



"The Vision of the Seven Seals" by Lucas Cranach

The Second Vision - The Seven Seals (Revelation 4:1-7:17)

Introduction - The Vision of the Seven Seals

The letters to the seven churches are now complete. They form the indispensable, practical background for all which follows in the remainder of the Book. The Christians of Asia Minor have been presented with a personal message from the risen and glorified Lord of the Church. Through these seven churches that message goes out to the people of God in every place and time. While correction and

commendation have varied with the different congregations every letter included the challenge to persevere and overcome. The time of testing is at hand, for we have entered upon the last days and the intensifying conflict between good and evil which signals the onset of the final era of human history. The grim words of the angel's warning in Revelation 12:12 characterize these times: ***“Woe for the earth and for the sea; because the devil is gone down unto you, having great wrath, knowing that he***



“The Vision of the Seven Seals” by Hans Burgkmair

seven sealed scroll of the future is in His hand, and only the Lamb has the power to open those seals and unfold that which is yet to be. Nothing is left to chance. There is no room for uncertainty here. The Lord reigns. As dark clouds of impending persecution gather on the horizon, the mighty song of the elders, angels, and saints reverberates across the vast reaches of heaven to remind us that our all powerful and all knowing God is still in control.

hath but a short time.” John is now swept up in the Spirit to the very gates of heaven so that he may convey to us a great word of consolation and courage for the coming tribulation. He is presented with a magnificent vision of the sovereign God upon His eternal throne in full command of all of the shifting tides of human events as they surge toward the fulfillment that He has designed for them. From where we stand evil appears to be triumphant and evil men seem to have the power to control the destinies of other men and nations. God's people appear to be helpless pawns in the hands of mighty forces beyond their control. But John's vision assures us that these appearances are deceiving. God upon His throne remains in absolute control of history. The



"The Vision of the Seven Seals" by Albrecht Dürer

The Throne of God in Heaven (Revelation 4:1-11)

After this I looked, and before me there was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the One who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to Him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and worship Him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being."

"And after this I looked, and before me there was a door standing open in heaven."

- The words "*and after this*" indicate that the Vision of the Seven Seals follows upon the completion of the initial vision of Christ amid the golden lamps and the dictation of the seven letters. This phrase does not refer to the events within the visions but to the sequence of the visions themselves. There is no indication in the text as to the duration of the time interval between the first and second visions. This introduction is a formula often used by John to mark a vision of particular solemnity and significance (cf. 7:1; 7:9; 15:5; 18:1). The NIV's translation, which omits the Greek particle "*idou*" ("*Behold!*"), lacks the dramatic force of the original. The text literally says: "*After this I saw and behold...*". This is not mere physical sight. It is rather the prophetic vision of divine revelation. The prophet sees a doorway, standing



"The Vision of the Seven Seals" by Gerard van Groeningen

open before him, which leads to heaven. The Greek verb is a passive perfect participle - *“a door was opened in heaven”* thus indicating that John did not open the door himself, nor did he see it opened. It is God who has opened this door and who provides St. John with the unique access which the open door represents. The door is said to be *“in heaven”* the dwelling place of God.

“And the voice I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said...” - The voices that emanates from within the doorway is the same voice which he had heard earlier from the golden lampstands - literally *“I heard the first voice.”* (Cf. 1:10). Once again it is the voice of power and authority - *“speaking to me like a trumpet”*. The mighty voice of Christ invites the Revelator to enter heaven - *“Come up here.”* The Lord promises to disclose to John *“what must take place after this.”* Having described the present situation of the church in the seven letters, Jesus now prepares to unveil the future, as the imagery of the sealed scroll will further indicate. This is not merely the far distant future of dispensationalist fantasies. The language of the text closely parallels that of Daniel 2:28-29,45 and indicates that the scope of that which is to be revealed pertains to the entire New Testament era, the last days which began with the death and resurrection of Jesus and which will continue until the Lord returns in judgment (cf. Mark 1:15; Acts 2:17; Galatians 4:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Corinthians 6:2; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:3; Hebrews 1:2; 9:26; James 5:3; 1 John 2:18; Jude 18). Thus, the encouragement and the warning of this book of prophecy are relevant not only for the first century Christians of Asia Minor but also for the twentieth century Christians of today's world for we both live in the last days.

Note the verb *“must.”* Jesus promise John a revelation of *“what must take place after this.”* The events and conditions of the future are already determined in the plan and purpose of God. The Sovereign Lord not only knows what will happen in the future, He controls and directs all things. In 1:10 we were told that John had been *“in the Spirit.”* Evidently, John had returned to his normal senses at the conclusion of the first vision. Now, in the aftermath of the Christ's invitation, that condition of heightened spiritual receptivity is abruptly restored: *“At once, I was in the Spirit.”*

“And there before me was a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it.” - A second dramatic *“idou”* (*“Behold!”*) marks the beginning of the new vision in the Greek text. Unfortunately, once again the NIV omits this highlight. At the center of John's vista there stands *“a throne in heaven.”* This is one of only four Biblical texts

which describe visions of God's heavenly throne. The other three are in Isaiah 6:1-8; Ezekiel 1:4-28; and Daniel 7:9-10. The divergences in these descriptions serve to remind us that the details of each vision are imagery which must not be confused with literal descriptions of physical places and historical events. R.C.H. Lenski offers this most important word of caution as we prepare to pass with John thru the doorway to heaven:

"When we speak thus we are quite right in not pressing the spatial terms and thinking of an elevated dais with a grand seat for a king, with space at its right and at its left and a great room in front of it. As in the other world time does not exist, so also space does not exist there. Yet we are unable to think in terms of timelessness and spacelessness. Revelation condescends and speaks as it does by employing imagery of space and time. There is a door, someone has opened it; John sees through the door; in spirit he is inside; there is a marvelous throne, also twenty-four other thrones, etc. Make all this as tremendous as you will when reading the words but do not stress our conceptions of space and time in order to draw deductions from them, for they would be picayunely, childishly false. The reality of heaven is inconceivable to us now; so is all that is in heaven, especially the One sitting on the throne. Symbols can alone "show" the ineffable realities to us to a degree that is possible for beings that are still of the earth." (Lenski, p. 170)



"God the Father Enthroned"
by Luca Signorelli

A ***"throne"*** is the official seat of a king, the place from which he exercises the royal prerogative of judgment (cf. Psalm 9:4) . It is a prominent symbol for God's power and authority exercised in judgment throughout Revelation, occurring thirty-seven times in the Book. The throne of God is placed at the center of a vast throne room of indescribable beauty around which everything else in this vision of heaven is oriented. In this way John emphasizes the universal sovereignty of God and His absolute control over all reality. The Old Testament declares that the heavens themselves are the throne of God and that the earth is His footstool (Isaiah 66:1). The Lord is typically described as being enthroned in heaven (i.e. 1 Kings 22:19; Psalm

11:4; 47:8; Isaiah 6:1; Ezekiel 1:26; Daniel 7:9) in a manner fully consistent with the imagery of Revelation 4. The throne of John's vision was set in place before he passed thru the open doorway to heaven - the text literally reads: "*a throne was standing in heaven.*" With the characteristic Hebrew reluctance toward the utterance of the holy name of God by mortal men, John simply designates the throne occupant as "*someone sitting on it.*" This is without doubt God the Father as He is later distinguished both from the Lamb (5:5,7; 6:16; 7:10) and from the Spirit (4:5; 19:4). To be seated upon the throne carries the connotation of reigning as Judge and King throughout the Book of Revelation.



"Ezekiel's Wheels" by William Blake

"And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne." - In Psalm 22:4, God is designated as "*the enthroned one.*" The Greek word "*ho kathemenos*" (literally - "*the seated one*") which begins this verse, is the New Testament equivalent of that divine title. The NIV's translation, "*the one who sat there*" muddles the recognition of the term as a title for God. The majesty of the divine presence is expressed by reference to three precious jewels, jasper, carnelian, and emerald. The use of glittering gem stones to symbolize the unapproachable brightness of God's glory is drawn from the Old Testament prophecy of Ezekiel:

"Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was

the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.” (Ezekiel 1:26-28)

“I looked, and I saw the likeness of a throne of sapphire above the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim...Then the glory of the Lord rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the Lord. The sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far away as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when He speaks...I looked, and I saw beside the cherubim four wheels, one beside each of the cherubim; the wheels sparkled like chrysolite.” (Ezekiel 10: 1,4-5,9)



“Satan in His Original Glory” by William Blake

“You were in Eden, the Garden of God, every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. You settings and mountings were made of gold, on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones.” (Ezekiel 28:13-14)



Aaron Presenting the Sin Offering Upon the Golden Altar Wearing the Jeweled Breastplate of the High Priest

The same symbolism is reflected in the jeweled breastplate of the High Priest in which a particular gemstone represents each of the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 28:15-21). The same imagery is applied to the New Jerusalem, the heavenly dwelling place of God in Revelation 21:11-21. The **“jasper”** was a glittering, diamond-like crystal, whose pure white light would serve well to symbolize the holiness of God. In sharp contrast, **“carnelian”** is a fiery red stone that appears to flicker with the blaze of consuming flames. Fire is often utilized in Scripture as the symbol for God’s judgment (i.e. the blazing eyes of Christ in 1:14). The **“rainbow,”** on the other hand, is the emblem of God’s mercy, the sign of His gracious promise after the flood that the world would never again be destroyed by water (Genesis 9:8-17). Thus, the third symbol tends to temper the fearful majesty of the image with a reminder of the Lord forgiveness and love. In the face of the impending message of judgment the rainbow reminds us that even in the midst of His righteous wrath He remains a God

of compassion. The dominant color of this rainbow is “*emerald*,” the rich green of earth and life. This rainbow “*encircled the throne*,” the first in a series of concentric circles surrounding the throne of God.



“The Twenty-four Elders Around the Throne of God” - Cologne, 1460

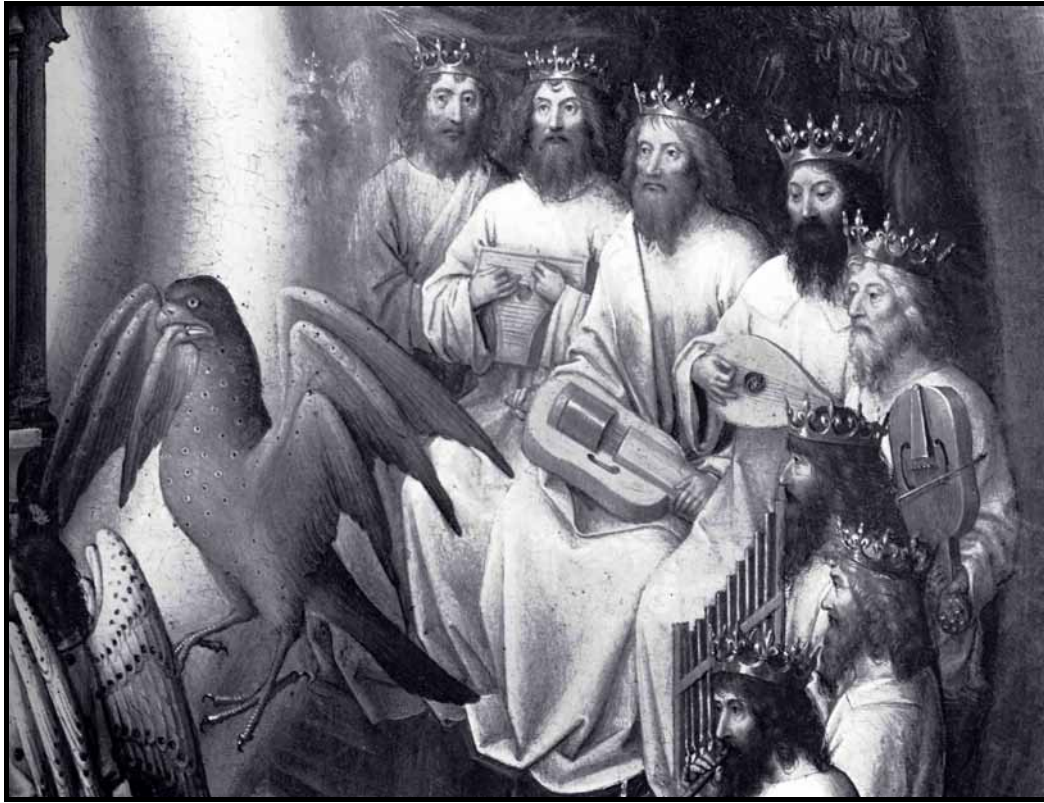
“Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders.” - Now the heavenly entourage around the throne of God is described. The first group to be mentioned consists of twenty-four elder/thrones. Twelve in Scripture is the representative number of the people of God, the Church, derived from the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Our Lord deliberately selected twelve apostles to reflect and balance the Old Testament number. Hence, when the suicide of Judas reduced the number of apostles to eleven, it was necessary to promptly select a replacement so that the Twelve might be restored (cf. Acts 1:12-26). The twenty-four elder/thrones which encircle the throne of God thus represent the entire people of God from both the Old and the New Testament eras. The fact that “*thrones*” are designated as the elder’s seats is reminiscent of Christ’s promise to His disciples that

in the coming day of judgment they would be seated on “*twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*” (Matthew 19:28). While there is general consensus as to the significance of the twenty-four thrones, the specific identity of the twenty-four elders seated upon them has been the subject of widespread debate. The occupants of the thrones are identified as “*elders in white garments, and upon their heads were crowns of gold.*” Are these elders men, or are they angels? The preponderance of the evidence seems to support the view that the elders (Greek - “*presbyterous*”) in this text are a special rank or category of angels - heavenly beings of high authority that belong to the court of God in heaven. In John’s vision these angels are the heavenly representatives of the church on earth. St. Paul may be alluding to this exalted rank of angels in his reference to “*thrones*” in Colossians 1:16. Within the

traditional nine ranks of angels the Thrones occupy the third level, beneath the seraphim and the cherubim. While the title “*elder*” is typically applied to human beings in Scripture, the prophet Isaiah does use the term in reference to the members of God’s angelic court in Isaiah 24:23 - “*The moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed; for the Lord Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before His elders gloriously.*” (Cf also 1 Kings 22:19; Psalm 89:7). Whenever these elders appear in Revelation they are always grouped with angels rather than men (cf. Revelation 7:9-11; 19:1-4). The elders of Revelation carry out tasks characteristically assigned to angels: offering the incense which represents the prayers of the saints before the Lord (5:8; 8:3), interpreting the details of the visions and conveying divine revelation (5:5; 7:13). In Daniel 7:9-18, which closely parallels this text, the heavenly beings seated upon the thrones that surround the throne of God are angels.



“The Twenty-four Elders Before God’s Throne” - 15th Century Woodcut



"The Elders Before God's Throne" by Hans Memling - 1475

The elders' song of praise (5:9-10) refers to humanity in the third person - ***"them," "they"*** - thus distinctly differentiating between the singers and the subject of the song. The elders are also consistently distinguished from the host of saints before the throne (i.e. 7:9-11) but are grouped with other categories of angels (i.e. the four living beings). These elders are ***"dressed in white and had crowns of gold upon their heads."*** White is the color of purity and holiness. Accordingly white apparel is the customary dress of the angels of God in Scripture (cf. Matthew 28:3; Mark 16:5; John 20:12; Acts 1:10). The elders wear golden crowns (Greek- *"stephanous chrysous"*). The crown, like the thrones upon which the elders are seated, is the symbol of royal authority and power.

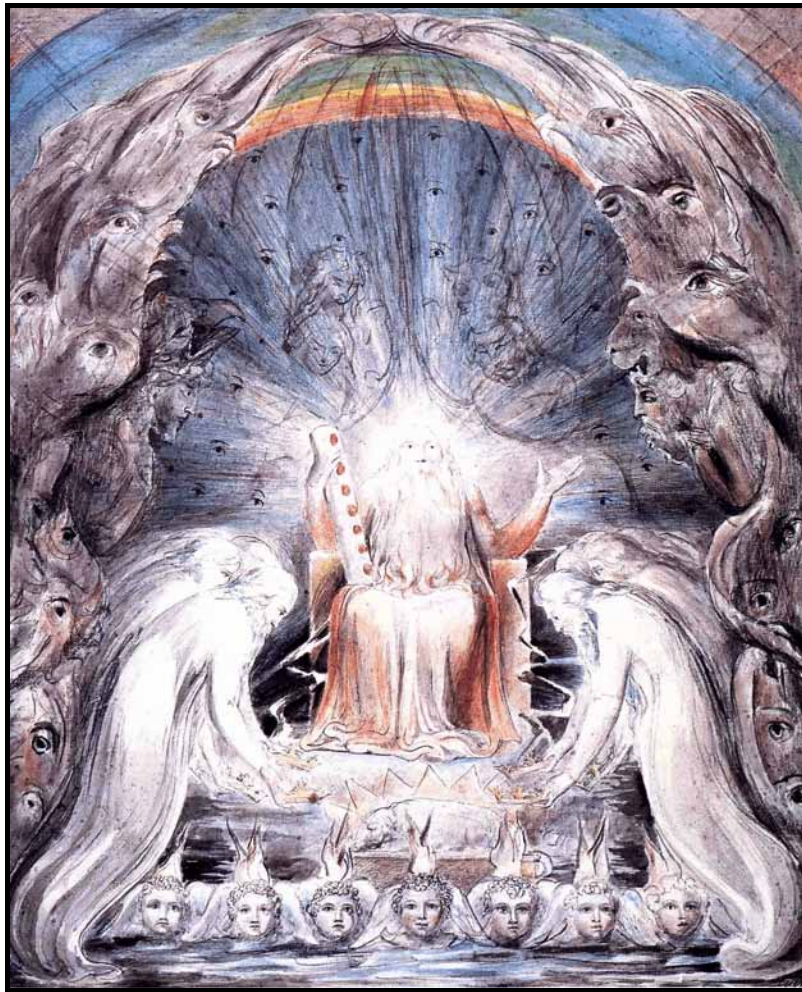
"From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder." - The thunder and lightning which rumbles and flashes across the scene of John's vision comes ***"from the throne."*** They are the physical manifestations of God's majesty and power. When God presented the Law to Israel at Sinai, His appearance upon the crest of the mountain was indicated by these same fearsome signs. ***"On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over***

the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.” (Exodus 19:16) Similar phenomena accompanied the presence of God in the vision of Ezekiel. *“The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright and lightning flashed out of it. The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning.”* (Cf. also Exodus 9:23,28; 1 Samuel 2:10; 7:10; 12:17-18; Job 37:2-12; Psalm 18:13-15) Throughout the balance of the Book the flash of lightning and the rumble of thunder are used to signal the appearance of God and the imminence of His judgment (cf. Revelation 8:5; 11:19; 16:18).



