need to know what the situation in heaven is like. It is good!

Chapter 4 shows us God on the throne, in peace and quiet, and every being in heaven worshipping him. John does not tell us what God looks like, he only describes the throne and its surroundings.

Chapter 5 adds some typical Christian elements to the vision of John. The Lord Jesus and his victory over death are celebrated and sung about. God gives world government into the hands of his Son. Still John avoids speaking directly about God – instead he says respectfully "He who sat upon the throne".

The first new element in chapter 5 is that God holds a scroll. In those days there were no books with covers; these were only made from the second century. A scroll was therefore the normal shape for a book (cf. Luke 4:17, 20; 2 Timothy 4:13).

John does not tell us what is in this book, but the interpreters are agreed that this book contains the history of humanity and the world. This history is a closed book, which is symbolised by the seven seals. One seal – a little liquid lacquer to connect the two parts of the material – was enough to close a scroll well, so the presence of seven seals means that the book is very heavily sealed. [The symbolism comes from Ezekiel 2:9-10, Daniel 12:1, 4, 9 and Isaiah 29:11.] In Daniel the seals remain closed whereas in Revelation are they opened; this means that the end times began with the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Verses 1-4: No-one worthy

John describes the situation: the Lord God has the book of history in his hands, but who of the people in heaven can take the book from him? That means: who is "worthy" to lead history and to bring it to a successful conclusion? There appears to be no-one who can do this. John in his vision is so anxious about this that he bursts in tears spontaneously. Yet for us this is not difficult to understand: no-one of us knows history and would be able to give guidance. No human, not even an angel, is dignified and powerful enough for this task.

Verses 5-6: Lion and Lamb

Finally, someone is found who is billed as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root (descendant) of David". These are messianic titles, indicating that the Lord Jesus is the redeemer of Israel and the world. The title "Lion of Judah" is based on Genesis 49:9-10; "Descendant of David" comes from Isaiah 11:1, 10 and Zechariah 3:8 (cf. Revelation 22:16.). Both titles were also used by the Jews at the time to refer to the promised Messiah.

On hearing this announcement we thus expect the arrival of the strong Lion of Judah who has conquered his enemies. All eyes are on the spot near the throne of God where he will appear. But what do we see? There appears a tiny little lamb, the opposite of a lion! What a surprise! Of course the lamb also symbolizes the Lord Jesus (cf. Exodus 12, Isaiah 53:7 and John 1:29), but the image is very different. John adds that the lamb looks as if he has been slain; the wound of his death is still visible. The emphasis is on the death of the Lord Jesus for the sins of the people, his humiliation and weakness.

Verse 7: The book

The Lamb, the Lord Jesus, takes the book from God the Father. This brings the book of history into the pierced hands of him who has won the victory over death and destruction. Revelation 5 describes the situation after the ascension of the Lord Jesus, the only person in the world who was worthy, is able, to take the book of history. From that moment on he is leading history and bringing it to completion. The history of the world, of the big and powerful countries; but also the life of every human being. The kingdom of God is now being established on earth.

Just as the book of Revelation has difficult, dark chapters, so history also contains many dark periods. And this is also true of our own life. However, we must trust that history is safe in the hands of the Lord Jesus.

Just as Revelation ends positively in chapters 21 and 22, so our lives will end positively and achieve their objectives if we are on God's side. The proverb is correct: "All is well that ends well." And the readers of Revelation already know this at the beginning of the book. The introduction of Revelation says: you can trust in the Lord Jesus. He has things firmly in hand so they will not get out of hand.

So we get a handle on the book as a whole: the beginning and the end are positive and they set the tone for the whole. From this starting point we can try to understand the rest of the book.

Some of us are used to thinking of the Lord Jesus as the powerful, strong lion. They see him above all as the Son of God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe. Others emphasize that Jesus was like us, one of us. He lived on earth as an ordinary person and died on the cross. Both aspects are of course true, as long as we keep in mind that they are merely aspects of who the Lord really is. We would do well to keep them in balance: Jesus is Lion and Lamb. He is the mighty Lord and the loving friend.
