

THE LION/LAMB

Some of you know that I have long intended to write a book about the Revelation of John. It was mostly in sheer frustration over the lack of good material available. The few books in print that are worth reading on the subject are either too uneven or too obscure for most us. Quite recently a marvelous scholar, M. Eugene Boring (one of the most misnamed men in history), wrote a superb commentary on Revelation. Breaking my foot gave me a chance to read it, one of the real blessings of this summer. Not only did I get to read his book (an enormous pleasure), but now I don't have to write one (an even greater boon). Furthermore, it makes me bold to preach from Revelation because now, if I get somebody too confused or upset, I don't have to say, "Well, just wait a few years until one of the study groups decides to go through Revelation again."

So last week I asked you to give Revelation a fresh hearing. It makes me very grateful that so many of you are apparently willing to do that. When I sat down after reading what must have sounded to many of you like a horrendous passage, I thought to myself, "If it sounded to me like it probably did to many of them, I would get up and walk out of here." But you did not do that. Thank you. I hope the powerful imagery John uses helps you start to hear the exact opposite of what is usually claimed to be the Message of Revelation. Some of you will never want to go into great detail, tracking all the levels of interlocking symbolism that John employs in his apocalyptic scenario. But you can know and feel the great themes, and realize that The Revelation is not a reversal of the Gospel but is, in many ways, a summation and certainly a strong challenge to live in and by and for the great reconciling love of God.

So now you have had a little time to go check some of it for yourselves. John's language is couched in battle and mayhem images, and I think he does that to catch and keep the magnitude of the drama that is going on. But the problem is like the one we have with the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers," only in much greater magnitude. That is, if we are not careful, we forget the analogy and fall back into notions of warfare itself. John's whole point is that this is *God's* warfare – warfare unlike any other we have ever known: warfare to free us from the bondage and blindness of a world that does not know or serve its Creator. The only weapon He will ever wield is the Message of God's love. The only blood He will ever shed is His own. And the slaughter

is the slaughter of conversion to a new and richer Life and WAY. It's the old "*You must be born anew,*" only on a cosmic scale.

So we started with some of John's best and final punch lines. A shame, in a way, to start there and ruin the crescendo. But I was afraid that if we did not go from the conclusion backward and try to get the larger Message of Revelation back in focus, we would not be able to keep things clear during the buildup.

Last week we were in chapter nineteen, and the great conflict was nearly over except for the shouting and the celebration and the glory of being with God and going on with God forever. Today we are back at chapter five, which is really the beginning. That is, John has used chapters one through four to orient us to the players and to the imagery of Heaven, and he has given pragmatic advice and encouragement to the seven churches of Asia, where presumably he was something like a bishop until his exile on the Island of Patmos.

So the action begins with chapter five. Or rather, the action is frozen, and nothing can happen unless ONE with sufficient authority is found to break the seals. The scroll is the blueprint for LIFE itself, for history itself – for the destiny of the earth and all upon it. John will keep confusing us because he talks past, present, and future simultaneously, and because a thing cannot happen on earth until it is begun in Heaven. John knows nothing of Einstein, but he believes that space is warped and that time is cyclical – and that all things depend upon God.

John's way of talking about it is to portray the destiny of the earth locked behind the seven seals of the scroll. Life goes on, but nothing happens unless the seals can be broken. The script is closed, and we can get no further progress until we can open the script. Nobody knows what is to happen next except the Author, and the Author will not let us see any more of the book. It will take a dimensional leap of great magnitude to get on with the story. Something dramatically new must happen, and that in turn requires some Leader of great authority to break the earth out of its rut. Only then can things move on toward God's true design. So God does not dare let us open the scroll until the Leader with sufficient authority is present, or the result would make Pandora's Box look like a bedtime story.

So John is weeping because the earth and the future are stymied and it is impossible to imagine that ONE great enough to break the

seals can ever be found. *“Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?”* We cannot go on building if we cannot see the blueprint. No one knows or can see the plan. So we are stuck.