*The “Menorah”
The Seven Branched Lampstand of the Temple*

“Before the throne seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.” - Once again (cf. 1:4) the Holy Spirit is presented as *“the seven spirits of God.”* In this instance, His presence is indicated by seven brightly burning lamps. The image is drawn from the prophecy of Zechariah where the ministry of the Holy Spirit is also represented by a seven branched lampstand (cf. Zechariah 4:1-6). The picture is similar to the golden menorah which burned perpetually in the tabernacle and the temple (Exodus 37:17-24). The text uses the Greek word *“lampades”* which specifically means *“torches”* in distinction to *“lychniai”* which refers to candlesticks or lampstands. *“Lampades”* were typically used outside because their larger flames were less likely to blow out than the wicks of a lamp or candle. Furthermore we are told that these torches are



“The Elders Before God’s Throne” by William Blake

“blazing,” again emphasizing the bright, fierce nature of this fire. Fire in Revelation represents judgment and these blazing torches signal the coming of God’s wrath upon sinful humanity.

“Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.”
 - John appears to have some difficulty describing the next feature of the vision. That difficulty is indicated by the phrase *“what looked like.”* Words can hardly describe it because he had seen nothing exactly like it on earth. He can only draw a limited comparison between that which is seen in the vision and its earthly description. It reminded him of an ocean made out of glass. The image is adapted, as is so often the case in Revelation, from Ezekiel’s prophecy. John’s dependence on Ezekiel is consistent but the Revelator is also consistently willing to adjust and embellish the earlier prophecy. In Ezekiel, the crystal sea is placed above, not before the throne of God - *“Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an*

expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome.” (Ezekiel 1:22) To the Hebrew, the sea represented chaos and disorder. The surging waves of the sea became the image for men and nations in endless conflict with one another. The prophet Isaiah declares: ***“But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.”*** (Isaiah 57:20-21). Later, John informs us that in the new heaven and the new earth ***“there was no longer any sea.”*** (Revelation 21:1). The glassy sea before the throne of God signifies the perfect peace and order which must exist in the presence of the Holy God. Before Him there is no conflict or disorder. The fact that this remarkable sea of glass is ***“clear as crystal”*** further emphasizes the purity and holiness of God.



“Ezekiel’s Vision” by Raphael

“In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes in front and in back.”

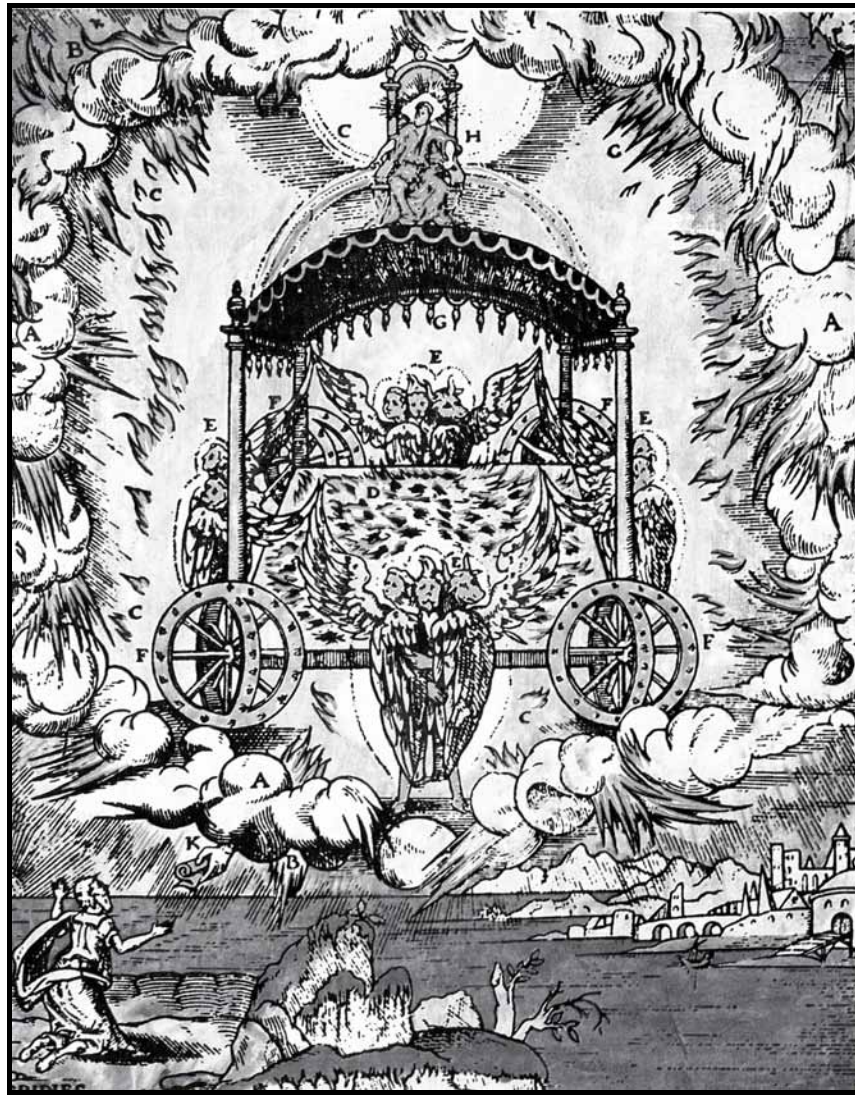
- At the center of the vision, in immediate proximity to the throne of God and encircling it, are the four living beings. They are the creatures closest to God’s royal seat, just beyond the green band of the rainbow, forming the second of the concentric circles around God’s throne. They are simply called “zoa” from the Greek verb which means “to live” (as in the English word “zoology” - the study of living things). The NIV inaccurately translates this noun as “living creatures,” and the KJV wanders even farther from the original with its “beasts.” These are simply “living beings.” Four is the earth number in the numerological symbolism of the Bible, evidently derived from the four points of the compass, the

four directions. The fact that there are **“four living creatures”** thus serves to link these magnificent beings to the animate creation, all the life forms fashioned by the Creator God. It is clearly evident that these beings are an exalted order of angels, both from their proximity to the throne of God, and their detailed similarity to the earlier visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah. Like the cherubim of Ezekiel they are four in number (Ezekiel 1:5); they are associated with the lion, the ox, a man, and an eagle (Ezekiel 1:10); and they are covered with eyes (Ezekiel 1:12). Like the serephim of Isaiah, they have six wings (Isaiah 6:2) and sing virtually the same song of praise and glory to God (Isaiah 6:3). The **“four living creatures”** of Revelation present us with an amalgamation of the characteristics of the Old Testament’s serephim and cherubim and thus within the symbolism of this grand vision may represent both of these exalted ranks of angelic beings.



“Isaiah Before the Serephim” - 19th Century Engraving

The first characteristic of the **“four living creatures”** is expressed in the words **“they were covered with eyes, in front and in back.”** As noted above, this detail is adapted from the imagery of Ezekiel in which the cherubim are full of eyes on **“their whole body, and their backs, and their hands, and their wings.”** (Ezekiel 1:12) The spinning wheels upon which they ride are also covered with all-seeing eyes in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezekiel 1:18). The point of this imagery is the watchful and comprehensive knowledge which has been granted to these remarkable angels.



"Ezekiel's Vision" - 19th Century Bible Illustration

Nothing escapes their gaze nor takes place without their knowledge. This is certainly not to attribute to an angel the absolute omniscience of God, which is in a category by itself but rather to state that God has created these beings with unique capacities to carry out the role which the Creator has assigned to them.

Next, the distinct characteristics of each of the four living beings is carefully noted. In Ezekiel's vision, each cherub has four faces, a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. John uses the same four animals but divides them among the four beings, assigning only one to each angel. The four animals were probably selected as being representative of basic forms of animal life: the lion - wild animals; the ox - domesticated animals; the man - humankind; and, the eagle - the birds. Thus the

responsibility of these angels for the entirety of animate creation is stressed. In Christian symbolism, since the days of the early church, these four creatures have come to represent the four Gospels of the New Testament: Matthew as man; Mark as the lion; Luke as the ox; and John as the eagle.

“Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings.” - The

six wings of Isaiah’s seraphim are added to the already impressive appearance of the living beings. The multiple wings serve to emphasize the swiftness and speed with which these angels carry out the will and command of God. In the Old Testament passage the functions of the three pairs of wings were described in this way: ***“With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.”*** (Isaiah 6:2) The

significance of the six wings may be explained in this way. The two wings that cover the face suggest the reverent awe of the seraphim who are unwilling to gaze directly upon the face of God. The two wings that cover the feet denote humility as these blessed angels stand in the divine presence. The two wings with which they fly represent obedience, the readiness of these ministering spirits to instantly carry out the commands of God. The emphasis on the angels’ all seeing eyes is reiterated and expanded in the phrase - ***“was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings.”*** These remarkable creatures exercise unceasing vigilance as they serve and obey the will of their Creator.

“Day and night they never stop saying: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.” - The four living beings exist to sing the praises of God. As the representatives of creation, they perform the function that creation was meant to fulfill. They do so without pause or interruption - ***“day and night they never stop saying.”*** This incessant praise does not preclude other



“A Sereph” - 8th Century Spain

activities on their part. In fact, they are depicted carrying out a variety of duties at functions at the command of God (i.e. Revelation 6:1,3,5,7). Each of those tasks becomes yet another expression of the continuous praise of God. The song of the four living beings echoes the glorious anthem of Isaiah's serephim: ***"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory!"*** (Isaiah 6:3). This is the "Trisagion" (Greek), the "Tersanctus" (Latin), the threefold affirmation of the essential holiness of God. Triple repetition in Biblical numerology intensifies the thought to its greatest, ultimate extent. These words constitute the most exalted expression of praise to God in all of Scripture. Their sublime substance go as far as human thought and expression can go in ascribing to God the glory due His Name. Through the balance of the hymn, the 'trisagion' is reflected in three divine names and three divine attributes so that three segments of threes provide the exquisite structure of the heavenly song.

Holy
Lord
Who Was

Holy
God
Who Is

Holy
Almighty
Who Is To Come

In effect, the hymn defines the nature of God. He is the essence of Holiness, set apart from that which He has made by His perfection and purity. The three divine names, ***"Lord God Almighty,"*** are the Greek equivalent of the ancient Hebrew title *"Yahweh Sebaoth,"* (*"the Lord of Hosts"*) which appears in Isaiah 6. The title emphasizes the omnipotence of the divine Judge who descends in wrath upon those who dare to disregard or defy His standards of righteousness. The four living beings conclude their song with reference to the eternity of God - ***"Who was, and is, and is to come."*** The Lord is transcendent - above and beyond this universe of time and space. He has no source, or point of origin. He is the Source and the Beginning of all that is. Therein lies the basic difference between the Creator and the creature. This is the great God of power and might. This vision is bestowed upon His faithful people for their consolation and encouragement: *"This is no abstract theology of God. Through John, the readers are being given information from the heavenly, secret council room of the Lord...This is to enable the suffering readers to perceive His eternal purpose and so motivate them to persevere faithfully through tribulation."* (Beale, p. 333)

This heavenly anthem is perhaps best reflected in classic Christian hymnody in Martin Luther's magnificent *"Isaiah Mighty Seer in Days of Old."* This chorale is

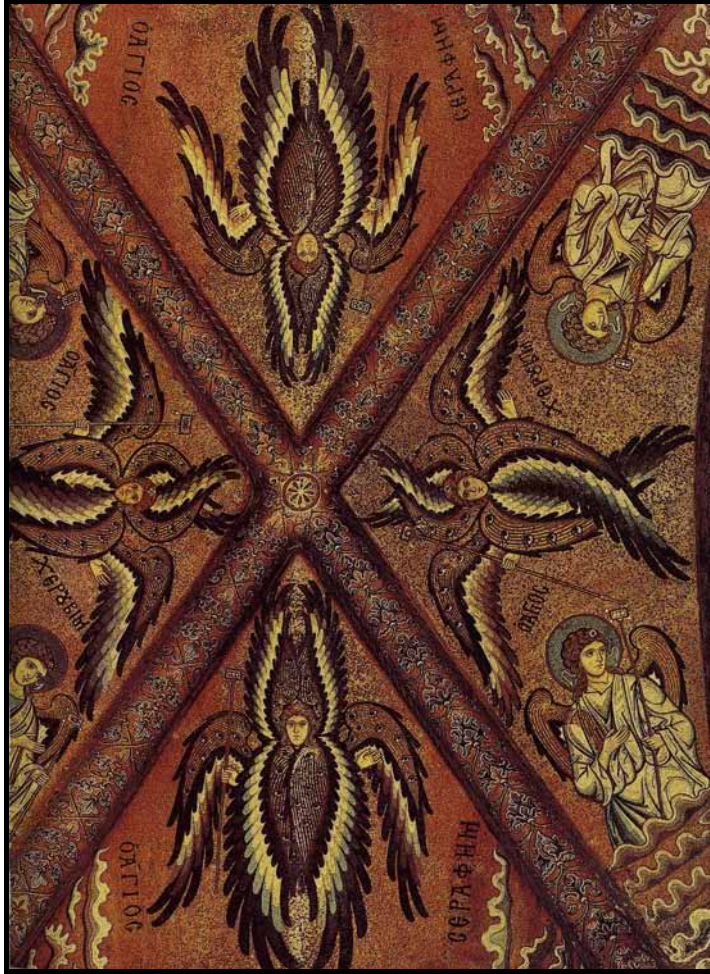


“The Call of Isaiah” by Rudolf Schäfer

often referred to as the “*German Sanctus*” because it was originally composed for use in the liturgy of Holy Communion as an alternative to the traditional Latin “*Sanctus*,” the chant which celebrates the sacramental presence of Christ, about to occur through the Words of Institution.

*“Isaiah, mighty seer in days of old the Lord of all in spirit did behold
 High on a lofty throne in splendor bright,
 With flowing train that filled the temple quite.
 Above the throne were stately serephim;
 Six wings had they, these messengers of Him.
 With twain they veiled their faces, as was meet,
 With twain in rev’rent awe they hid their feet,
 And with the other twain aloft they soared,
 One to the other called and praised the Lord:
 “Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth! Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!”*

Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth! Behold His glory filleth all the earth!"
The beams and lintels trembled at the cry,
And clouds of smoke enwrapped the throne on high.

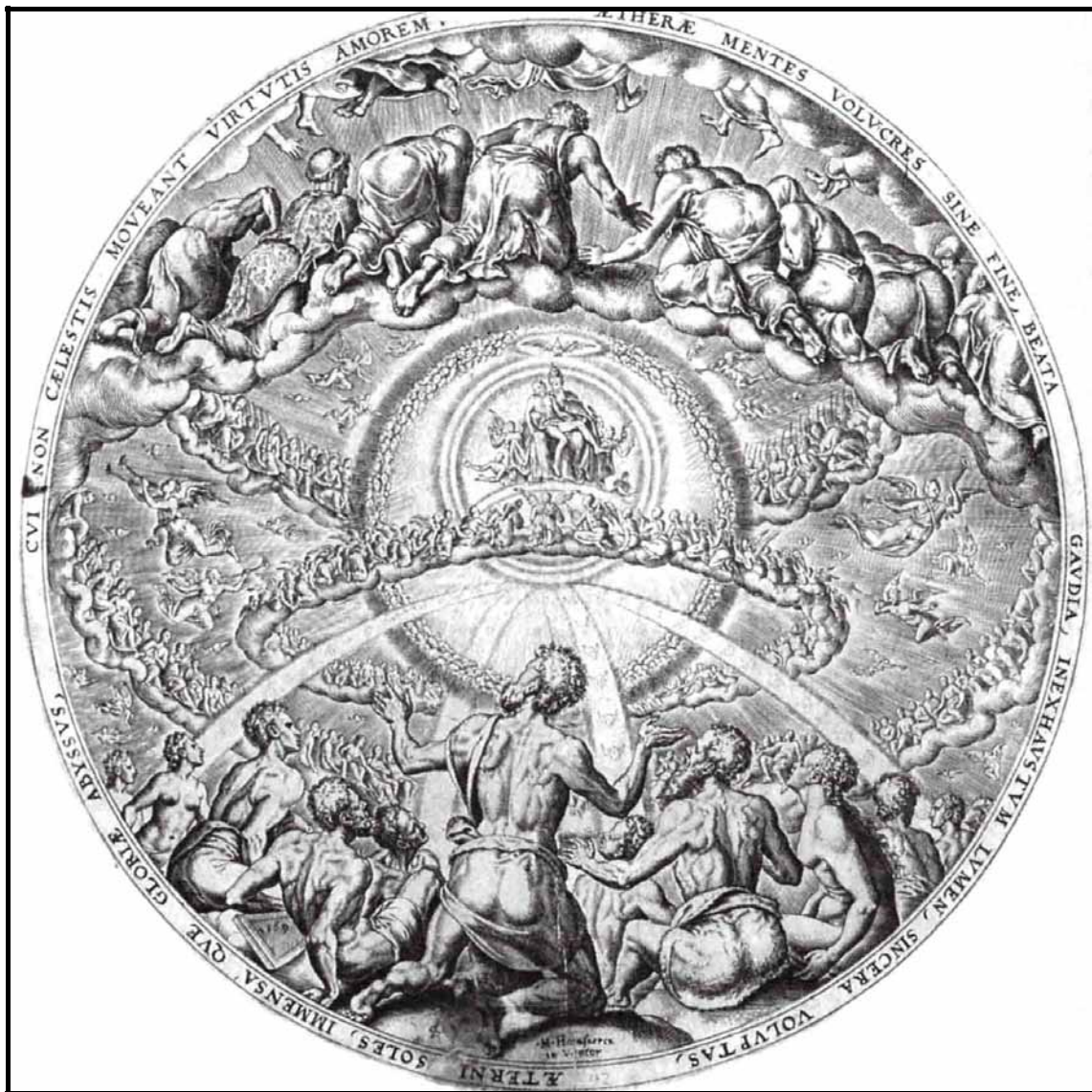


“Serephim” - Byzantine Mosaic

“Whenever the living creatures gave glory, honor, and thanks to Him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and worship Him who lives forever and ever.” - The next phrase details the response of the twenty-four elders to the four living beings’ great song of praise. Praise leads to praise. One song reverberates in another as ever widening circles of worship resound throughout the heavens. The same pattern of antiphonal song will be seen in subsequent chapters as the hosts of angels and saints add their voices to the mighty chorus (cf. Revelation 5:8-14; 7:9-17). The song of the four living beings is characterized as giving **“glory, honor, and thanks”** (Greek - *“doxan kai timen kai eucharistian”*). All that

is expressed about God by those whom He has created ought to be *“doxology,”* an uninterrupted song that ascribes to God the glory (Greek - *“doxa”*) due His Name. **“Honor”** (Greek - *“timen”*) refers to the reverent awe of the creature in the presence of the Creator. *“Eucharistian,”* from which the English word *“eucharist”* is derived, is the creature’s natural and appropriate desire to give thanks to God and to express a sense of gratitude for that which God has made and done. The song of praise is directed to **“Him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever.”** This apt description of the eternity of God is based on Daniel 4:34 and 12:7. Earthly rulers rise and fall, but the reign of the Sovereign Lord endures forever. This is the first of

six times in Revelation when the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves before either God or the Lamb (cf. Revelation 5:8,14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). The elders' spontaneous response to the living being's song of praise is to fall down upon their faces in worship before the Lord. These two terms *“fall down”* and *“worship”* are consistently combined in Revelation as two stages in a single act of adoration (cf. Revelation 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:10; 22:8). This combination is not unique to Revelation (cf. Psalm 72:11; Daniel 3:5,6, 10,11,15; Matthew 2:11; 4:9; 18:26; Acts 10:25; 1 Corinthians 14:25).



