

Revelation

Lesson #6

What Will Be, John's Vision

(4: 1 – 5: 14)

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Review



In Lesson #5 we continued examining the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, focusing on the final four: Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

Preview



John Steczynski. *APOCALYPSE: Meditations on the Visions of John, "Revelation 4: 1"*
(pen and ink on paper), 1996-1997.
[Prof. Steczynski's series of 43 drawings can be found on his web site: <https://www2.bc.edu/~steczyns/3apc.htm>.
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Upon completing the letter to the church in Laodicea, John looks up and he sees an “open door to heaven.”

In Lesson #6 John is suddenly snatched up, and he instantly finds himself standing before the throne of God. It is a glorious vision, and he gives us all the details!



As we move from John's transcribing the seven letters to his vision of the throne of God, we move from John's present time on Patmos to an entirely different dimension, to a time and place that inaugurates John's vision of the future.

As we enter Revelation 4, we witness the ἀποκάλυψη [a-po-ka'-lu-pses], the dramatic “unveiling” of what is soon to come.

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“After this I had a vision of an open door to heaven, and I heard the trumpet-like voice that had spoken to me before, saying, ‘Come up here and I will show you what must happen afterwards.’ At once I was caught up in spirit. A throne was there in heaven, and on the throne sat one whose appearance sparkled like jasper and carnelian. Around the throne was a halo as brilliant as an emerald. Surrounding the throne twenty-four elders sat, dressed in white garments and with gold crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightening, rumblings, and peals of thunder. Seven flaming torches burned in front of the throne, which are the seven spirits of God. In front of the throne was something that resembled a sea of glass like crystal . . .

(4: 1-6a)

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**Matthias Gerung. "John's Vision of Heaven," *Ottheinrich Bible*
(illuminated manuscript, fol.287r), 1532.
Bavarian State Library, Munich.**

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Notice the vivid language John uses as he stretches to capture what is far beyond his ability to describe.

As St. Paul said, “*At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face*” (1 Corinthians 13: 12), so John in being suddenly snatched from an earthly, material dimension to a spiritual, timeless and heavenly one, sees clearly, face to face, and he strains for words to bridge the gap, relying on dazzling imagery and simile as a rhetorical tools. He hears a voice “*like a trumpet*”; the one sitting on the throne in heaven sparkles “*like jasper and carnelian*”; the halo surrounding the throne is “*as brilliant as an emerald*”; and in front of the throne is “*something that resembled a sea of glass like crystal*.”

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“In the center and around the throne, there were four living creatures covered with eyes in front and back. The first creature resembled a lion, the second was like a calf, the third had a face like that of a human being, and the fourth looked like an eagle in flight. The four living creatures, each of them with six wings, were covered with eyes inside and out. Day and night they do not stop exclaiming:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and who is, and who is to come.’”

(4: 6b-8)

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Earlier we noted that allusions to the Hebrew scriptures form the texture of Revelation's fabric. Like John, the prophet Isaiah (active from 740-686 B.C.) also has a dramatic vision of living creatures:

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings; with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they hovered. One cried out to the other:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!
All the earth is filled with his glory!’

At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke.

(4: 6b-8)

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Like Isaiah, the prophet Ezekiel (active from 593-571 B.C.) also has a dramatic vision of God's throne, only with Ezekiel the allusion is more detailed and overt:

“In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I [Ezekiel] was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens opened, and I saw divine visions . . . As I watched, a great storm wind came from the North, a large cloud with flashing fire, a bright glow all around it, and something like polished metal gleamed at the center of the fire. From within it figures in the likeness of four living creatures appeared . . .

“Their faces were like this: each of the four had a human face, and on the right the face of a lion, and on the left, the face of an ox, and each had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above. On each one, two wings covered the body . . . [and] the appearance of the living creatures seemed like burning coals of fire. Something indeed like torches moved back and forth among the living creatures. The fire gleamed intensely, and from it lightning flashed.”