Sometimes we get stuck in our own lives and think there is no ONE with authority enough to unlock our destiny – to free us from some stalemate or some flaw that has us frozen or spinning in endless, meaningless circles. John believes it was like that for the whole world, until ... until what? What is John leading up to? Christmas! Of course! The Incarnation. *“The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David has conquered, so that He can open the scroll and its seven seals.”* He has conquered, and He will conquer. He has answered the riddle, cut through the Gordian Knot, found the key of LIFE and unlocked the door. He has, and He will. The pattern is set first in Heaven, and now He comes to bring it to light on earth. Or maybe it goes on both places at the same time and in all the dimensions of the universe.

In any case, this Incredible One comes and begins to open the seals. History is unstuck: God’s plan and God’s will begin to unfold again, and it will go on unfolding as the Worthy One breaks the seals and the great BATTLE is eventually brought to all the earth – and won throughout the earth.

That was just to get us oriented. So now we come to the most dramatic moment in all of Revelation, although sheer familiarity cuts it back a little for some people. Then as we get *truly* familiar with it, it starts to move us again even more powerfully than it did at first, when it took us by sheer surprise.

The spotlight now (verse six) comes to focus on the GREAT WARRIOR CHAMPION who is worthy and able to break the seals, to save the earth, to go into battle against the Great Beast, the foe, the terrible Tyrant who has us all enslaved: SATAN himself – the great spirit of alienation, hatred, resentment, deceit, and cruelty personified. It must, of course, be the Lion of Judah, the Root of David – it has to be the MESSIAH. And the church is still reeling from the kind of Messiah we got, and still arguing with its Jewish relatives and antagonists who insist that no Messiah has come or we would have seen His conquering and already be in a realm of prosperity and peace. But John is not at all ashamed of the Messiah we got. For John, He is just a lot greater and more surprising than anything we expected.

So the drums roll and the spotlight sweeps across the stage of all of Life, and John announces: “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the GREAT WARRIOR. THE MESSIAH. THE CONQUEROR – our last hope and our only chance for victory and Life.” And as the spotlight comes to rest, I switch to John’s own words: “*Between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, with the marks of slaughter upon it.*”

This has been called “the most mind-wrenching ‘rebirth of images’ in literature.” (Boring, page 108.) The Lion is introduced, but when we look, there stands the Lamb: *Arnion*. As many of you know, this is not the usual word for lamb (*amnos*), but specifically refers to the most helpless lambkin. This is the first mention of *Arnion* in Revelation. John has reserved it for this dramatic moment of announcement. Who can break the seals? We should stop and sing: “Worthy is the Lamb.” *Arnion* will remain John’s definitive title for Christ. He will use it twenty-nine times in Revelation. Only once does this word appear anywhere else in the New Testament: John 21, where Jesus says to Peter at the Last Breakfast, “*Feed my lambkins.*”

I am reminding us that this startling switch from Lion to Lamb as the action of Revelation begins is dramatic, totally intentional, and absolutely crucial for understanding any of John’s meaning or theology.

John will never switch back to the Lion as the image of Christ. Almost everybody else will try to, including us. We cannot stand it! If the Lion shifts to Lamb, everything in the entire world turns upside down. But the Message of Revelation does not switch; it gives us no relief. “Go to battle in and under the banner of *Arnion*.” That is the Message of Revelation from first to last. That is still what is being proclaimed in the nineteenth chapter and beyond. And so the New Testament closes without recanting. Only the Message of God’s reconciling love – only that blood of true mercy and grace – will ever truly conquer ... you, or anyone else.

So what do we do with this? We constantly, desperately try to find some way to get back to the Lion. It’s as if we read the rest of the New Testament with growing alarm, despite its incredible appeal to our inward being. And the meaning of the Gospel – the proclamation of grace: the invitation of the God who really *wants* us and likes us even though we do sweat and stink and make mistakes, lose our tempers,

and foul things up – even if we do grasp a little of it, we know it cannot last. God has to draw the line somewhere, hopefully just on the other side of us. The Lion will reappear at any moment, and we will hopefully have just made it in and through by the skin of our teeth.