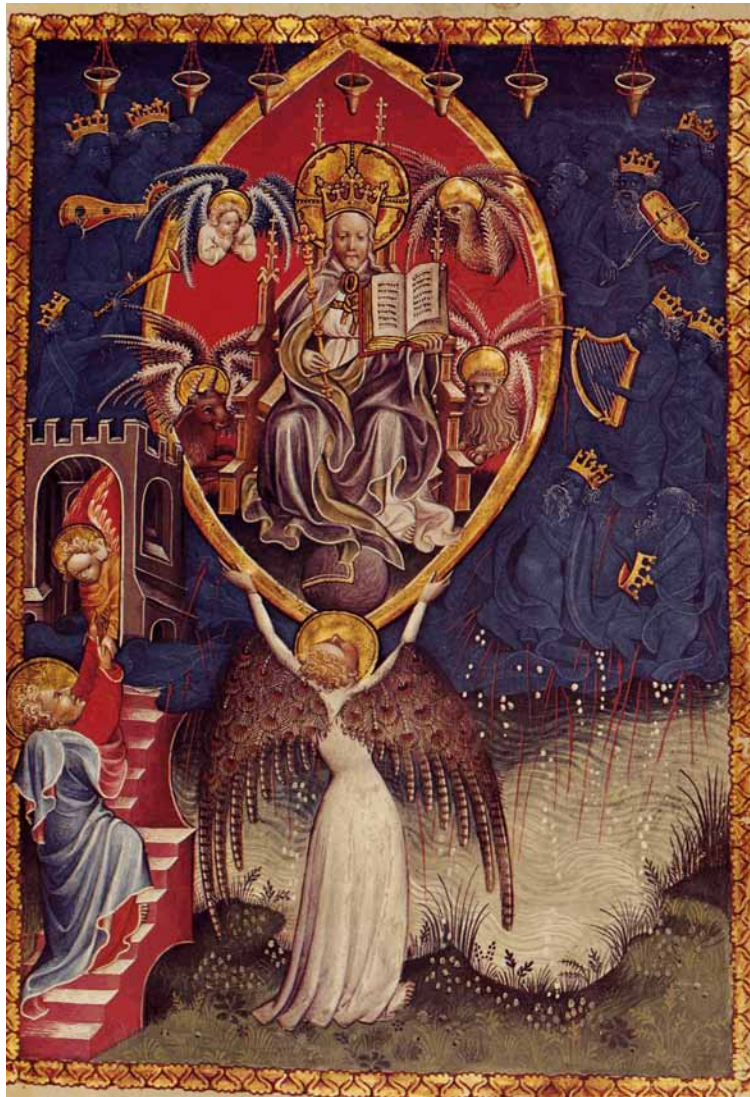
*“The Heavenly Adoration of the Divine Trinity”
Maerten van Heemskerck*

“They lay their crowns before the throne...” - The elders’ action in casting down their golden crowns before God’s throne signifies their homage before God and their subordination to Him. By removing their crowns and placing them at His feet they acknowledge that the victory and power which the crowns represent are not their doing, but the work of God. The classic hymn *“Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!”* is based on this text.

*“Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and serephim falling down before Thee,
Which wert and art, and evermore shall be.”*

The elders’ song of praise is similar to and yet distinct from the song of the four living beings. It opens with an affirmation of the worthiness of God - ***“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.”*** The wording is slightly altered in the song of the elders. ***“Power”*** replaces ***“thanksgiving,”*** the third component in the song of the living beings. This is consistent with the elders’ focus on the role of God as almighty Creator. The identification of the deity with the title ***“our Lord and God”*** in Revelation may be a deliberate rejection of the Roman senate’s blasphemous presumption in assigning that title (Latin - *“dominus et deus noster”*) to the emperor. The Roman historian Suetonius reports that Domitian, the occupant of the imperial throne at the time Revelation was written, was one of the few emperors arrogant enough to claim the designation during his own lifetime. In most cases, the title was bestowed posthumously.

The basis for the exclamation of God’s worthiness to receive glory, honor, and power is identified in the phrase which follows - ***“for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”*** The joyful celebration of God’s identity as the Creator of all things is a regular theme in Scripture (cf. Psalm 33:6-9; 102:25; 136:5-9). The threefold repetition of the text - ***“You created all things”*** - ***“by Your will they were created”*** - ***“and have their being”*** - emphasizes the reality that everything that exists has its origin in God. *“He, and He alone is the one and only source of creation.”* (Thomas, p. 367) As the opening scene of the vision surges to its triumphant conclusion, the throne of God - majestic symbol of His eternal, sovereign power - stands supreme, exalted, and serene forever. John’s message for struggling believers is unmistakably clear: Stand firm! Do not despair! The Lord God reigns omnipotent!



*"The Vision of the Seven Seals"
15th Century Bible Illumination*

The Book of the Seven Seals (Revelation 5:1-5)

"Then I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

“Then I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll...” - The opening formula ***“Then I saw”*** signal the transition to the next scene of the vision. The focus shifts from the throne and its divine occupant to the mysterious, seven-sealed document held in His hand. The Greek text literally says that the scroll is ***“on”*** God’s right hand. Thus, the image is that of an outstretched hand, perhaps

slightly cupped, with the sealed scroll resting upon it. The fact that the scroll is in God’s ***“right hand,”*** which represents His majestic power, indicates His ownership of the scroll and His control over that which the scroll contains. The object in hand is a ***“biblion,”*** that is, a scroll made up of papyrus or vellum sheets connected to one another and then rolled up, often around a wooden handle. The scene is reminiscent of a number of Old Testament passages in which scrolls figure prominently (cf. Isaiah 29:11-12; Jeremiah 36:10-25; Ezekiel 2:9-10; Daniel 12:4).



***“Jeremiah with the Scroll of his Prophecy”
by Raphael***

“With writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.” - Two details about the scroll are carefully noted. First, the scroll is opisthographic, that is, written on both front and back (Greek - *“gegrammenon esother kai opisthen”* - literally - *“written upon inside and on the back”*).

This is unusual. Typically scrolls are only written on one side, and the text is then rolled up on the inside. The fact that this scroll has writing on both sides indicates the large amount of information it contains and the completeness or comprehensive nature of that information. Secondly, this scroll is ***“sealed with seven seals.”*** In ancient times, documents of particular importance were closed with a wax or clay seal into which the signet or sign of the author was impressed before the wax or clay was allowed to harden. The scroll could not be opened without breaking the seal, thus preventing access to its contents by

unauthorized persons. This scroll is sealed not once but seven times. The use of the perfect seven indicates that the scroll's contents are completely, absolutely sealed, a mystery most profound.

The significance of the scroll and its contents is revealed both by its Old Testament precedents and First Century Roman custom. In Old Testament prophecy the image of a sealed scroll represented the unknown future with special reference to God's future plan for judgment and redemption. In Daniel 7:10, the opening of the books describes the judgment of God before the court of heaven. Later in Daniel 12:8-9, the prophet asks how these prophecies will be fulfilled. He is told that in the last days that which is now ***"closed up and sealed"*** will be opened (cf. Isaiah 29:18; Ezekiel 2:8-3:3). The prophecies of the Old Testament, incomplete and often only dimly understood, were fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As John observes the opening of the seals in Revelation 5, the latter days have begun. All that remains until Christ comes again will now be revealed. Thus, in the vision of the seven seals, the long awaited answer to Daniel's question finally comes. The fulfillment of the ancient prophecies has begun and will continue to unfold until the Day of Judgment in the manner now to be disclosed.



"The Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea Collection"

The document in John's vision also bears a striking similarity to a Roman last will and testament. In First Century Roman practice, the will itself was written on the inside of the scroll while its contents were briefly summarized on the outside, hence the scroll was opisthographic. A Roman will had to be witnessed and personally sealed by seven witnesses. The will could only be opened upon the death of the testator and its provisions implemented. The opening of the will was carried out by a trustworthy executor who was then given the responsibility to execute the terms of the will. Thus it may well be that John's seven-sealed scroll signifies a most solemn and official document, possibly the last will and testament of God (cf. Hebrews 9:15 - ***“that those who are called may receive the promised inheritance.”***). G.K. Beale provides a helpful summary of the theological implications of this insight according to which Christ is both the executor and the heir of God's testament:

“The “book” in chapter 5 should be seen as the covenantal promise of an inheritance in the broader theological context of the Apocalypse concerning Paradise lost and regained. God promised to Adam that he would reign over the earth. Although Adam forfeited this promise, Christ, the last Adam, was to inherit it. A human person had to open the book, because the promise had been made to humanity. But no person was found worthy to open it because all are sinners and stand under the judgment contained in the book. Nevertheless, Christ was found worthy because He suffered the final judgment as an innocent sacrificial victim on behalf of His people, whom He represented and consequently redeemed. No doubt, He was also considered worthy because He also overcame the final judgment imposed on Him by redeeming a people and by being raised from death. Therefore Christ was able to inherit the promises of the book as do all those who are represented by Him.”
(Beale, p. 341)

“And I saw a mighty angel, proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” - A strong angel now comes forth as the herald of God's court seeking someone capable of and qualified to open the sealed scroll. The angel's name is not provided. He is simply described as ***“mighty.”*** Many commentators conclude that this is ***“Gabriel,”*** whose Hebrew name means ***“the strong one of God.”*** Gabriel frequently serves as God's messenger in Scripture (cf. Luke 1:19,26). In fact, in the Daniel texts so closely associated with this passage, it is Gabriel who instructs the prophet to close and seal the book (Daniel 8:16; 9:21). The angel's proclamation goes forth ***“in a loud voice.”*** This is a phrase which occurs twenty times in Revelation to designate a message of special importance which resounds throughout the universe. The mighty angel is looking for the man who can reveal and carry out the hidden counsel of God. The adjective ***“worthy”*** (Greek - ***“axiotes”*** - literally - ***“of proper weight”***) refers to a combination of proper rank and

qualification, moral purity and competence, and ability, power, and capacity. He who would ***“break the seals and open the scroll”*** must be one who is capable of serving as the executor of God’s testament, not only uncovering but also carrying out God’s plan for the future of His creation.

“But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.” - The answer to the angel’s question is vast silence throughout the universe. No one responds to the challenge. The threefold division ***“in heaven, on earth, or under the earth”*** is the standard Greek idiom for the cosmos, the entire universe (cf. Philippians 2:10). ***“No one in the whole universe had the ability. No one in the heaven, not even among the greatest angels; no one on the earth among living men; no one beneath the earth among all who had died.”*** (Lenski, p. 194)

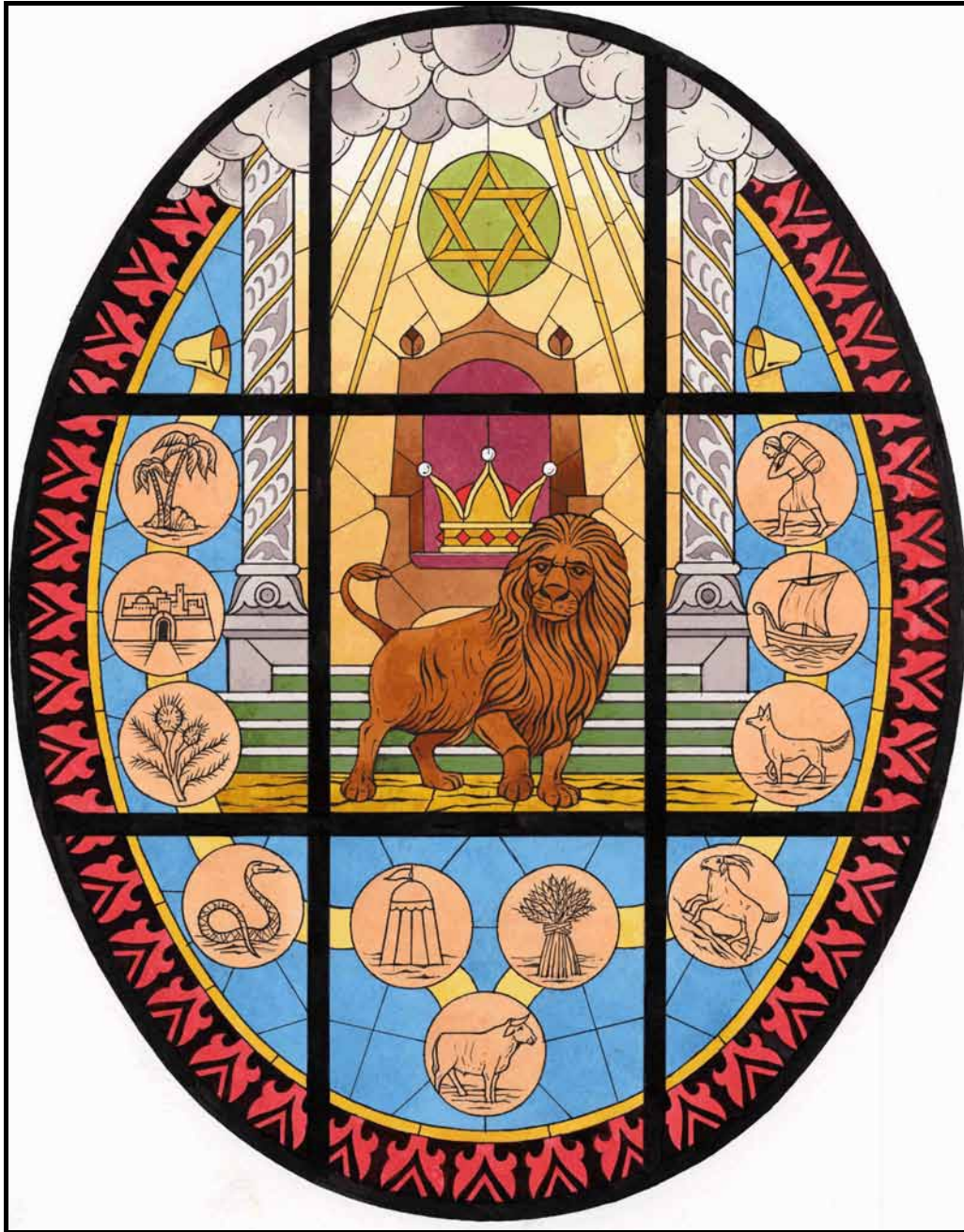
The dramatic device of the angel’s cosmic challenge and the complete absence of response emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ and our absolute dependence upon Him and that which He has done for us and for our salvation. There is not anyone else. Jesus is the one and only hope of humanity.



“The Archangel Gabriel” by Guariento di Arpo

“I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.” - No one is found and John’s reaction is the bitter weeping of despair. The seals cannot be broken, God’s glorious plan for the future will not be carried out. At that grim moment, in the face of deafening silence, John must have wondered why the Lord had not stepped forward. Could it be that Christ Himself is not worthy to carry out the plan of God? If that were true then there would be no hope whatsoever.