(Ezekiel 1: 1, 4-14)



**The four living creatures then
reappear in Ezekiel 10.**

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“Something like a human hand was visible under the wings of the cherubim. I also saw four wheels beside each cherub, and the wheels appeared to have the sparkle of yellow topaz. And the appearance of the four all seemed alike, as though one wheel were inside the other Their entire bodies—backs, hands and wings—and wheels were covered with eyes all around like the four wheels Each living creature had four faces: the first a cherub, the second a human being, the third a lion, the fourth an eagle. . . . These were the living creatures I had seen beneath the God of Israel by the river Chebar. Now I knew they were cherubim.”

(Ezekiel 10: 8-20)



**William Blake. “The Whirlwind, Ezekiel’s Vision” (pencil and watercolor on paper), c. 1803.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts.**

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John's vision continues . . .

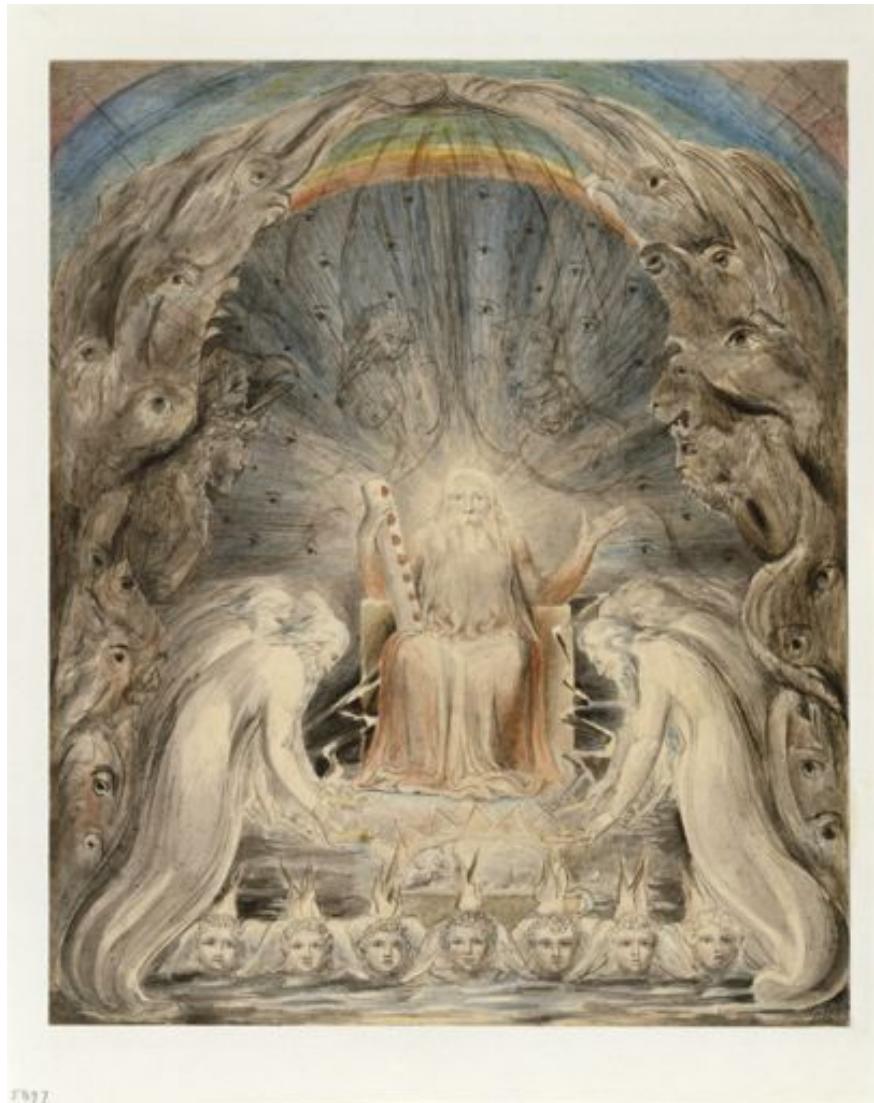


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“Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before the one who sits on the throne and worship him, who lives forever and ever. They throw down their crowns before the throne, exclaiming:

‘Worthy are you, Lord our God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things;
because of your will they came to be
and were created.’”