So we have to reverse the Message and meaning of Revelation. We have to! We cannot stand the disorientation. I should have more sympathy for Hal Lindsey (*There's a New World Coming*), who baldly states that Jesus has two roles. First He comes as the Lamb (back in Palestine two thousand years ago). But those who do not respond to that far-off event will get the apocalyptic violence of the Lion. Clearly it is the Lion that Lindsey is excited about in his reworked, made-up version of The Revelation. Lindsey knows that the love of Christ will not really work, so he focuses on the Second Coming of a second kind of Christ altogether – one who is going to either beat the dickens out of everybody or throw them away, because that's the only thing that will ever really work.

My complaint with most Second Coming talk is that it brings with it this Second Christ who bears no resemblance to the Jesus who was crucified and resurrected. The Second Christ is different in method and in attitude and is certainly described as “saving us” by a very different process. The Second Christ of the Second Coming is the anti-Christ in every straight definition of that term: against everything the Nazarene ever stood for.

There are, of course, many schools of interpreters of Revelation who proclaim this FIRST THE LAMB, THEN THE LION approach. Others, still trying to escape the *Arnion* conclusion, have tried to formulate a LAMB TO SOME, LION TO OTHERS theory. They say that the Christ presents His Lamb side to believers and His Lion side to nonbelievers. So the only way to get out from under the terrible reality of the punishment of the Lion is to believe and be good. That is another total reversal of the New Testament Message. Does the Cross come only after we have believed? Nor is there any shred or hint in the Book of Revelation that the Christ is somehow dual-natured. WE thought it would be a Lion, but when we looked to see who had the authority to break the seals, it was the Lamb. It always was and always will be *Arnion* – *Arnion* all the way.

Arnion, with the marks of slaughter upon Him, is powerful, in John's view – more powerful than the Beast; more powerful than all the forces of evil combined. He does not need to turn into a Lion to accomplish anything; indeed, that would make Him far *less* powerful.

The seven horns and seven eyes make the claim that this Lamb has all power and sees everything – has all dominion and all wisdom. But as the Lamb! Jesus has all power, but we have never seen or understood true power before. We only know about coercion. The verb John uses is “conquer” (*nikao*): the Lamb will conquer, overcome, prevail, win the victory, triumph. John will claim it twenty-three times.

How does Jesus conquer? How do *you* conquer? Conquering is what binds together Jesus and His followers. They will conquer as He conquers. Jesus stood before the Roman court and was faithful unto death, and that was His victory – His conquering. Many of His followers in John’s day were finding it necessary to stand before Roman courts as well. They also died. And in that dying, they conquered. In Revelation, conquering is by dying, and dying is to conquer. “For Christians, what it means to ‘win’ has been redefined by the cross of Jesus.” (Boring, page 111.)

Kids, and even some adults, sometimes want to know: How is the Bible relevant to me? How is Jesus or the Christian Faith relevant to me? (I never know when it will become relevant to whom. I guess it becomes relevant to anybody who claims it, whenever they claim it.) Clearly this new WAY seemed relevant to John, though it had been over fifty years since Jesus had walked the earth. For John the Crucifixion was not just an event that was fixed in some historic setting. It was that – but far more than that. It was not just Jesus giving proof of the extent of God’s reconciling love – although it was that! And that was far more than the historic moment by itself.

To John and to the Book of Revelation, Jesus was the ONE who unlocked the secret of Life – for all time, and for us all. And He would first win us by that sword and that blood, and then we would become followers who would each in our own circumstances live by that same power – and conquer with Him by dying with Him. At home, at school, at work, or at play, the death of self – the death of my will, my desires, my way (body, mind or spirit) – at any time and all the way. A constant reordering of Life. To live for the Crucified One. To die daily. *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”* (Luke 9:23)

The Revelation of John is not changing the Christian Message. It is just so full of the Word – full of that sword – that reading it keeps tending to slay us: to call us away from the Beast – to convert us.

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I'm through for today, except I cannot keep still about one last thing, for those of you who have an issue with it: *"Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'"*

Who does John think will be saved in the end? Who is he leaving out? *"Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea will be singing."*

Nobody will be left out of that choir.