“The prophet weeps as it is borne in on him how powerless all human wisdom and power is over against the unknown and unknowable future. If no one be found to answer the angel’s challenge, mankind, and mankind’s world would have no future and no hope. The bright world into which the prophet had been allowed to gaze will remain forever hidden and remote, a place which a man may dream of perhaps, but cannot ever attain.” (Franzmann, p. 56,57)



***“The Lion of the Tribe of Judah”
Our Savior Lutheran Church***

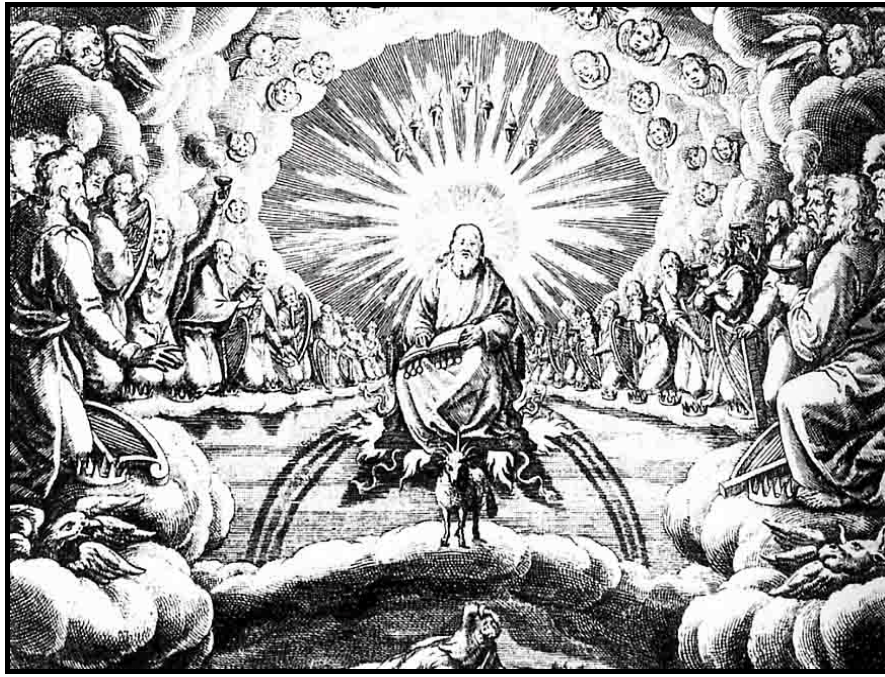
“Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep! See the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.’” - One of the twenty-four elders who surround the throne comes forward to put an end to the prophet’s despair. The elder commands John to stop crying. Jesus used virtually the same words on two occasions: first, when He raised the widow’s son at Nain (Luke 7:13) and again when He raised the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:52). In both cases this was the bitter cry of the mourner in the face of death.

Christ put an end to their weeping by removing its cause and raising their loved one from the dead. So also in this instance, the command to stop crying is based on the fact that Christ has removed the basis for despair - ***“He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”*** The language of the text is most dramatic. The command is followed by the Greek *“idou”* (*“Behold”*). The verb ***“has triumphed”*** is placed at the beginning of the next phrase for particular emphasis. Christ controls the future and will execute God’s plan of salvation because he has overcome sin, death, and the power of the devil. This is the same Greek verb, *“nikao”* (*“to triumph,” “to overcome”*), which concluded each of the seven letters to the churches with a promise to those who would persevere and overcome. The Lord can and will fulfill His promises to His faithful people because He has Himself overcome. Christ is identified with two Messianic titles from the Old Testament, ***“the Lion of the Tribe of Judah”*** (Genesis 49:9) and ***“the Root of David”*** (Isaiah 11:1,10).

Both designations highlight the role of the Promised Savior as the victorious King from the royal tribe of Judah and a descendant of the line of the great warrior King David who will defeat and destroy His enemies.



“Isaiah’s Vision of the Root of David”
13th Century Bible Illumination



"The Lamb Before the Throne" - 16th Century Bible Woodcut

The Lamb Before the Throne

(Revelation 5:6-14)

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. And when He had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

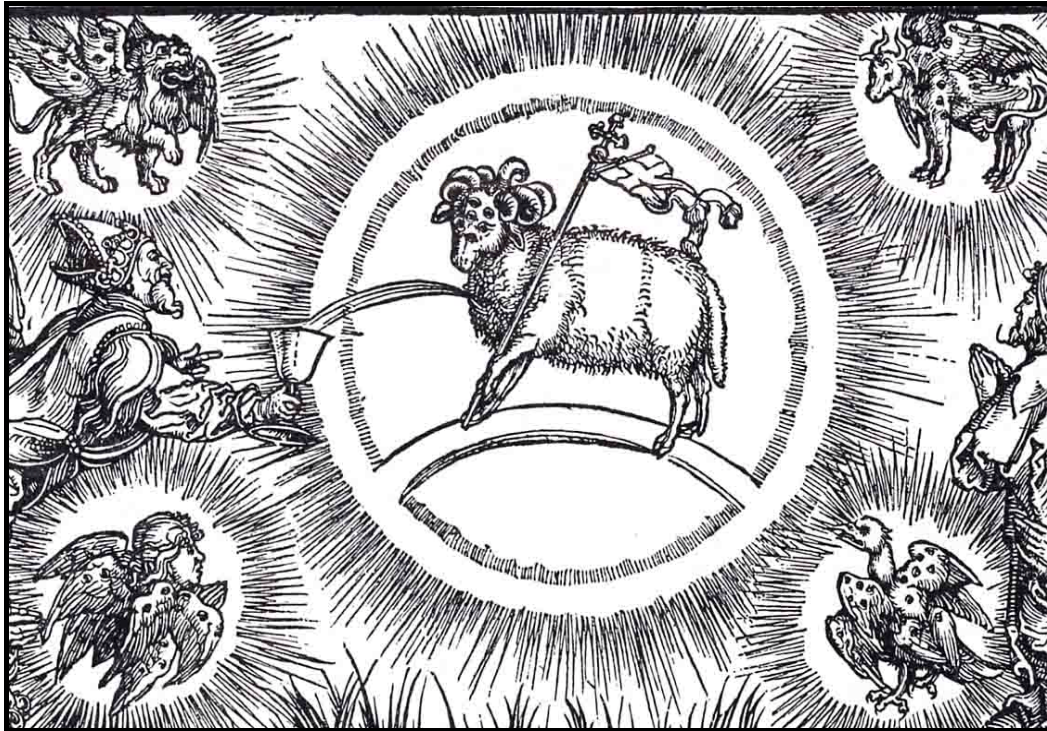
“Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if It had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.” - The figure which becomes the focus of the next scene in the vision is not a mighty lion or a majestic warrior, as might have been expected. Instead, the humble figure of a helpless Lamb stands at the center of the scene before the throne of God. The image of a lamb introduces the concept of sacrifice, particularly the sacrifice of the Passover lamb whose blood adorned the doorposts of Israel in Goshen (Exodus 12:1-30). Isaiah had foretold that the Messianic Suffering Servant would be ***“led like a lamb to the slaughter”*** (Isaiah 53:7). When Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by John, the Forerunner hailed Him as ***“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”*** (John 1:29). The sacrificial focus is sharpened by the fact that this is a lamb ***“looking***

as if It had been slain.” The Greek word *“esphagmenon”* (*“slain”*) is the technical term for the slaughter of an animal in preparation for sacrifice. The Lamb should be dead. Its body bears the vicious marks of slaughter. And yet it is alive. It is ***“standing in the center of the throne.”*** The victorious power which Christ has achieved is the result of His sacrificial death. That power was conclusively demonstrated in the resurrection. The shadow of the cross and the reality of the empty tomb looms over this imagery. Like the risen Christ who continued to bear the wounds of His crucifixion in His glorified body, this resurrected Lamb continues to exist as one that has been slaughtered, thus indicating the means by which His victory has been won. The text uses the Greek word *“arnion”* which is the diminutive form of the noun



“The Sacrifice of the Passover Lamb”
by Rudolf Schäfer

“aren” (“lamb”) to further heighten the contrast between the massive lion and the tiny lamb. This word becomes the characteristic designation for Christ through the balance of the Book of Revelation. The Lamb is placed ***“in the center of the throne”*** in the NIV’s translation. *“In the center at the throne”* or *“before the throne”* probably be a more accurate rendering of the Greek. The Lamb stands at the center, directly in front of God’s throne ***“encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.”***



“The Lamb with Seven Horns and Seven Eyes” by Albrecht Dürer

“He had seven horns and seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” - This is no ordinary lamb. The paradox of an evidently helpless creature which holds the greatest power in the universe is not heightened by the unique features of this Lamb with ***“seven horns and seven eyes.”*** In the Old Testament, the horn represents power (cf. Numbers 23:22; Deuteronomy 33:17; 1 Kings 22:11; Psalm 89:17; Daniel 7:7-8:24). That the Lamb has ***“seven horns”*** signifies that His power is complete and absolute. The Lamb also bears ***“seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”*** As the seven horns represent the omnipotence of the Lamb, so the seven eyes signify His omniscience. He sees and knows all things. The text explains that the seven eyes ***“are the seven***

spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” This is Revelation’s fourth reference to the *“seven spirits of God”* (cf. Revelation 1:4; 3:1; 4:5). As previously noted this imagery for the Holy Spirit is drawn from Zechariah 4:10 which notes: *“These seven lamps are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth.”* Christ had promised that after His exaltation He would send the Holy Spirit (John 15:26). This text uses the same verb to describe the sending of the spirits throughout the world. Within the inner working of the Holy Trinity, God the Holy Spirit, becomes the means through which the omniscience of the Father and the Son are exercised throughout creation.



“The Holy Trinity” by Michael Kirmer - 1552

“He came and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who sat upon the throne.” - Having fulfilled the will of His Father and having accomplished the plan of salvation by His death and resurrection, the exalted Christ steps forward and receives the sealed scroll from God’s right hand. The transfer of the scroll represents the exaltation and empowerment of Christ to exercise the sovereign authority of God. The God/Man, Jesus of Nazareth, born of the Virgin Mary, reclaims all the power and majesty that He had possessed as the Son of God from eternity. Daniel describes the same scene in his own inspired imagery:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of

every language worshiped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13-14)

It is exactly as St. Paul declares in Philippians chapter 2:

“Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the Name that is above every name, that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11)

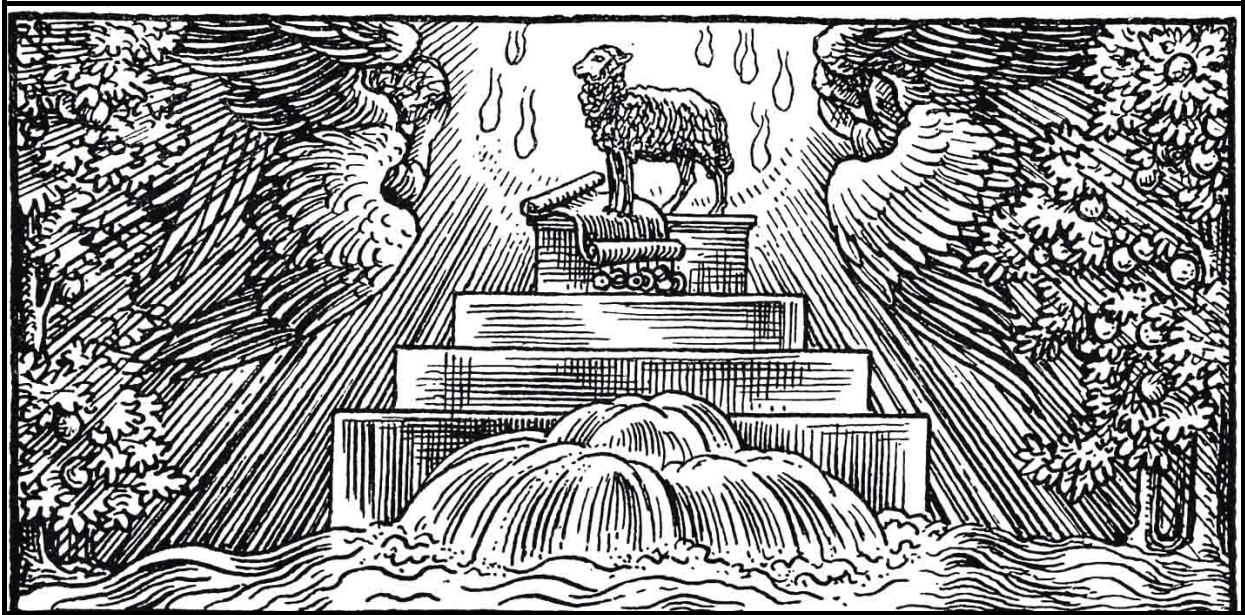
“And when He had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints.” - As the Lamb receives the seven sealed scroll from God’s right hand we enter upon one of the greatest scenes of universal adoration anywhere recorded. The living creatures and the elders fall down on their faces in worship and awe before the Lamb and their spontaneous song of exuberant praise resounds throughout heaven. In Revelation 4:10 the elders had fallen down before God upon His throne. As that action is now repeated, the living beings and the elders are acknowledging Jesus, the Lamb, as true God, the second member of the divine Trinity. The elders are holding harps in their hands. The harp, or lyre, is the traditional instrument used in the singing of the Psalms. It is associated with the praise of God - ***“Praise the Lord with the lyre, make melody to Him with the harp of ten strings.”*** (Psalm 33:2). Golden bowls of incense also play a role in the elders’ worship. These flat, saucer-like vessels, were part of the golden utensils of the temple. The use of incense was a typical feature of Hebrew worship. The sweet smelling smoke of the incense rising toward heaven represented the God-pleasing sacrifices and prayers of the faithful. Psalm 141:2 declares: ***“May my prayer be set forth before You like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.”*** John notes the meaning of the incense - ***“which are the prayers of the saints.”*** The image of angels bearing the prayers of men to God is common in first century Judaism. We see the same view reflected in Revelation 8:3-5. Given the context, the prayers in this instance are probably for the coming of God’s kingdom and the vindication of His people who have endured the world’s persecution and opposition. ***“Their prayer was the age-long prayer of the church, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”*** (Mounce, p. 147)

“And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its



"The Vision of the Seven Seals by Lucas Cranach

seals, because You were slain and with Your blood You purchased men for God...”
 - The “*new song*” (Greek - “*oden kainen*”) of the living beings and the elders is a celebration of the great salvation which God has accomplished through the blood of His Son . This is the second of three hymns in Revelation which begin with the Greek adjective “*axios*” (“*worthy*”). (Revelation 4:11; 5:9, 12) The Lamb is hailed because He is “*worthy to take the scroll and open its seals.*” The adjective “*worthy*” (Greek - “*axios*”) was applied to God the Father in the preceding chapter - “*You are*



“Worthy Is the Lamb Who Was Slain” by Rudolf Schäfer

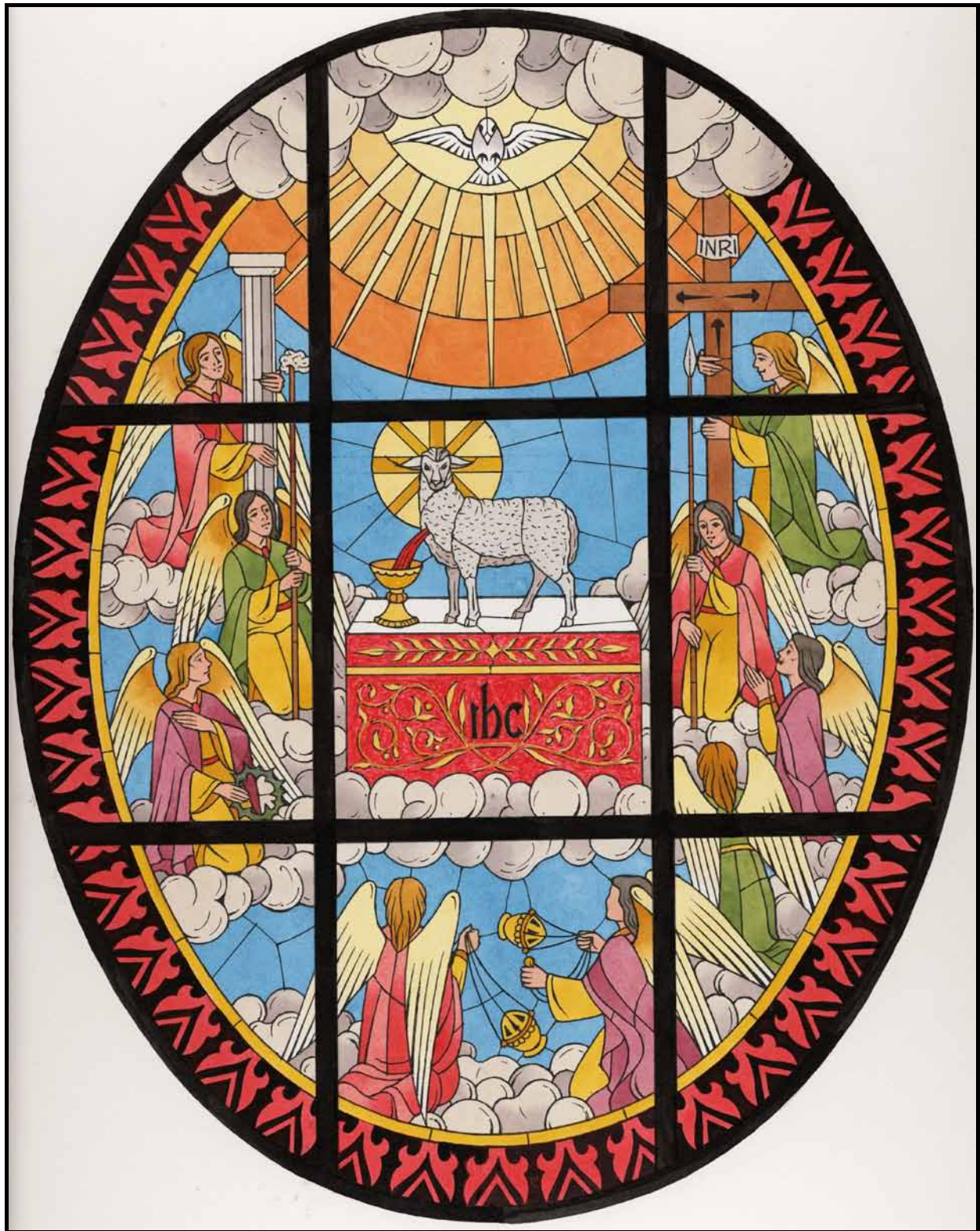
worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.” (Revelation 4:11). The deity of Christ is clearly indicated by the parallel. As previously noted (Revelation 5:2, p. 98f.), the concept of worthiness to unroll the scroll and break its seven seals signifies the qualification and the capacity to reveal and to implement God’s plan of salvation. He who opens the book not only knows the future, but controls the future. The text explains the basis for the worthiness of the Lamb in terms of His identity as the Redeemer of the world - “*because You were slain and with Your blood You purchased men for God.*” The tenses of the verbs - “*were slain*” “*purchased*” - are aorist, indicating past actions that have been fully completed. John uses the Greek word “*esphages*” (“*were slain*”) which specifically refers to the ritual slaughter of the Passover lamb to describe the death of Christ. In this way the sacrificial nature of Christ’s death on the cross is emphasized. The second verb, “*egorasas*” (“*You purchased*”) deals with the payment of the ransom

or redemption price. The background of this term pertains to the purchase and release of slaves in the marketplace. The sacrificial emphasis continues as the the elders declare that the price of our redemption is the blood of Jesus, the Lamb - ***“with Your blood You purchased.”*** As Martin Luther declares in his classic explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles Creed : *“He has purchased and won me, not with gold or silver but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death.”* We have been redeemed ***“for God.”*** The grammarians describe this as a dative of interest or advantage. Through the purchase price of Jesus’ blood we belong to God; we have become His possession. The scope of Christ’s redemption is universal, reaching out to include all of mankind ***“from every tribe and language and people and nation.”*** Four is the earth number in Revelation. Variations of this fourfold division occurs seven times in the Book (cf. Revelation 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15) It is broadly inclusive of every part of humanity. The terminology is drawn from the Book of Daniel (cf. Daniel 3:4,7,29; 5:19; 6:25; 7:14).