(4: 9-11)



William Blake. *Four and Twenty Elders Casting their Crowns* (graphite and watercolor on paper), c. 1803-1805.
Tate Gallery, London.

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We met the twenty-four elders earlier in Revelation 4, where we read:

"Surrounding the throne I saw twenty-four other thrones on which twenty-four elders sat, dressed in white garments and with gold crowns on their heads."

(4: 4)

Who are these guys?

The twenty-four elders may represent all the people of God, twelve from the Hebrew Scriptures and twelve from the New Testament, suggesting completion. Revelation refers to the twenty-four elders precisely twelve times—a nice touch!

One might go even farther and suggest that the twenty-four elders are Jacob's twelve sons, the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the twelve Apostles.

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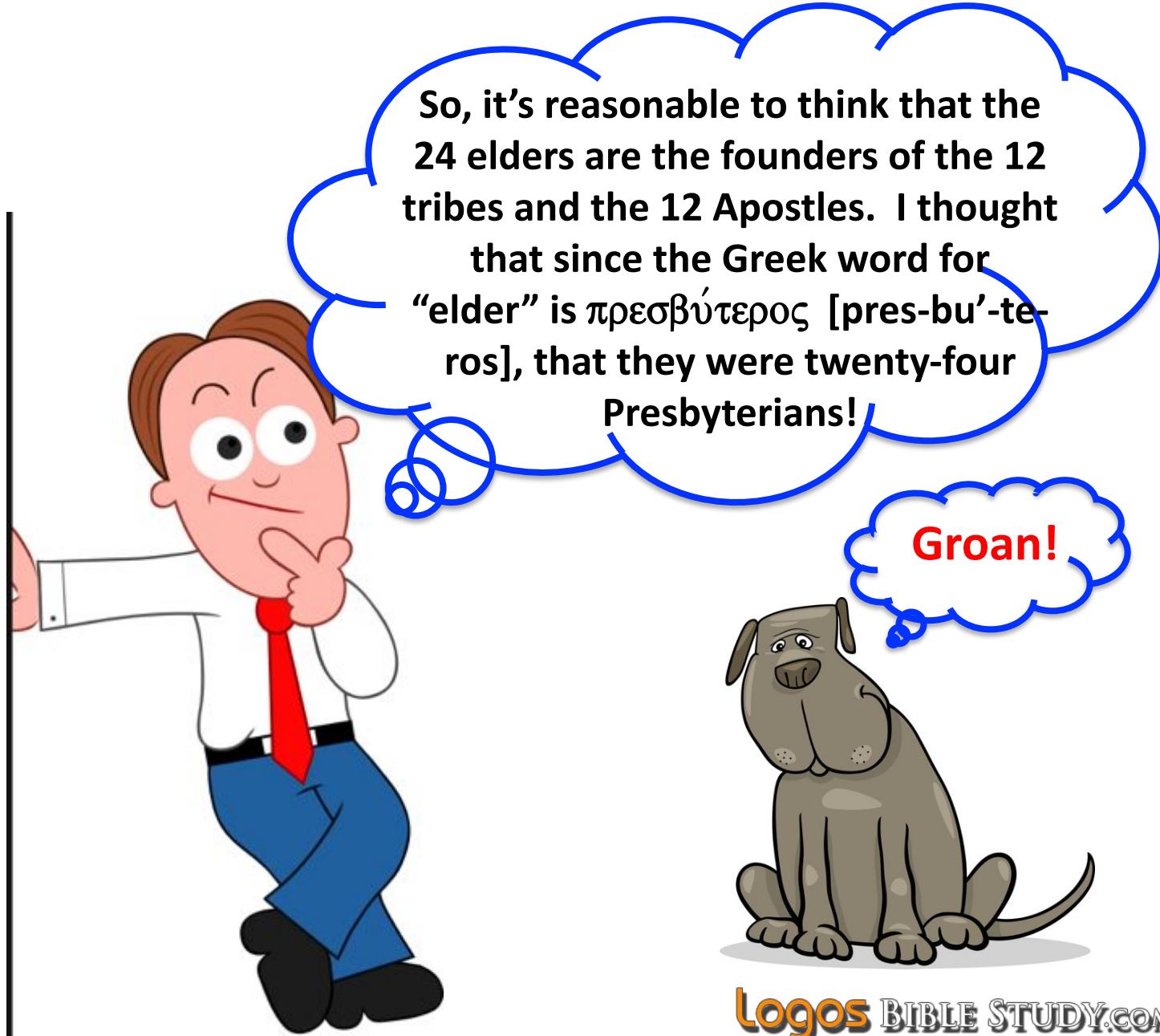


