

chapter one

THE SCROLL AND THE LAMB

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

REVELATION 5:1-5

The first four chapters of Revelation have not been included in our discussion since our focus is on the events initiated by the opening of the scroll. It is at this time that “the time of the end” commences and a chronological timeline is established, culminating with the new heavens and new earth. However, because these four chapters provide important background and context for the opening of the scroll, it is worth providing a short synopsis before continuing our main discussion.

This background and context was revealed to John, who penned Revelation. In Revelation 1, John was told to pass along the contents of

the scroll to the seven churches (representing the entirety of the followers of Jesus) in written form. In Revelation 2 and 3, John was told to elaborate on his message to the seven churches by identifying their strengths and weaknesses and their resulting rewards and punishments. In Revelation 4, John is caught up in the spirit to heaven to the throne of God, where he witnesses the activities to occur just prior to the end of the age. In Revelation 5, the focus turns to the scroll in the right hand of the Father, and we discover that the only one found worthy to open the scroll is Jesus.

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people
for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.” (Rev. 5:9-10)

This brings us to the beginning of our discussion.

SYMBOLISM OF THE SCROLL

The scroll of Revelation 5 is one of the most recognizable images in all of Revelation. When the Lamb of God is handed the scroll, this sets the stage for everything that follows. It is the precipitating event that enables the final judgment and what many call “the end of the world.” Jesus—and only Jesus—is authorized to break the scroll’s seals and unleash the series of terrifying events the document foretells.

The opening of the scroll ties the prophecies of Revelation together with those written by the prophet Daniel hundreds of years earlier. In both books, we see Jesus (in Revelation as the Lamb and in Daniel as the Son of Man) being set loose to take his rightful position of kingship over the earth. In both books, we see Jesus destroying his enemies and overpowering and destroying all earthly kingdoms. In both books, we see him setting up his eternal kingdom before judging the living and the dead.

Understanding the parallels between these two books is important because it allows Daniel’s prophecies to give us key insights into the enigmatic prophecies of Revelation. This, in turn, gives us a fuller, more

detailed picture of the time of the end that helps us appreciate just how sovereign God is over his creation. For those who live to experience these awe-striking prophecies, it also gives them (or perhaps us) the knowledge and confidence needed to understand the events they are about to experience and to stand firm in patience and confidence to endure to the end, no matter how difficult that may seem.

THE STAGE IS SET

With the formation of Israel as a nation in the twentieth century, the stage was set for the end times. Once the seven-sealed scroll is handed to Jesus, the countdown to the end will begin. What an irony! The Word of God (John 1:1) brought creation into existence and holds all things in place. Now the very same Word is about to bring an end to all things as we know them, destroying the very creation he once so lovingly spoke into existence.

Jesus has been found worthy to bring this catastrophic judgment because he overcame evil through the sacrifice of his own perfect life. Thus he obtained the right to redeem (harvest) those who share in his victory through faith in him and execute judgment on those who don't.

Let's think for a moment about the imagery found in the sequential breaking of the seals. This imagery is important because it speaks directly to the chronological nature of the events that are about to unfold.

Scrolls were ancient forms of communication for letters and other important documents. Authors often closed their scrolls with wax seals to restrict access to the intended recipient or recipients. In this case, the author is God the Father. The intended recipient is Jesus. Because Jesus is the intended recipient, only he is authorized to break the seals, open the scroll, and unleash the events it describes.

In this case, the breaking of each seal unleashes a new terror upon the world. With the breaking of the first seal, the rise of a wicked national leader ushers in the reign of the beast, the end-time manifestation of evil on a global scale. In the second through fourth seals, this is followed by the rise of global war, global famine, and widespread earthquakes, death, and disease. Perhaps most terrifying, the breaking of the fifth seal allows

the inescapable, global persecution of all true believers unto death.

Historically, very important documents, such as legal contracts, had multiple seals. In this case, the scroll is sealed with seven seals, the biblical number of perfection and completion.

The Scroll of Revelation



As we discuss the imagery of this scroll, it should be noted that there is a fundamental difference between the seals and the contents of the scroll on which they are placed. While the information within the scroll is hidden, the seals (being external) are public in nature. This suggests that the events they unleash, no matter how terrifying, are different from the events written inside the scroll in that they are not unique in history. They have been seen before. The difference is that, during the end times, they occur on a global scale.

Once the seals are broken, Jesus can open the scroll and unleash its full contents. It might be hard to imagine, but things are about to get much worse. After the seals are broken and the scroll is opened, the seven trumpets are blown. As this occurs, we observe a shift from events previously seen throughout history, even if they are now magnified in scope and intensity, to a new phase of catastrophe far beyond anything man has previously experienced.

The imagery of the scroll is very specific and detailed. This leads one to wonder if the symbolism of the scroll itself is part of the message God is communicating. Some have suggested that the scroll represents the title deed to the earth forfeited at the fall of man in the garden of Eden. I think this interpretation has merit. At the time of the fall, evil entered the world. In Revelation, we see that evil being eliminated. Viewing the scroll as a legal document from both the standpoint of its imagery (with its seven seals) and its context (the underlying purpose of restoring mankind to an unblemished relationship with God) lends merit to this interpretation.

In establishing the chronological nature of the events of Revelation, it's crucial to understand how scrolls were historically read. First the exterior seals were broken, one by one. This allowed the scroll to be unrolled and the message inside to be revealed. One side of the scroll would be read (presumably the trumpets), then the scroll would be turned over and the other side would be read (presumably the bowls). This imagery of the breaking of the seals one by one, followed by the successive reading of each side of the scroll, implies chronology. This supports the view that the events being described in Revelation are chronological.

This is also consistent with the events themselves, which build upon one another as they unfold. The rise of the wicked leader and lawlessness (first seal) leads to raging global war (second seal). It is this global war that leads to global scarcity, disease, and death (seals three and four). The resulting global human crisis opens the door to the rise of the Antichrist and the greatest persecution of believers in history (fifth seal).

As we get further into the book of Revelation, with the blowing of the trumpets and the outpouring of the bowls, we see a similar pattern. The events are sequentially ordered (first trumpet, second trumpet, third trumpet, and so on), with the events unleashed by each judgment building upon one another until they culminate in the battle of Armageddon.

UNDERSTANDING THE BEAST OF REVELATION

Throughout Revelation, evil manifests itself on the earth in the form of a beast. This beast is described in detail in Revelation 13, 17 and Daniel 7. However, since this beast exists in its initial form at the opening of the first seal, it is necessary to briefly discuss its characteristics here.

In Daniel and Revelation, this beast is described as both an individual and a government. This can cause confusion, but the reason is simple. The character of the governmental beast is derived from the character of the individual who leads it. Thus, the term “beast” can refer to both an individual and to the government he leads.

In its governmental form, the beast has seven heads and ten horns.