“You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth.” - The second portion of the basis for Christ’s worthiness to open the scroll pertains to that which He has done for those whom He has redeemed. By His death in our place upon the cross the Lord has constituted us as His priestly kingdom. The royal priesthood of believers is a theme repeated three times in Revelation (cf. 1:6; 20:6). The kingdom language of Revelation echoes that of Daniel 7:27: ***“Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey Him.”*** Israel had been called by God to be His own kingdom of priests, set apart among all the nations



“The Adoration of the Lamb” - 9th Century Illumination



"The Adoration of the Lamb" - Our Savior Lutheran Church

(cf. Exodus 19:6). Now God has set apart His own people in Christ, through whom we have direct access to the Father. In Christ we already participate in His glorious reign as it is celebrated in the elders' magnificent song of praise (cf. 1 Peter 2:9). It is significant to note that this celebration is present reality.

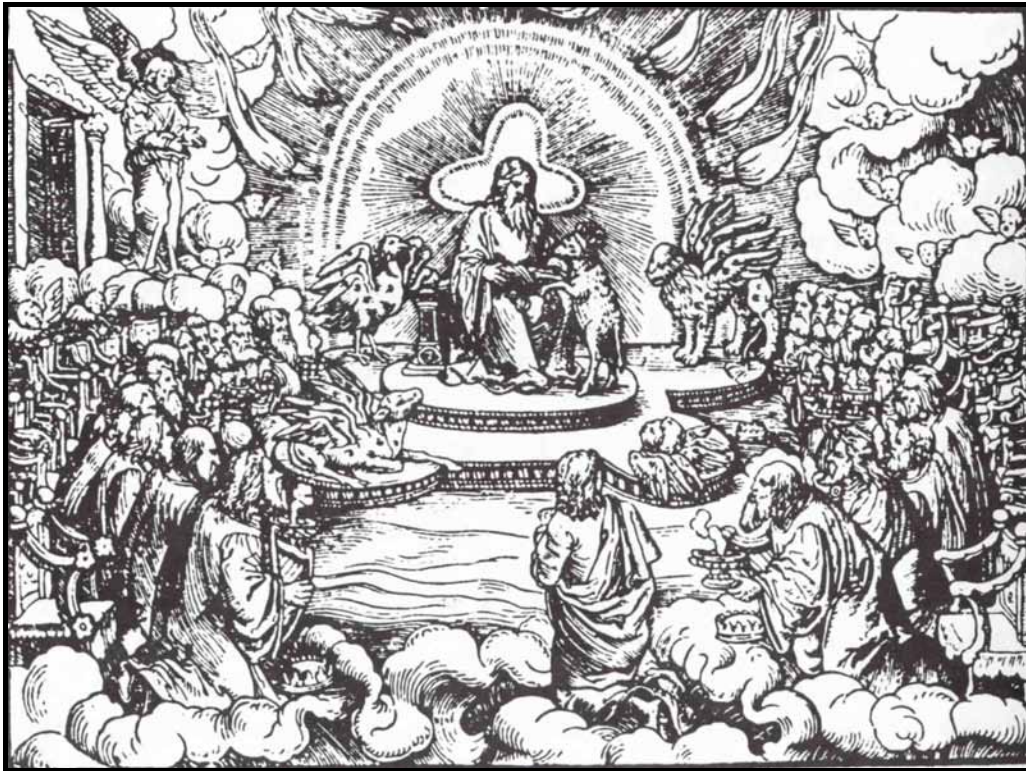
“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand.” - The doxology of the four living beings and the elders is echoed and amplified by the countless hosts of angels. The description of the countless host of angels ***‘numbering thousands upon thousands and ten thousand time ten thousand’*** is again reminiscent of the earlier prophecy of Daniel where the angels before the throne of God are described in virtually identical language - ***“Thousands upon thousands attended Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him.”*** (Daniel 7:10). The endless ranks of angels appear to continue the series of concentric circles that radiate out from God's throne. ***“They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.”*** This arrangement serves to emphasize the fact that God is the center, the focal point, of all reality. Everything that exists owes its being to Him and only continues to exist through Him.

“In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain...” - The myriad angels take up the song of exaltation and praise. They too affirm and celebrate the worthiness of the Lamb to unveil and implement God's purpose for the future. Like the living beings and the elders, they base their assertion of the Lamb's worthiness upon the fact of His sacrificial death and resurrection. Once again, it is ***“the Lamb who was slain”*** that is declared to be worthy. In the vision of the Revelator, the Lamb bears in His living body the horrific, fatal wounds which brought about His death. He was dead but still He lives! These are the wondrous marks of which the hymn writer sings:

*“Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne;
Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own.
Awake my soul and sing of Him who died for thee,
And hail Him as thy matchless King through all eternity.*

*Crown Him the Lord of love, behold His hands and side,
Rich wounds yet visible above in beauty glorified.
No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,
But downward bends his wondering eyes at mysteries so bright.*

*Crown Him the Lord of Heaven, enthroned in worlds above,
Crown Him the King to whom is given the wondrous name of Love.
Crown Him with many crowns as thrones before Him fall;
Crown Him ye kings with many crowns for He is King of all!*



“The Vision of the Seven Seals” - 16th Century Woodcut

The song of the angels’ celebrates the Victim/Victor whose death has redeemed a lost and fallen creation. It is a song that is vibrant and robust - ***“In a loud voice they sang.”*** The substance of the angels’ doxology is an affirmation of the worthiness of Christ in terms of seven characteristics or qualities. Christ is worthy to receive adoration for these things which He already possesses. The use of the perfect seven is deliberate reflecting the absolute perfection of the Son of God to whom the hymn is directed. The repetition of the conjunction ***“and”*** (Greek - *“kai”*) between each of the seven nouns serves to highlight and emphasize each individual quality while linking them all together as a powerful expression of divine majesty. ***“Power”*** (Greek - *“dynamis”* - hence the English *“dynamite”*) denotes the omnipotent power of Christ in contrast to ***“strength”*** (Greek - *“kratos”* - hence the English *“democracy”*) the ability to do things through the use of force. On the Mount of Ascension Jesus declared: ***All power has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”***

(Matthew 28:20) **“Wealth”** (Greek - *“pluton”* hence the English *“plutocrat”*) indicates the endless resources of the all-sufficient Creator God, both spiritual and material (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9; Ephesians 3:8). The ascription of perfect **“wisdom”** (Greek - *“sophia”* - hence the English *“philosophy”*) is of long standing precedent throughout Scripture. St. Paul declares that Christ is the ultimate embodiment of the **“wisdom of God”** (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30). **“Honor”** (Greek - *“timen”*) indicates the recognition and respect accorded one whose personal characteristics and actions have rightly earned such recognition. **“Glory”** (Greek - *“doxa”* hence the English *“doxology”*) is a very powerful term closely associated with the divine majesty of God. It is used to describe the brightness and radiance of God’s heavenly presence. **“Praise”** (Greek - *“eulogian”* hence the English *“eulogy”*) is a declaration of blessing in response to the Lord for benefits received. Dr. Siegbert Becker observes:

“The last word “blessing” is especially significant. Countless Hebrew prayers, the kind of prayers John had known from his childhood, begin with the words, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, King of the universe.” Such prayers are properly addressed to the exalted Son of Mary.” (Becker, p. 102)



“Worthy Is The Lamb!”

“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To Him who sits on the throne and to the



*"The Adoration of the Lamb"
15th Century Bible Illumination*

Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!" - The majestic song of the angel hosts is answered and carried on by the entire creation. The cosmos joins in a universal celebration and anthem of praise. When the challenge for someone worthy to open the scroll and break its seven seals had gone forth no one in all of creation was able to respond. That impotent silence is now replaced by the reverberation of joyful song. God's plan and purpose will be carried out. All of the prophecies shall be fulfilled, for the Lamb of God has come. He who offered up His own life upon the cross is worthy. The future is secure. The text stresses the fact that the response from creation is universal. One phrase follows upon another so that there can be no doubt - *"every creature in heaven and on earth and under*

the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them." No living creature fails to join in this climactic hymn of praise (cf. Philippians 2:10-11). Four is the earth number in revelation. Thus it is fitting that creation's doxology is expressed in four of the seven ascriptions from the hymn of the angels.

"The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped." - As the hymn began with the four living beings around the throne, so it now concludes and is confirmed with their final *"Amen."* The verb *"said"* is imperfect which suggests ongoing continuous action. Thus the tremendous *"Amen"* of the cherubim and seraphim may well have been repeated four times, after each of creation's four ascriptions. As the living beings cry out, the twenty-four elders once again fall down in abject worship before the awesome presence of God and of the Lamb.



“Death on a Pale Horse” by William Blake

The Second Vision - The Seven Seals

Revelation 6:1-8:1

Introduction

The awesome vision of God's heavenly throne, the exaltation of the Lamb, and the triumphant anthems of saints and angels have set the stage for the opening of the seals. The Lamb who was slain has begun His reign! But to hard pressed believers, struggling to survive in the face of bitter persecution, the evidence of God's coming kingdom must have been difficult to discern.

“Riders of ruin go forth, four of them, the despairing cry of slain martyrs is heard, and a convulsed and tottering universe seems to cut off forever all human hope for a better day. Things are as they have been; war and dearth and death are rampant as heretofore; indeed, things are to be worse than they have been.” (Franzmann, p. 60)

The message of the seven seals, and indeed of the trumpets and bowls which will follow from them, is that Christ reigns even in the apparent chaos and confusion of this world. The preliminary judgments depicted here are the signs of the times which herald the great day when Christ will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. In the meantime, disaster and suffering do not take place at random or by chance but serve both the redemptive and judicial purposes of the Lord. The horsemen ride forth only upon the thunderous command of the cherubim. The Lord reigns! Even those who persecute His church and oppress His people help to accomplish His purpose and usher in the Day of Judgment.

<u><i>Matthew 24</i></u>	<u><i>Revelation 6</i></u>
<u><i>false Christs (v.5)</i></u>	<u><i>the white horse(Anti-Christ) (vs. 1-2)</i></u>
<u><i>wars and rumors of war (v. 7)</i></u>	<u><i>the red horse (war) (vs. 3-4)</i></u>
<u><i>famines (v.7)</i></u>	<u><i>the black horse (famine) (vs. 5-6)</i></u>
<u><i>pestilences (v. 7; cf. Luke 21:11)</i></u>	<u><i>the pale horse (death) (vs. 7-8)</i></u>
<u><i>earthquakes (v.7)</i></u>	<u><i>earthquake (vs. 12)</i></u>
<u><i>persecutions (v.9)</i></u>	<u><i>the souls under the altar (9-11)</i></u>
<u><i>“Then the end shall come.” (V. 14)</i></u>	<u><i>the end (vs. 12-17)</i></u>

The events described in this segment bear a striking resemblance to the “*Little Apocalypse*” of Matthew 24 where Jesus details the signs of the times which will characterize the last days. The parallel between the two chapters includes not only the signs themselves, but even the sequence in which they are presented. The signs of the times, in Matthew and in Revelation, are warnings and foreshadowings of the end of the world; recurring patterns of events intended to remind those with the insight to see the signs that the Day of Judgment is coming.



"The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" by Albrecht Dürer



"The Four Horsemen" - 16th Century Woodcut

The First Seal

Revelation 6:1-2

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

"I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals" -

Everything thus far in the vision from the two preceding chapters has anticipated this moment. The characteristic phrase **"I watched"** (literally - **"And I looked"**) marks the shift to a new scene within the vision. The prophet is an observer, an eyewitness to that which occurs as the events of the future are dramatized. The Lamb proceeds to

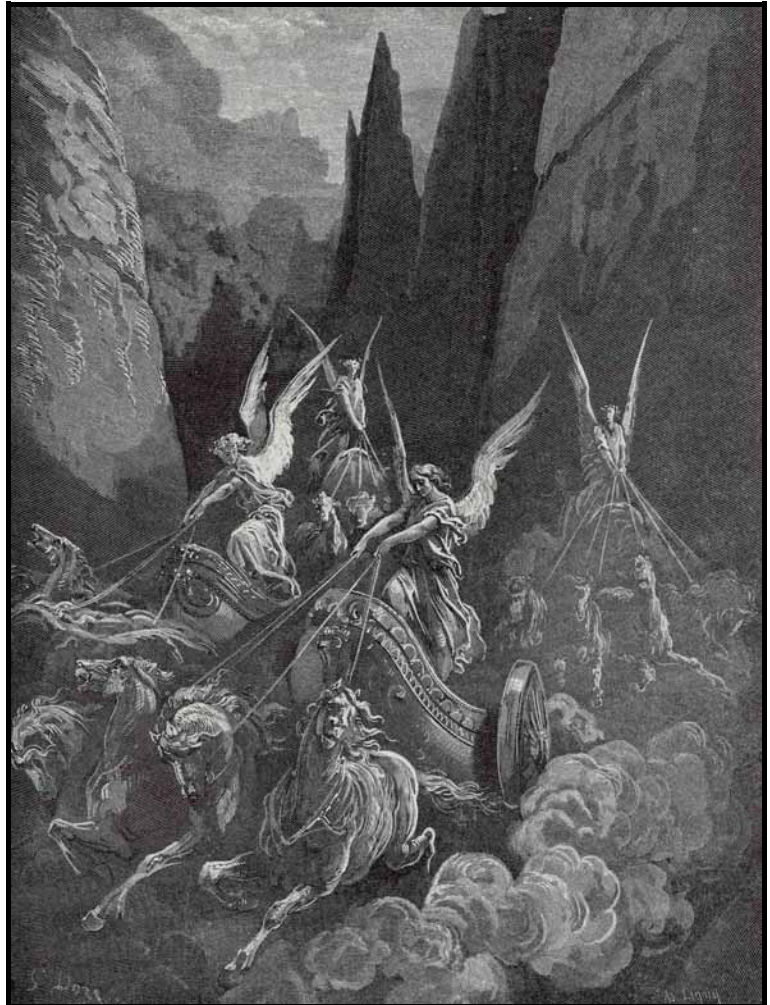
unseal the first of the seven seals which close and conceal the scroll. By this symbolic action Christ reveals and sets in motion the events contained in the scroll.

The opening of the first four seals present one of Revelation's most familiar images, the famous Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. In the ancient Near East, donkeys and camels were used for transportation in contrast to horses which were connected with warfare and conquest. Hence the four horsemen bring a message of war and the calamities which accompany the waging of war. The image of horse and rider as a symbol of the powers that patrol the earth to carry out God's purposes is drawn from the Old Testament book of Zechariah.

"During the night I had a vision - and there before me was a man,

riding a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in a ravine. Behind him were red, brown, and white horses. Then the man standing among the myrtle trees explained: "These are the ones the Lord has sent to go throughout the earth...I looked up again - and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains - mountains of bronze! The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white, and the fourth dappled - all of them powerful. I asked the angel who was speaking to me, "What are these, my Lord?" The angel answered me, "These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world"...When the powerful horses went out, they were straining to go throughout the earth. And he said, "Go throughout the earth!" So they went throughout the earth."
(Zechariah 1:8-10; 6:1-5,7)

While John makes effective use of the Old Testament image, he freely modifies the prophetic symbolism. The colored horses and chariots of Zechariah are the agents through which God inflicts punishment on the nations that have afflicted Israel, thus demonstrating His faithful love for His people. So also in Revelation, the horsemen represent the judgment of God upon a rebellious and sinful world which continues to persecute the people of God. The agents of God's judgement in Revelation, conquest, warfare, famine, and death, closely parallel Ezekiel 14:12-23 where sword, famine, plague, and wild



*"Zechariah's Vision of the Four Chariots"
by Gustav Dore*

beasts are the dreadful judgments poured out upon apostate Jerusalem. Thus both the world and the church must endure the visitation of the horsemen. These judgments come upon the sinful majority as punishment while for the faithful remnant they are the chastening of God intended to strengthen and purify believers. As believers recognize this dual purpose they are enabled to accept God's painful chastening as a positive means of sanctification. The horsemen are four in number thus emphasizing their impact upon all the earth. They do not correspond to specific events but represent ongoing, endlessly repeated patterns of events which will recur throughout the New Testament era - not a particular conquest, war, famine, or pestilence but each of these grim realities in general in all of their specific occurrences as they are repeated over and over again until the Lord returns. *"Just as the four living creatures represent the entire creation, so the plagues of the four horsemen symbolize the suffering of many throughout the earth, which will continue until the parousia."* (Beale, p. 385)

"Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, 'Come!'" - The first of the horsemen is summoned by a thunderous voice from the throne - ***"Come!"*** The command might more aptly be translated *"Come forth!"* Lenski suggests the translation *"Be on thy way!"* In any case, the crucial point is that the horsemen ride out only at the command of God. They are His messengers. The four living beings who surround God's throne serve as the agents through whom His will is carried out. As the Lamb opens the first seal the mighty command is issued by one of the living beings. The reference to thunder serves to identify the angel's voice with the divine throne from which had come ***"flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder."*** (Revelation 4:5) The ominous rumble of the thunder warns of the coming judgment storm. The sound of impending judgment is associated with the sound of thunder on two other occasions in Revelation (cf. Revelation 14:2; 19:6).