We learn in Revelation 20, after Christ's triumphant return, that Satan and his crew are thrown "into the abyss," which is locked and sealed over them for a thousand years (20: 2-3).

During that time—the "Millennial Kingdom"—the twenty-four elders will reign with Christ, entrusted with judgment (20: 4a), and with them are the martyrs of the apocalypse who "*came to life and . . . reigned with Christ for a thousand years*" (20: 4b).

After the thousand years are over and the last judgment occurs, the New Jerusalem descends out of heaven from God. The city has twelve gates, each inscribed with a name from the twelve tribes of Israel, and a foundation, inscribed with the names of the twelve Apostles.

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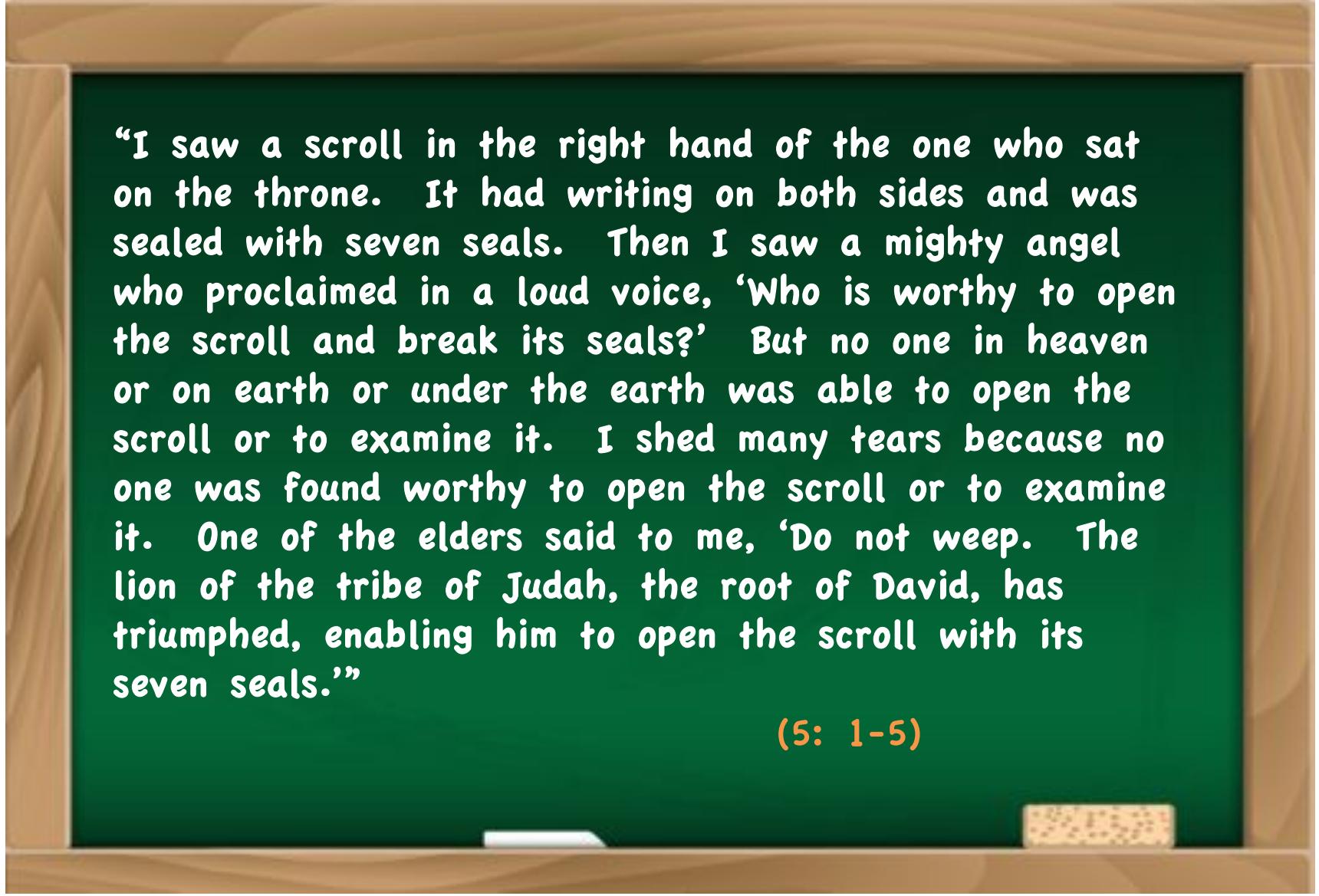


