

THE LAMB TAKES THE SCROLL

REVELATION 5

Daniel and Revelation Series

OPENING PRAYER

Creator God, open our hearts to your Spirit of Truth, so that through these texts, our discussion and our prayer, we will hear the voice of your living Word. Through this Bible study, may our minds be renewed and our desire for your Kingdom quickened. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

EXEGESIS

Revelation, attributed to a 1st Century Christian exiled to the Greek island of Patmos, is a complex, many-layered book. It is filled with symbols and images drawn from the Hebrew Bible (particularly the book of Ezekiel) and 1st century Roman culture. It has a history of misinterpretation, and is dangerous if handled irresponsibly. It was very nearly not included in the New Testament.

In chapter 5, we find ourselves amidst a vision of the heavenly throne room. A scroll with seven seals, symbolic of God's judgement, waits to be opened. The number seven is of critical importance in this text, as it symbolises completeness and perfection. One of the twenty-four elders (a number perhaps symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel plus the twelve apostles) tells us to expect the appearance of a lion, a symbol of royal strength. Turning our attention once more to the throne, we find, not a lion, but a lamb. This lamb has been slaughtered, becoming a symbol of weakness twice over, but it is the only one able to open this mysterious scroll and enact God's justice. The lamb has seven horns (symbols of strength) and seven eyes (for it is all-seeing). The lamb represents a God who is present, witnesses and challenges injustice, and whose power is made perfect in weakness.

Harps (translated from the Greek word kitara), incense and singing would accompany Roman ceremonies of Emperor worship. The Emperor's kingdom (basilica – which could also be translated as 'empire') was considered to span the entire known world and be the greatest empire ever known. In this scene of heavenly worship, God's kingdom, an alternative to Caesar's, is revealed to be far larger. Its citizens' number 'myriads of myriads' – it encompasses the whole of creation. In Rome, divine power was attributed both to the Emperor and to the stars and planets. Here, the four living creatures, representing ancient astrological symbols, bow down before the Lamb. A slaughtered lamb is at the centre of the cosmos, not Caesar, and it alone is worthy to be worshipped.

REFLECTION

Who is seated on the throne? This is the question that Revelation continually puts to us. The throne is a central image. We live in a time where thrones are more ceremonial and ornamental than literal seats of power, but although the Roman Caesars are long dead, we still have people and institutions that seek to dominate others through lies, material wealth, violence and martial strength. A slaughtered lamb could never be the symbol of the 21st century Caesars, but what the empires of this world see as defeat, the Church sees as victory. God's empire is accomplished through weakness, through witnessing and confronting injustice with only our frail and breakable bodies. What does that look like today? Maybe like Massachusetts Quaker Jay O'Hara, who felt led to witness to the impact of fossil fuels on climate change by blockading a 40,000-ton coal shipment with a tiny lobster boat. Maybe like Libera Terra ('Free Land'), an organisation that farms land confiscated from the Italian mafia. They produce olive oil, red wines, lemons, durum wheat and honey, and give work to the unemployed, people with disabilities and recovering drug addicts, making pasta in the face of mafia hostility. Maybe like Malala Yousafzai, who defied the Taliban in Pakistan by advocating education for girls, and was shot at point blank range on her school bus. Surviving such a brutal attack only strengthened her message.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you respond to the image of Jesus as a slaughtered lamb?
2. What do you think is competing for our allegiance? Where are the Caesars today?
3. Where do you see God's Empire breaking out in today's world?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, open our eyes to those powers that would claim our worship. Help us to faithfully follow the Slaughtered Lamb, using our weakness to reveal the power of your Kingdom. In the name of the Resurrected Christ, Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Michael J. Gorman, 'Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation' (2011)
- Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, 'Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now' (1999)