"I looked, and there before me was a white horse! It's rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest." - The first rider sits astride a white horse wearing the pure white robes of holiness and righteousness. The image is strongly reminiscent of John's portrayal of Christ as the victorious champion on a white horse who is ***"Faithful and True."*** (Revelation 19:11). But the Christ, the Son of God and Captain of the hosts of Heaven has no place in this sinister company. This horseman is not Christ but an antichrist ***"who will honor a god of fortresses; a god unknown to his fathers he will honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts."*** (Daniel 11:38) The white rider glories in power



“The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” by Jean Duvet



"The Antichrist" by Luca Signorelli

and wealth. He is conquest personified, the very antithesis of Christ. Nonetheless, he is carefully disguised to conceal his true satanic identity. Satan is the Imitator, the Counterfeit, who masquerades as the Lord whom he seeks to replace. Our enemy is the master of disguise and deception (2 Corinthians 11:14). This hellish horseman rides out not to ***"judge and make war with justice"*** (19:11) as did our Lord, but ***"as a conqueror***

bent on conquest." The repetition in the phrase serves both to emphasize conquest as the rider's sole and only purpose and to state the certainty that he will achieve that which he sets out to do. He not only intends to conquer but he will. The white rider is in every way a parody and a perversion of the victorious Christ. He personifies the lust for glory and power that leads to conquest. This is the burning desire of which great empires are born: the insatiable beast which swallows up countries and cultures - depriving men of their dignity and their liberty as all are reduced to the status of mere pawns in the endless search for new worlds to conquer. Dr. Louis Brighton says it well: *"The picture represented by this rider on the white horse symbolizes and represents every form of tyranny which is won and acquired by power and force, usually warfare or forms of it, and which then by dictatorial rule exploits, enslaves, dominates, and terrorizes."* (Brighton, p. 165) The image describes the great empires of antiquity and the totalitarian dictatorships of the modern world equally well. The weapon of conquest's warfare is not the ***"sharp sword"*** of the Spirit (19:15) but the battle bow which is never used in Scripture as a symbol of God's judgment. This is instead, the weapon of ***"Gog of the land of Magog"*** (Ezekiel 38-39) who is the captain of the hosts of Hell. The imagery of Ezekiel is borrowed from the terrifying reality of the Scythian hordes that swept down across the civilizations of the ancient Near East from the steppes of Russia in the 8th Century B.C. like

demons from Hell leaving devastation and death in their wake. These fierce barbarian horsemen, much like the Huns and the Mongols of later European history, were mounted bowmen who launched storms of arrows upon their foes and then swiftly rode away, invincible and irresistible. No conventional army was able to stand against them. The Scythian hosts penetrated as far as lower Egypt before withdrawing back into the vastness of the steppes. The terror of their coming left an indelible impression on the people of the Fertile Crescent for generations to come. Hence the effectiveness of the prophet's image. The false Christ wears the victor's crown by God's consent - note the passive verb - ***"he was given a crown."*** He is, to use Luther's phrase, *"Gottes Teufel"* (*"God's Devil"*) used by the Lord to carry out His own purposes. This enemy of the Lord will meet with widespread success, moving from triumph to triumph.



"The Onslaught of the Huns" 19th Century Engraving



*"The Four Horsemen"
Woodcut from the First Complete Luther Bible -1534*

The Second Seal

Revelation 6: 3-4

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

"When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" - The pattern which introduced the opening of the first seal is now repeated. The white rider disappears from the scene only to be replaced by another even more ominous figure. As the second of the seven seals is broken by the Lamb, the divine summons is issued again, in this instance by the second of the four living beings. In a sense, the first horseman, the conqueror, represented warfare and conflict in general terms while the three riders who now follow after detail the havoc and destruction characteristic of war.

"Then another horse came out, a fiery red one." - The second horseman rides out to ravage mankind. John refers to this harbinger of doom as *"another horse"* thus

emphasizing the similarities between the horsemen. The first four seals comprise a unit, different dimensions of the same dire warning. His color is bright red (Greek - “*pyrros*”) of blood and fire, symbolic of the calamitous mission upon which he is sent forth. This is the grim reality of warfare. *“Victory, white horsed and crowned, wears another aspect when viewed in the lurid light of the battlefield. Triumph spells much bloodshed in the past and the maintenance of an empire based on conquest demands more in the future.”* (Swete, p.86) Again the text stresses the fact that the horseman is a messenger of God’s judgment, carrying out the sentence of His righteous wrath upon rebellious mankind. His power and his sword are “*given*” to him by God. His power is “*to take peace from the earth and to make men slay one another.*” In the Little Apocalypse, Jesus had warned of “*wars and rumors of war*” throughout the latter days (Matthew 24:6). He had foretold that “*nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom,*” (Matthew 24:7) and so it has been.

“Throughout the time period covered by the prophetic message of Revelation, from the victory of the Lord Christ up to His second coming, peace and tranquillity will be the exception. The general rule will be wars and rumors of war, violence, murders, insurrections, and the like (Mark 13:7-9). (Brighton, p. 166)

The horseman is empowered to deprive the world of peace and to endlessly incite men to violent conflict with one another. To carry out this judgment, he is given “*a large sword*” (Greek - “*machaira megale*”). This is the short stabbing sword which was the standard weapon of the Roman legions. Through the centuries of Roman dominance it proved to be a most effective instrument of death and destruction. It is described as “*large*” not because of its unusual size but because of “*the constant and terrific slaughter it symbolizes.*” (Lenski, p. 225) The image of the sword is often used elsewhere in Scripture to symbolize bloodshed and violent death (i.e, Matthew 26:52).



“The Second Horseman” - 13th Century



"The Four Horsemen" 16th Century Woodcut

The Third Seal

(Revelation 6:5-6)

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine."

"When the Lamb had opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" - The now familiar pattern recurs: the seal is broken, the command is given, and the horseman appears. The color of this horse is *"ill-omened black"* (Franzmann, p. 61), the color of death, calamity, and mourning. The black rider represents famine and starvation, for he bears in his hand the measuring

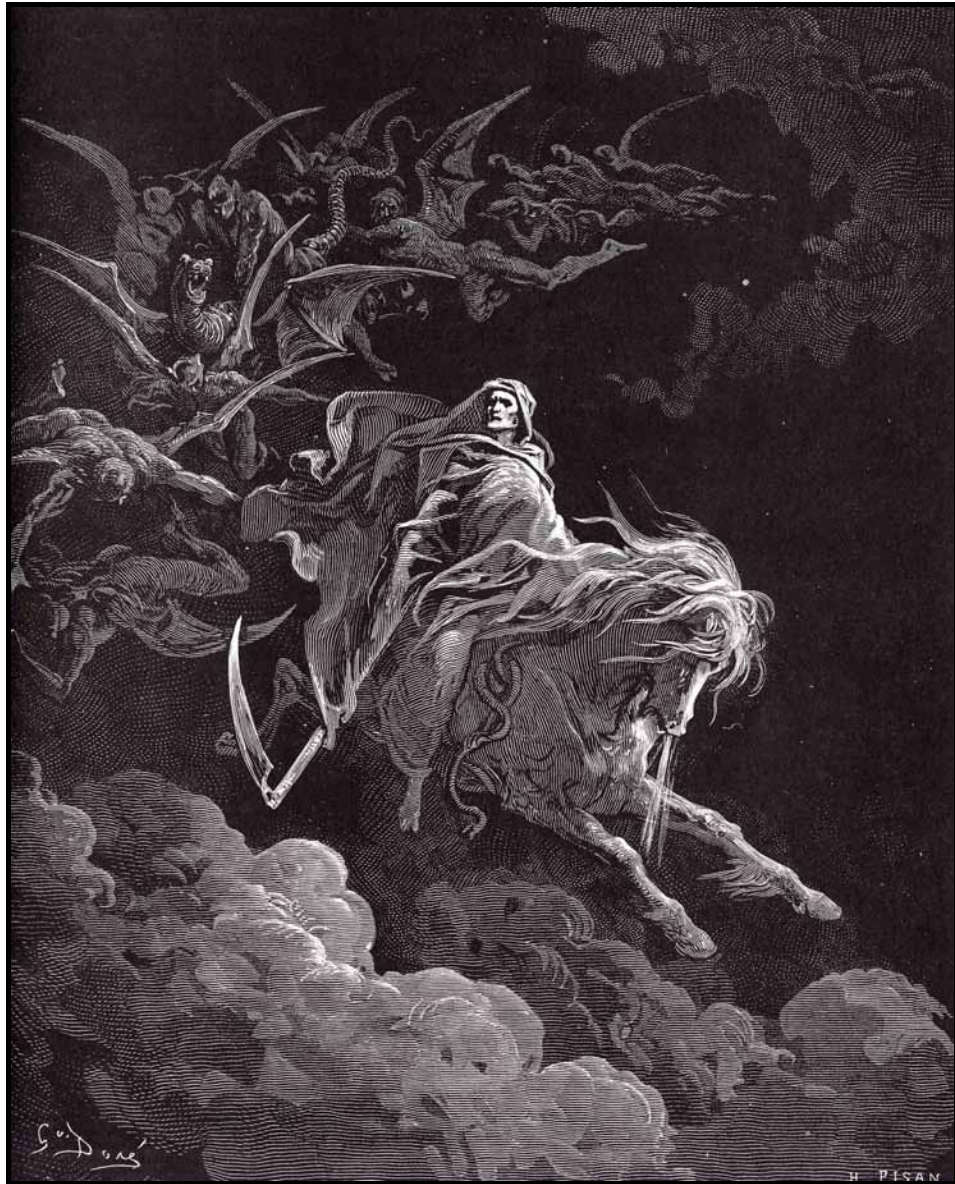
scale used in the sale of food. The scale is literally described in Greek as a *"balance"* or *"yoke."* It consisted of a bar with pans suspended from both ends. Weights would be placed in the pan on one end and the commodity being measured on the other. The amount of that commodity would then be adjusted until it balanced with the weight on the other end of the scale. As the rider appears something *"like a voice"* is heard speaking from *"among the four living beings."* The vague description suggests that this voice was unlike any other that John had ever heard. Unidentified voices are heard thirteen times in Revelation (cf. Revelation 6:6; 9:13; 10:4,8; 11:12,15; 12:10; 14:13; 16:1,17; 18:4; 19:5; 21:3). At times the voice is that of an angel speaking for God and at times it is the voice of God Himself. The source of the voice *"among the four living beings"* in this instance seems to suggest that the voice is that of God or the Lamb. The voice announces and explains the impact of

the third horseman's visitation. ***"A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine."*** Exorbitant prices for food signal scarcity and hunger. A full day's wage would barely suffice to purchase enough grain for the family to survive, even resorting to the use of less expensive and less nutritious barley (cf. Joel 1:10-11). These prices are about 16 times the average cost of these items in the Roman Empire during the First Century. Most commentators see the reference to sparing ***"the oil and the wine"*** as an allusion to the economic disparity which is exaggerated in times of famine. Luxury products remain available, but only the rich can afford to buy them. While most people struggle to provide the bare necessities of life, the wealthy revel in their excess. The plight of the starving poor is thoughtlessly dismissed - ***"Let them eat cake!"*** That disparity only adds to the tension of the explosive situation and increases the potential for violence and disorder. Dr. Brighton summarizes the significance of the third horseman:

"The overall picture presented is a condition of both scarcity and plenty, that is, an economic imbalance in the supply of food and the daily necessities of life...The horseman on the black horse, then, suggests that throughout the entire period from the Lord's ascension until the End, there will always be present, at various times and places, hunger and famine." (Brighton, p. 168)



"The Third Horseman" - 15th Century Belgian Apocalypse



“The Fourth Horseman”: by Gustav Dore

The Fourth Seal

Revelation 7-8

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

“When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living

being say, “Come!” - For the fourth and final time the pattern recurs. The Lamb breaks open the fourth seal. The voice of the fourth living being calls out the summons, and the fourth horseman rides out.

“I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close after him.” - The color of this horse in the Greek text is “*chlorus*,” the ghastly greenish white complexion of a decaying corpse. This is the color of death itself. Brighton suggests the apt translation “*ghostly green*.” The grim reaper, death personified, rides out upon this hideous horse - ***“Its rider was named Death.”*** Death (Greek - “*thanatos*”) is accompanied by his inseparable comrade the grave. The Greek term “*hades*,” transliterated here in the NIV text, literally means “*the place that is not seen*.” It is the equivalent of the Old Testament Hebrew word “*Sheol*.” These words are often used in Scripture to refer to Hell, the place of the damned. In this instance, as consistently in Revelation (cf. Revelation 1:18; 20:13,14) it is used in a neutral sense to simply describe the place of the dead, the grave. As Death’s attendant, the grave follows closely along behind, its gaping jaws opened wide, prepared to swallow up and consume Death’s victims. The fourth horseman both intensifies and summarizes the consequences wrought by his three predecessors. Conquest, warfare, and famine all result in death, hence Death itself is the last and decisive horseman. The vast extent of their devastation is expressed by the phrase - ***“They***



“The Triumph of Death” by Nicholas le Rouge 14th Century Woodcut

were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.” Like their counterparts, Death and the Grave operate only by divine consent - *“They were given power.”* The Lamb who has broken the seal remains in complete control, as He implements God’s plan for the future. Millions will die, but Death is not permitted to completely annihilate mankind. The scope of his activity is limited by God. Only *“a fourth of the earth”* is allowed to perish. The fraction is quantitative not literal. It signifies that a major portion but not all of mankind is effected (cf. 8:7) The four ravages through which Death accomplishes His task - *“sword”*” *“famine,”* *“plague,”* and *“the wild beasts of the earth”* are drawn from Ezekiel 14:12-21. They summarize violent and catastrophic death in every form. The grim history of mankind throughout the New Testament era provides ample evidence of the accuracy of John’s vision. Again and again the horsemen have gone forth leaving death, devastation, and destruction in their wake. Every one of their fatal visitations should serve to remind us of God’s righteous judgment upon sin and prepare us for the day when He will come again to judge the living and the dead.



“The Harvest of Death” by J. James Tissot



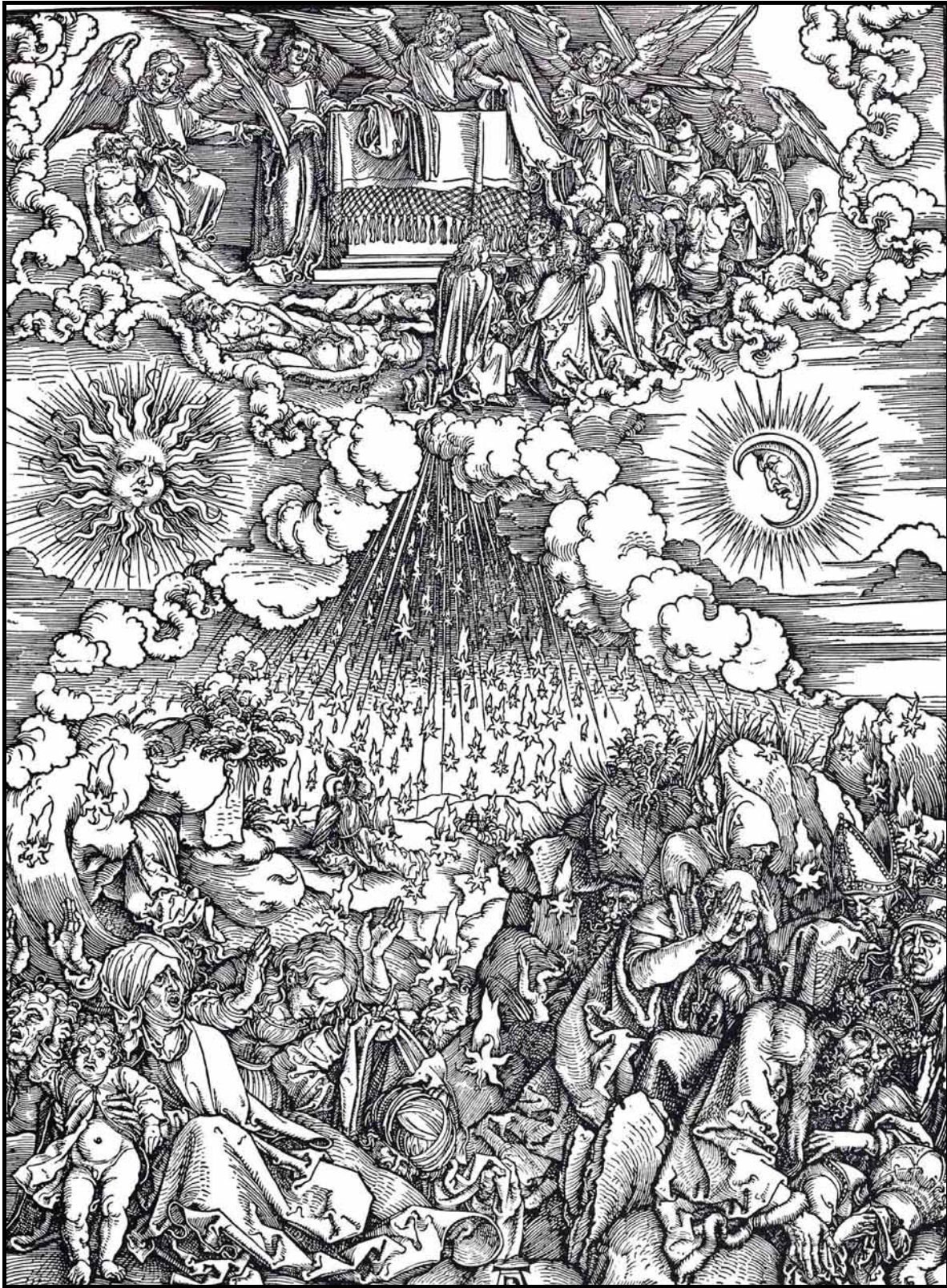
“The Fifth Seal” by Hans Burgmair

The Fifth Seal

Revelation 6: 9-11

When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain...” - The pattern changes with the opening of the fifth seal. There is no