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Now, back to John's vision!

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“I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. It had writing on both sides and was sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a mighty angel who proclaimed in a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to examine it. I shed many tears because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to examine it. One of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep. The lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed, enabling him to open the scroll with its seven seals.’”

(5: 1-5)



- “I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. It had writing on both sides and was sealed with seven seals.” The fact that John sees in God’s right hand a scroll with writing on both sides is unusual on two counts:
 - 1) by the end of the 1st century the codex had replaced the scroll as the medium on which a book was written, suggesting that the scroll in God’s hand is very old; and
 - 2) a scroll normally has writing on only one side, since when rolled up the writing on the back would be exposed and would be damaged easily. Writing on both sides suggests an abundance of content.
- Normally, a scroll would be sealed with one seal, not seven. Seven suggests the importance of what is inside, as well as completion.

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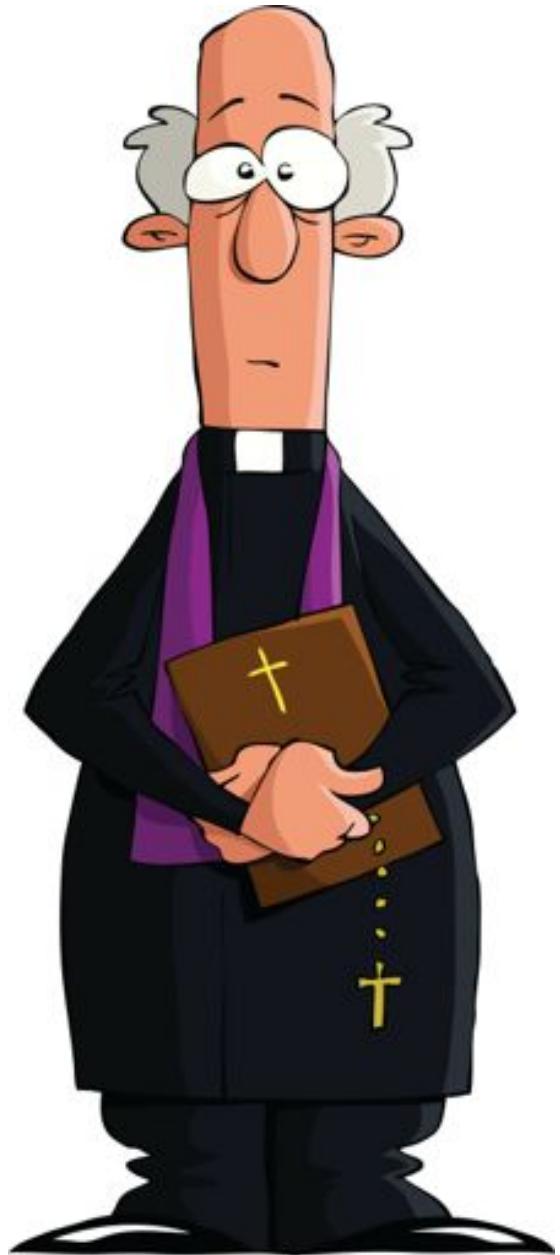
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“Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes; these are the [seven] spirits of God sent out into the whole world. He came and received the scroll from the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. When he took it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones. They sang a new hymn:

“Worthy are you to receive the scroll
and to break open its seals,
for you were slain and with your blood
you purchased for God
those from every tribe and tongue,
people and nation.

You made them a kingdom and priests
for our God,
and they will reign on earth.”

(5: 6-10)



- “A Lamb that seemed to have been slain.”
- When we studied Leviticus together we learned about the five great sacrifices, four of which are animal sacrifices: 1) burnt offering; 2) grain offering; 3) fellowship offering; 4) sin offering and; 5) guilt offering.
- The sin offering atones for one’s sin, and it can be an unblemished bull, goat or lamb.
 - St. Paul writes:
- “For what the law, weakened by the flesh, was powerless to do, this God has done: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for the sake of sin, he condemned sin in the flesh”*
- (Romans 8: 3).
- That is, Christ became our “sin offering,” and that’s what John the Baptist meant when in seeing Jesus, he said: *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1: 29).

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**Francisco de Zurbaran. *Agnus Dei* (oil on canvas), 1635-1640.
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.**

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- The Lamb in John's vision has seven horns and seven eyes, "*the [seven] spirits of God sent out into the whole world*" (5: 6), which as we have seen, represents the Holy Spirit infused into Jesus at his baptism.

"John testified further, saying, 'I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him.'"

(John 1: 32)

- It is the spirit-filled, risen and glorified Christ—Jesus—"*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*," who takes the scroll from God's right hand and who is worthy to open it.

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The scroll originates with the prophet Daniel. Here's the scene:

"In the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel, who had been named Belteshazzar. The revelation was certain: a great war; he understood this from the vision. In those days, I, Daniel, mourned three full weeks. I ate no savory food, took no meat or wine, and did not anoint myself at all until the end of the three weeks."

(Daniel 10: 1-3)



Like John, Daniel is given a vision, a “revelation” or “unveiling” of future events, of a catastrophic war so terrible that it sickens him for three weeks. Daniel is so stunned at the horror that he cannot eat, sleep or function.

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A man dressed in linen with a belt of fine gold around his waist—the pre-incarnate Christ whom we met before, and who also appears to John in Revelation as the risen and glorified Christ—displays the vision for Daniel, as it is written on a scroll.

When the vision ends, the Lord tells Daniel to “*keep secret the message and seal the book until the end time*” (12: 4).

And that’s what Daniel does.



But Daniel then asks the obvious question:
“How long shall it be to the end of these appalling things” (12: 6)?

The Lord replies:

“[It] should be for a time, two times, and half a time; and that, when the power of the destroyer of the holy people was brought to an end, all these things should end.”