"The Fifth and Sixth Seals" by Albrecht Dürer

summons from one of the four living beings and no messenger of God's judgment appears. The fearful scenes of horsemen sent out to ravage the earth now give way to a vision of the souls of the martyrs crying out for vindication. The fifth seal addresses the issue of persecution and places the ongoing suffering of God's people in its proper perspective. *"With the fifth seal the Church comes into sight, in its persecuted suffering state."* (Swete, p. 89) The Revelator sees *"the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and the testimony they had maintained."*

The Bible teaches that man consists of body and soul. The "soul" (Hebrew - *"nephesh"* - Greek - *"psyche"*) is the immaterial part of man, the self or ego, our sense of individual identity and personality. Physical death is the separation of the body and the soul. The body dies and decays, returning to the dust from which man was created in the beginning, there to await the resurrection of all flesh on the Last Day. The soul survives death. Unlike the body, the soul does not cease to exist. At the moment of physical death the soul of the believer is with Christ in heaven while the souls of the damned are condemned immediately to the torments of hell (cf. Genesis 2:7; 3:19; Job 19:25-27; Ecclesiastes 12:1-7; Isaiah 14:9-11,17; 26:19; 66:24; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 10:28; 22:31-32; Luke 12:19-



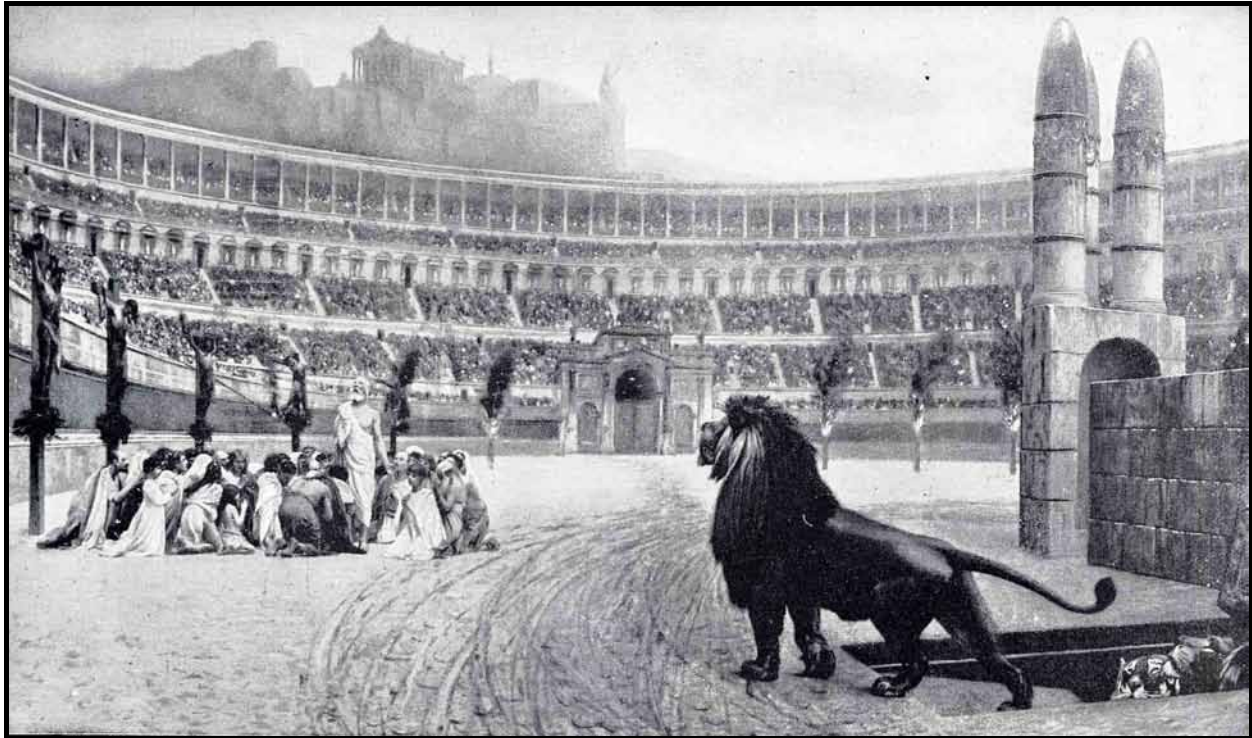
"The Souls of the Martyrs Given White Robes"
by Lucas Cranach

31; 23:43; John 11:25-27; 14:1-4; 19:30; Acts 7:59-60; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Philippians 1:20-26; James 2:26; 1 Peter 3:18-20; 2 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 14:13). The “souls” here depicted are in what has been called the “*Intermediate State*,” that is, the time between individual death and the Final Day of Judgment. While recognizing that this is a vision, the details of which are not designed to convey literal reality, it is also true that the framework of the vision, like that of our Lord’s parables, does not deceive. It is therefore significant to note, that these souls in the Intermediate State are fully aware of their presence before God in heaven and equally cognizant of the fact that the Judgment has not yet come and that evil continues to run rampant upon the earth. These are the souls “*of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and the testimony they had maintained.*” These are the believers of every age who have given their lives for the faith and sealed their witness



*“The Soul of Lazarus Carried to Heaven”
19th Century Bible Illustration*

with the martyr’s blood. They have stood for the truth of the Word of God and have fearlessly and faithfully testified (Greek - “*martyrian*”) to that truth despite the opposition of all the world. The consistency of that witness is indicated by the imperfect tense of the verb which might better be translated “*the testimony they had maintained over and over again.*” These brave souls willingly followed in the footsteps of the Lamb that was slain, giving up their lives without protest or resistance, led like lambs to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). The sacrificial nature of their martyrdom is emphasized by the use of the verb “*slain*” (Greek - “*esphagmenon*”) which was used earlier in reference to Lamb upon the throne (Revelation 5:6) and specifically describes the slaughter of a sacrificial animal. John sees the souls of the martyrs “*under the altar.*” The Greek noun is “*tou thysiasteriou*” which may refer either to the altar of



“Christian Martyrs in the Coliseum in Rome” 19th Century Engraving

burnt offering or the golden altar of incense. The once for all sacrifice of Christ on the cross rendered the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament obsolete (cf. Hebrew 9:11-14; 10:11-18). Hence in the imagery of Revelation there is only one altar in heaven, the golden altar of incense. This understanding would also appear to be consistent with the fact that the souls beneath the altar are praying, given the Biblical symbolism of the prayers of God’s people rising like incense before the heavenly throne (Revelation 6:8; 8:3). Their presence *“under the altar”* signifies the intimacy and the immediacy of their heavenly relationship to God. The golden altar of incense stood in the holy place of the temple, directly in front of the holy of holies. So also the martyrs in heaven stand before the throne in the presence of the God for whom their lives were given.

“In the OT the priest would pray and offer up incense on the altar in the temple for the people of God as they stood outside and also prayed (Exodus 30:7-8; 40:26-28; cf. Luke 1:8-10). So now, the souls of God’s saints, as His priests (Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) in God’s heavenly temple, pray while God’s people on earth (1:6), who are also priests are still in their suffering and are praying for deliverance. (15:2-4)” (Brighton, p.170)



“The Fifth and Sixth Seals” by Jean Duvet



“The Souls Beneath the Altar” - 16th Century Luther Bible Illustration

“They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” - The urgency of the martyrs’ prayer is indicated by the words *“they called out with a loud voice.”* The verb *“to call out”* (Greek - *“krazo”*) is a strong word which means to cry out in anguish during the hour of most urgent need. Their plea is not softly stated. They cry out *“in a loud voice”* (Greek - *“phone megale”*) in a manner consistent with the urgency of their petition. The prayer takes the form of a question *“How long?”*. *“This perplexing question has been on the lips of the righteous almost since the beginning of the human race.”* (Thomas, p. 445) The martyrs pray for divine intervention in the face of rampant and apparently triumphant evil. They plead for the vindication of God and the demonstration of His justice before all the world. They pray for the coming of the judgment and the end of sinful mankind’s defiant rebellion against the Creator. This is not a matter of personal vengeance or vindictiveness. The souls beneath the altar are not merely asking for the punishment of those who murdered them. Instead they cry out for judgment upon all of *“the inhabitants of the earth,”* a phrase which is consistently used in Revelation to describe sinful mankind in its opposition to God and His will. Their only concern is for the honor and glory of the Christ for whom their lives were given. Their

impatience is motivated by a holy zeal for the accomplishment of God's purpose and plan. *"These martyrs do not cry for vengeance upon the wicked who slew them; their cry involves something that is far greater. They cry to have their blood avenged upon those dwelling on the earth." They cry to God to send the final judgment.*" (Lenski, p. 253) When the martyrs pray that their blood may be avenged, they are asking God to vindicate His cause, the cause for which they died. Some would object that such a prayer is improper, given our Lord's repeated commands to forgive those who sin against us. This objection fails to recognize both the nature of the prayer and the circumstances in which it is offered. An unwillingness to recognize the necessity of punishment for sin also reflects a confusion of law and gospel. Lutheran theologian Siegbert Becker notes:

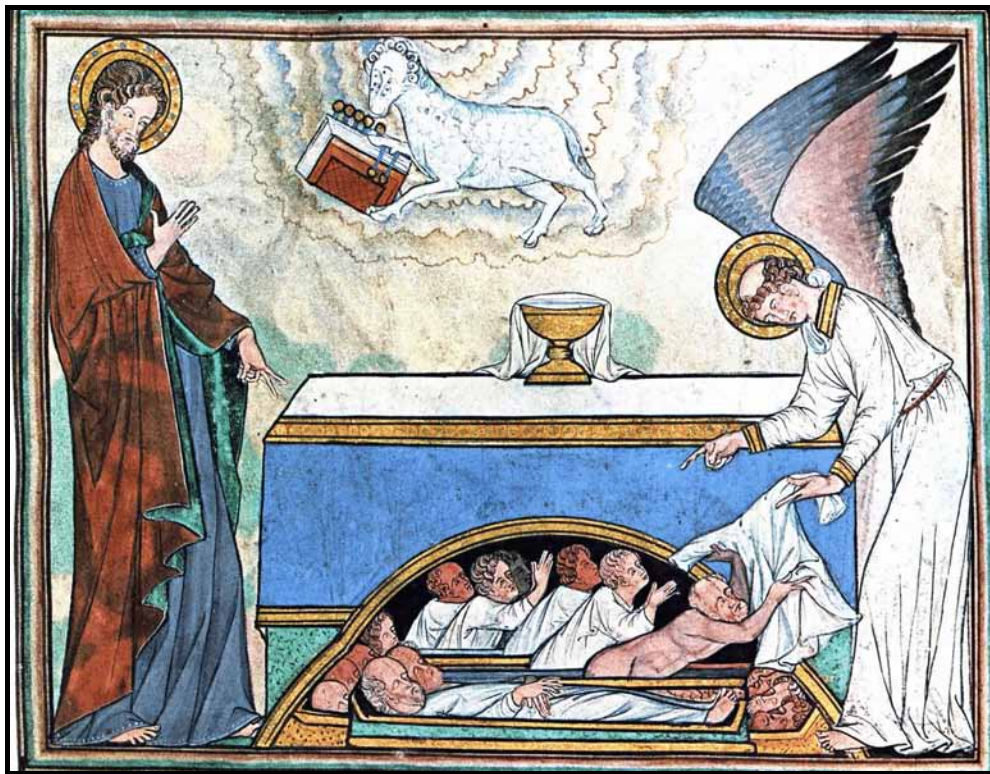
"At first glance the prayer of these martyrs may seem to be in conflict with the spirit of Jesus who calls upon us to forgive those who sin against us and to pray for those who persecute us. In this respect, this prayer of the martyrs is reminiscent of the imprecatory psalms, in which the psalmist prays for vengeance on his enemies. Neither the prayer of these martyrs nor the imprecatory psalms, however, are unworthy prayers. The difficulty which many people and even many theologians see in them stems from a failure to understand the biblical distinction between law and gospel. The law, which is an expression of God's holy, immutable will, calls for the punishment of evildoers. This prayer of the sainted martyrs as well as the imprecatory psalms are to remind God's enemies that their sins will surely be punished if they continue in their impenitence. It is the will of the just God that those who sin against Him and His people should be punished, and the prayer of these martyrs is in accord with this holy will of God. The prayer can therefore be made with a loud voice. It is a prayer of which they need not be ashamed and which they can pray with confidence." (Becker, p. 112)

The martyrs address God as the **"Sovereign Lord, holy and true."** The title **"Sovereign Lord"** (Greek - *"ho despotes"* - literally *"absolute ruler"*) emphasizes the power, majesty, and authority of God. This is the only instance in the New Testament where the term is used in reference to God. The two divine attributes cited (**"holy and true"**) are most appropriate given the nature of the prayer. The holy God is unalterably opposed to evil and cannot tolerate sin. As the God of truth, the Lord may be relied upon to fulfill the promises of His Word.

"Then each of them was given a white robe and they were told to wait a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed." - God's response to the martyrs' appeal is a combination of symbolic action and spoken word. First, ***"each of them was given a white robe."***

The “**white robe**” (Greek - “*stole leuke*”) is a flowing, floor length, robe of state (cf. Revelation 7:9,14). To receive such a robe was a mark of honor and recognition. In this context, the bestowal of the white robes upon the martyrs is a vindication of their faithfulness to God and a reaffirmation of His faithfulness to them. That reaffirmation also includes the promise of certain judgment upon those who have oppressed and murdered God’s witnesses. G.K. Beale correctly notes:

“The robes are not given as a reward for purity of faith but as a heavenly declaration of the saints purity or righteousness and as an annulment of the guilty verdict rendered against them by the world. Therefore, receiving the robes is an assurance to the petitioning saints that the unbelieving “earth dwellers” will be declared guilty and punished for persecuting them.” (Beale, p. 394)



“The White Robes of the Martyrs” - Medieval Bible Illumination

The white robes in which Revelation consistently depicts the saints in heaven symbolize the righteousness of Christ which is God’s gracious gift to every believer. The robes are “**white**” to symbolize the fact that those who have been cleansed in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14) stand before God in purity and holiness (cf.

Isaiah 1:18 - *“though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson they shall be like wool.”*). This imagery is not unique to Revelation. St Paul declares: *“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”* (Galatians 26-27; cf. also Isaiah 61:10; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10,24).



*“The White Robes of the Martyrs”
16th Century bible Woodcut*

The explicit response to the prayer of the martyrs is the instruction *“to wait a little while longer, until the number of the fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.”* The comfort of the original is somewhat muddled in the English translation. The Greek literally reads *“rest yet a little time.”* (Greek - *“anapausontai”*). The verb means *“to be at peace”* without worry or concern. In this context the phrase might better be translated *“enjoy your peaceful rest a little while longer.”* To these blest souls, already in heaven, these words should not be construed as an admonition to put aside their impatience, for there can be no impatience in heaven. Rather, God here offers the martyrs the assurance that they may rest in the enjoyment of their blessedness. *“The delay is itself a part of the reward; to the church on earth it*

may be irksome, to the martyrs themselves it is a peaceful rest.” (Swete, p. 91) To the church militant on earth the assurance that the evil world will certainly receive its just punishment becomes an encouragement for Christians to persevere in their witness through suffering. To the church triumphant in heaven that same assurance

constitutes a basis for their enjoyment of peaceful rest until the time comes for God's punishment to be carried out. The period of their waiting is *"a little while longer."* *"The 'short time' during which the martyrs are to wait patiently for God's avenging justice is evidently the whole New Testament period."* (Becker, p. 113) The Creator God's perspective on time is different than ours. Remember St. Peter's admonition:

"But do not forget this one thing, dear friends; with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:8-9)



"The Souls Beneath the Altar and the Four Horsemen" - 15th Century Bible Illumination

God's plan and purpose must be fully accomplished before the end can come. The full number of the elect must be saved and all those whom God has appointed to be his witnesses before the world must be given the opportunity to offer their witness - *"Until the number of the fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed."* The language of the phrase appears to broaden at this point to include all believers, not only those who have actually given up their lives for the faith. *"The fellow servants"* are all Christians (cf. Romans 1:1; Colossians 1:7; Revelation 1:1,6) while the *"brothers"* are those who share the honor of actual martyrdom. The mission of all the witnesses, those who live for Christ and those who die for Him, must be completed before the coming of the final judgment. The number set in God's predetermined plan had not yet been reached (cf. Matthew 23:32). There is a striking parallel to this text in the apocryphal Fourth Book of Ezra, written only a few years

after Revelation. Many scholars conclude that the 4 Ezra text is a direct reference to Revelation 6:9-11.

“Did not the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask about these matters, saying, “How long are we to remain here? And when will come the harvest of our reward?” And Jeremiel the archangel answered them and said, “When the number of those like yourselves is completed; for He has weighed the age in the balance, and measured the times by measure, and numbered the times by number; and He will not move or arouse them until that number is fulfilled.” (4 Ezra 4:35-30)



“Blessed Are the Dead” by Rudolf Schäfer

The closing verse of Henry Alford’s classic hymn *“Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand”* is based upon this text. The poet gives eloquent expression to the heartfelt longing of God’s people for His speedy return:

*“Bring near Thy great salvation, Thou
Lamb for sinners slain;
Fill up the roll of Thine elect, then take Thy
power and reign.
Appear, Desire of Nations; Thine exiles
long for home.
Show in the heavens Thy promised sign;
Thou Prince and Savior Come!”*

The vision of the fifth seal presents the Church, the people of God in heaven and on earth, in the midst of a sinful world rushing headlong toward destruction. As the marauding horsemen of God’s judgment ride relentlessly back and forth, leaving chaos and confusion in their wake, the people of God are called to offer a

faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to patiently endure - even unto death - the persecution that will be the world’s inevitable response to that witness. We long for the day of the Lord’s glorious return and the vindication which that day will bring.



"The Opening of the Sixth Seal"
Luther Bible Woodcut - 1530

The Sixth Seal

Revelation 6:12-17

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to the earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. The kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall upon us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"



"The Prophet Haggai" by J. James Tissot

"I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake..." - The martyrs beneath the altar had prayed for the coming of the judgement and now, as if in response to their prayer, the opening of the sixth seal depicts the end of the world and the cosmic disturbances which will accompany our Lord's return. Centuries earlier God had spoken through His prophet Haggai:

"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'In a little while, I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all the nations, and the Desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory' says the Lord Almighty."
(Haggai 2:6-7)

The New Testament writer to the Hebrews cites the prophecy of Haggai in order to remind his readers that when all created things have been shaken only the unshakeable things of God will remain:

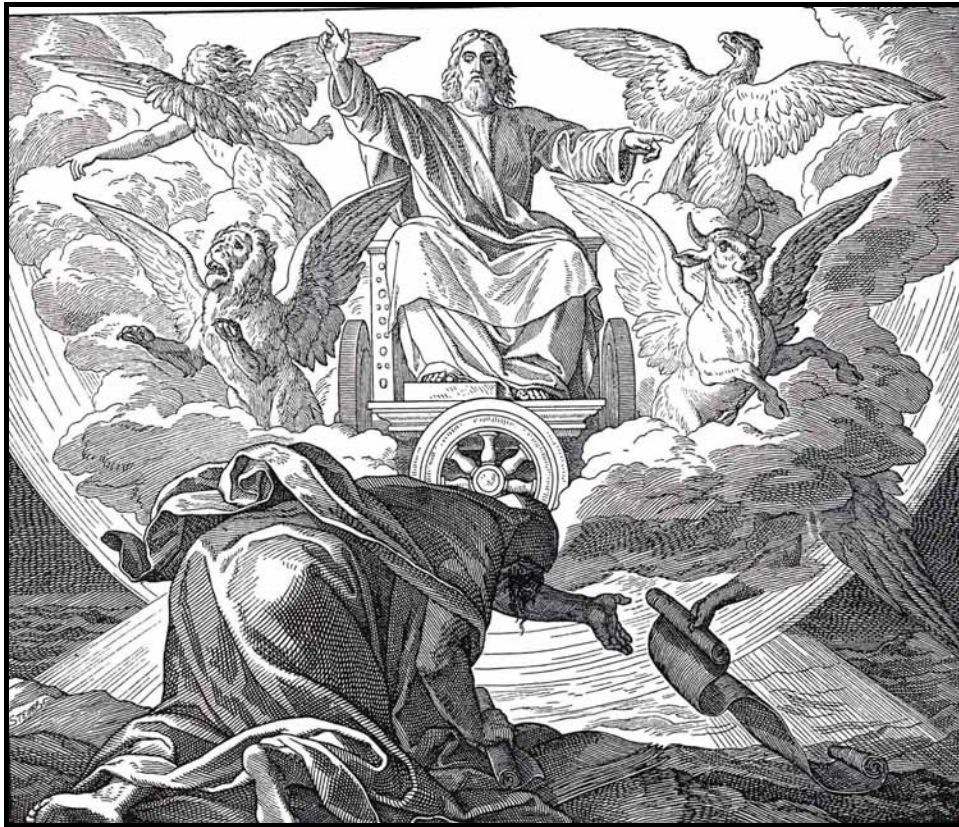
"At that time His voice shook the earth, but now He has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken - that is, created things - so that what cannot be shaken can remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God

acceptably with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews

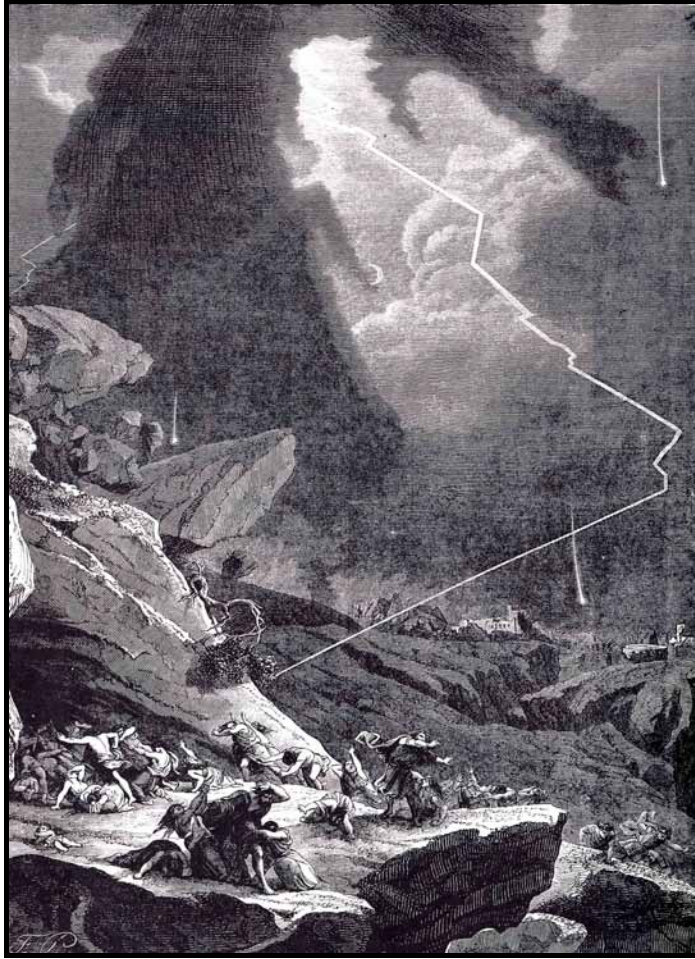
12:26-29)

The language of John's vision is also strongly reminiscent of Haggai's prophecy. In fact, the imagery of the sixth seal employs a great many of the Old Testament's most popular judgment images.

"The judgement of the world is depicted with stock in trade OT imagery for the dissolution of the cosmos. This portrayal is based on a mosaic of OT passages that are brought together because of the cosmic metaphors of judgment they have in common. The quarry of texts from which the description has been drawn is composed primarily of Isaiah 13:10-13; 24:1-6, 19-23; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:6-8; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:15-16; Habbakuk 3:6-11. The same OT texts are also influential in Matthew 24:29; Mark 13:24-25 and Acts 2:19-20 which themselves likewise form part of the apocalyptic quarry influencing the dramatic portrayal in Revelation 6:12-14. All these passages mention at least four of the following elements, which are found here in Revelation; the shaking of the earth or the mountains; the darkening or shaking of the moon, stars, sun and/or heaven; and the pouring out of blood." (Beale, p. 396)



"Ezekiel's Vision of God's Throne in Heaven" by Carolsfeld



*“The Opening of the Sixth Seal” - 19th Century
Bible Engraving*

Revelation mentions earthquakes (Greek - “*seismos*”) seven times (Revelation 6:12; 8:5; 11:13 (twice); 11:19; 16:18 (twice)). Elsewhere in Scripture earthquakes often accompany and attest God’s mighty acts. (Cf. Ezekiel 38:19-20; Haggai 2:6-9; Zechariah 14:1-5; Matthew 27:5; 28:2) The shaking of the earth serves to represent the tenuous and transitory nature of the physical world. But this is no ordinary earthquake! It is a shaking of cosmic proportions, effecting not merely one nation or region, but all of the universe - “*a great earthquake*” (Greek - “*seismos megas*”) indeed! Siegbert Becker stresses the significance of every earthquake in history in relation to this ultimate final shaking: “*Every earthquake throughout history is but a foreshadow of this great earthquake which moves every mountain and island from its place.*

Not only the earth, but the whole universe undergoes radical change.” (Becker, p. 114)

The earth quake is accompanied by four occurrences in the heavens, that which Luke the Evangelist had described as “*fearful and great signs from heaven*” (Luke 21:11). First, “*the sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair.*” The darkening of the sun is a common feature of apocalyptic imagery. Here the eclipse like blackness which will overtake the basic light source is compared to a rough black cloth typically woven from the thick black hair of a goat. This was the cloth of mourning and despair (Isaiah 50:3) as if the sun itself is grieving the death of the universe. Then “*The whole moon turned blood red.*” The pale light of the moon is transformed into the ghastly red of blood, another terrifying indication of doom and destruction (cf.

Joel 2:31; Matthew 24:29). Next, ***“And the stars in the sky fell to the earth as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.”*** That which is depicted here is not merely the appearance of unprecedented numbers of meteors and comets but the total collapse of the universe (cf. 2 Peter 3:10 - ***“the heavens will disappear with a roar.”***) This is the disintegration of the vast reaches of the entire universe. The imagery of stars falling like figs from a tree is drawn from Isaiah 34:4 - ***“All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.”*** Jesus also speaks of the lesson of the fig tree in urging His people to carefully read the signs of the times (Matthew 24:32-35). The specific reference in this text to ***“late figs”*** refers to *“figs which grow during the winter under the shelter of the leaves but ripen as seldom as the untimely figs of spring and thus dry up and drop during a wind.”* (Lenski, p. 241) Finally, the vision declares that ***“The sky receded like a scroll rolling up.”*** The vast expanse of the heavens will appear to split and roll back in opposite directions, shriveling and curling up like paper burned in a fire. This graphic imagery is drawn, once again from Isaiah 34 and the prophet’s description of the collapse of the physical universe. The catastrophic transformation of the constellations and the heavenly bodies will also be reflected in a comprehensive reordering of the surface of planet earth itself - ***“and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”*** Even the massive upheavals which surrounded the world destroying flood in the days of Noah will pale into insignificance



“The Opening of the Sixth Seal” by Lucas Cranach

in comparison to the events which will accompany the coming of the great Day of the Lord.

“Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains.” - Sinful humanity’s response to the cosmic cataclysm is consternation and dread. The comprehensive nature of the event is emphasized by the sevenfold categorization of fallen mankind. The message is clear. The panic of this decisive moment will include every unbeliever on the face of the earth.

“Men, great and small, who have presumed upon His longsuffering (Romans 2:4) are only driven to mad desperation by the sight of the sure, dependable universe now being shaken into huge uncertainty; they attempt to hide themselves from Him whose eye searches everywhere, in dark caves and under the shelter of the enduring hills; they cry for extinction under the collapsing rocks rather than face the wrath of the enthroned Judge whose patience they have despised, the wrath of the Lamb whose redeeming sacrifice they have refused (5:7-9). On that great day of wrath the strutting kings and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong will strut no more.” (Franzmann, p. 63)



“The Opening of the Sixth Seal” - Luther Bible Woodcut - 1534



“The Sixth Seal” by Hans Burgmair - 1522

The “**kings of the earth**” (Greek - “*hoi basileis tes ges*”) are rulers of the highest rank, those whose authority and power has commanded the nations. The “**princes**” (Greek - “*hoi megistanes*”) are the nobility of the royal court, the officials who implement and carry out the will of the king. The “**generals**” (Greek - “*hoi chiliarchoi*”) are designated with the technical term which refers to a tribune in the Roman army, the commander of 1,000 men. These were the officers at whose command the invincible legions had marched forth to conquer the world. The “**rich**” (Greek - “*hoi plousioi*”) and the “**mighty**” (Greek - “*hoi ischyroi*”) are those who used their wealth and influence to control and direct the lives of other men. These are the “**strutters**” of whom Dr. Franzmann spoke, who have always had it their own way; the movers and shakers who have made things happen according to their own will. Now all that is past and done, for the Lord has returned. The great mass of



“The Great Day of His Wrath” John Martin - 1789

humanity is included in the final two categories, *“every slave and every free man,”* which describe the two basic conditions of ordinary people in Roman culture. The language is comprehensive. No one is forgotten or left out.

That which sinful mankind fears at this awful moment is not merely death, but judgment. It is death for which they pray as they cry to the mountains and to the rocks: *“Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!”* Like our first parents Adam and Eve in the aftermath of their disobedience, mankind does not dare to stand before the Creator.

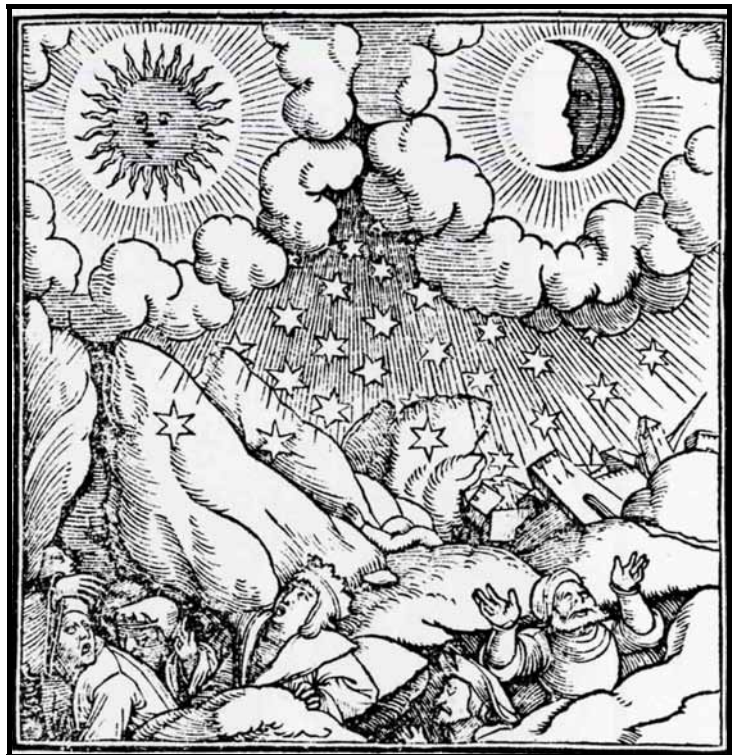
“When the cosmic, earthquake-like shaking hits the earth as the mountains begin to move and disappear, the peoples of the earth will be struck with a terror and a hopelessness that staggers the imagination and surpasses any horror yet experienced by humanity.” (Brighton, p. 173)

Mankind flees in total fear from *“the face of Him who sits upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.”* This combination is of profound theological significance.

“The face of Him who sits upon the throne” signifies the holy and righteous presence of God the Father before whom no sinner may stand. But at His side as the Judge of mankind stands the **“Lamb.”** The juxtaposition is unusual. When Christ is linked to the judgement elsewhere He is ordinarily entitled the **“Son of Man”** (cf. Matthew 26:64; John 5:27). The gentle figure of the **“Lamb”** is typically used to convey the thought of God’s grace and mercy in the sacrifice of His Son. But here it is joined to the fearsome concept of the **“wrath”** of God to indicate that the judgement of God the Father will be executed by His Son who is both Savior and Judge. The Son alone has the right and the authority to carry out God’s judgement because of His innocent suffering and atoning death for the sins of humanity.

“For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?” - “The great day” is a characteristic Old Testament designation for the end of time and the judgement of the human race (cf. Joel 2:11; Zephaniah 1:14; Malachi 4:5). Judgement is depicted as both a great day of vindication and deliverance for the people of God (Malachi 4:4-6), and a day of fearful retribution and wrath for the unbelieving world (Zephaniah 1:15,18); 2:3). The New Testament makes use of the same language to speak of the coming day of judgement. Thus, for example, Jude warns that the angels who rebelled against God: **“He has kept in darkness bound in everlasting chains for judgement on the great Day.”** (Jude 6)

All of mankind will recognize its accountability before God on that day and will tremble when confronted by His righteous anger - **“who can stand?”** The language recalls the words of Nahum 1:6 - **“Who can withstand His indignation? Who can endure His fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered**



“The Great Day of His Wrath” - 16th Century Bible Woodcut

before Him.” The prophet Malachi sounds the same theme - “But who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears? For He will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.” Our Lord Himself provides the only possible answer to these awful questions: “Be always on the watch, and pray, that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 24:36)

Christian composers and poets down through the centuries have been moved to produce some of the world’s most powerful music on the basis of this scene. The magnificent “*Dies Irae*” (“*The Day of Wrath*”) written by 13th Century Franciscan monk Thomas de Celano is a notable example of such compositions. De Celano composed the piece for the Requiem Mass of All Souls Day. The text of “*Dies Irae*”



“The Final Judgement” by William Blake

has been set to music hundreds of times in scores of languages. Virtually every major classical composer has produced a version of this great text. Its every word is a thunderclap of judgement. The enduring power of the hymn can be seen from the fact that seven hundred years after its original composition, the text is still included in the vast majority of Christian hymnals today.

Dies Irae” (“*The Day of Wrath*”)
by Thomas de Celano

*Day of wrath, O day of mourning! See fulfilled the prophet’s warning:
Heaven and earth in ashes burning.
Wondrous sound the trumpet flingeth, Through earth’s sepulchers it ringeth
All before the throne it bringeth.
O, what fear man’s bosom rendeth
When from heav’n the Judge
descendeth
On whose sentence all dependeth*

*Death is struck and nature quaking;
All creation is awaking,
To its Judge an answer making.
Lo, the book, exactly worded, Wherein
all hath been recorded;
Thence shall judgment be awarded.
When the Judge His seat attaineth,
And each hidden deed arraigneth
Nothing unavenged remaineth.*

*What shall I, frail man, be pleading,
Who for me be interceding
When the just are mercy needing?
King of majesty tremendous, Who
dost free salvation send us ,
Fount of pity, then befriend us!
Righteous Judge, for sin’s pollution
Grant Thy gift of absolution
Ere the day of retribution.*



“*The Downfall of the Damned*” by Hans Memling

*Bows my heart in meek
 submission Strewn with ashes of
 contrition;
 Help me in my last condition!
 Worthless are my prayers and
 sighing; Yet, Good Lord, in
 grace complying
 Rescue me from fires undying.
 Thou the sinful woman savedst;
 Thou the dying thief forgavest;
 Thus to me true hope
 vouchsafest!*

*Faint and weary Thou hast sought
 me, On the cross of suffering
 bought me.
 Shall such grace be vainly brought
 me?
 Think, good Jesus, my salvation
 Caused Thy wondrous
 incarnation;
 Leave me not to sin's
 damnation!
 Guilty now I pour my moaning,
 All my shame with anguish
 owning;
 Hear, O Christ, Thy servant's
 groaning.*



"The Homecoming of the Redeemed" by Hans Memling

*With Thy favored sheep then
 place me Nor among the goats abase me,
 But to Thy right hand upraise me.
 While the wicked are confounded, Doomed to flames of woe unbounded,
 Call me, with Thy saints surrounded,
 To the rest Thou didst prepare me On Thy cross; O Christ, upbear me!
 Spare, O God, in mercy spare me!*