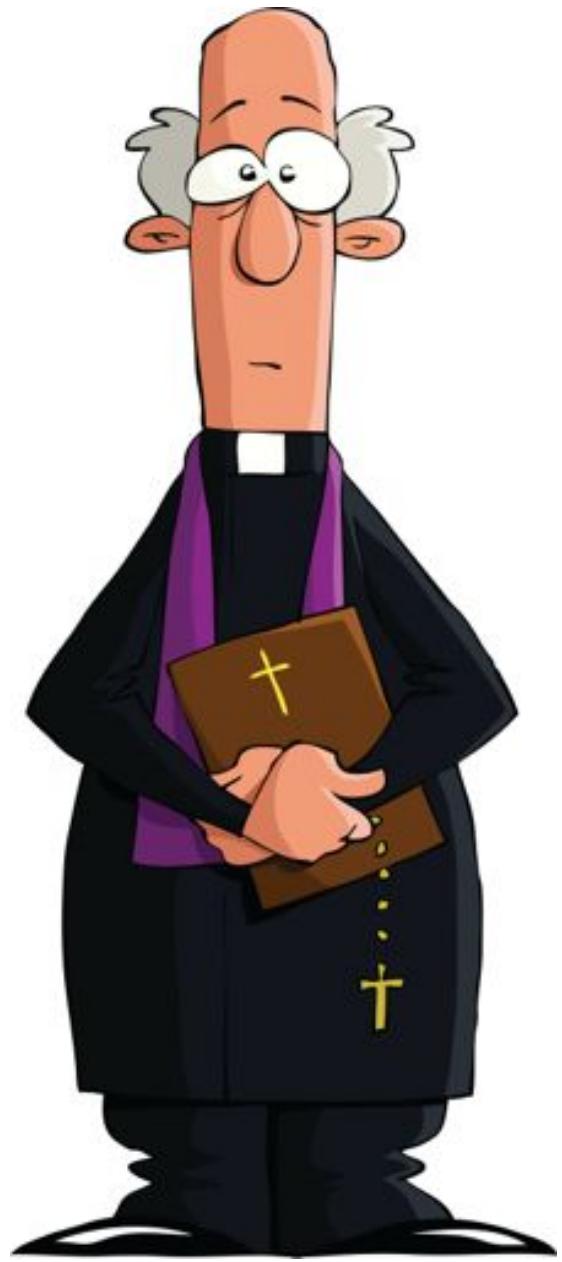
(12: 7)

But Daniel still does not understand: *“I heard, but I did not understand; so I asked, ‘My lord, what follows this?’”*

And the Lord replies:

“Go, Daniel, because the works are to be kept secret and sealed until the end time.”

(12: 9)



So, the scroll that the Lamb of God takes from God's right hand in Revelation 5: 7 is the very scroll that the Lord commanded Daniel to seal "until the end time."

In Revelation we have reached the "end time," and the "unveiling" is about to begin. In the next chapter—Revelation 6—the slain and bloodied Lamb will open the scroll's first seal and the "end-time" events will leap off the page, flashing before our eyes in Imax® 3-D and Dolby® sound!

But before they do, the four living creatures, a legion of angels and the twenty-four elders erupt into a cosmic song of praise, and the twenty-four elders hit the deck . . . again!

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“I looked again and heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, and they cried out in a loud voice:

‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain
to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength,
Honor and glory and blessing.’

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out:

‘To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever.’

The four living creatures answered, ‘Amen,’ and the elders fell down and worshiped.”

(6: 11-14)

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**Jan van Eyck. “Adoration of the Lamb,” *Ghent Altarpiece*, central panel (oil on panel), 1427-1429.
Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.**

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Questions for discussion and thought

- 1. What are the literary antecedents for John's vision of God's throne?**
- 2. What literary devices does John use to capture the beauty of his vision?**
- 3. What are the four living creatures that surround God's throne?**
- 4. Who are the twenty-four elders seated on thrones?**
- 5. What is on the scroll held in God's right hand?**

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