

The Silence of the Lamb

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain

Reactions to the presence of the Lamb in The Revelation of John



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Understanding the Lamb is central to the book of Revelation

“The idea of the Lamb is one of the great characteristic ideas of the *Revelation*”¹

Although the Lamb is easy to overlook amongst the great parade of the weird and wonderful characters in the book of Revelation, he is of central importance if we are to understand the book. He appears in many of the scenes (29 times), although that appearance is often brief and he doesn't speak.

When I was trying to think of a title for this paper and letting my mind roam, I thought of “The Silence of the Lamb” as a joke, but rejected the idea. As I thought more I realised that the Lamb does not speak, but others speak for him by their reaction to him. Also, as we come to understand what the figure of the Lamb represents, we realise his deeds speak for themselves.

In this paper I am going to look at the Lamb as a symbol, what does the Lamb symbolise, and the message of the Lamb.

The Lamb as a Symbol

Symbols are very important part of Revelation. As the weird characters that are a mixture of Dr Seuss and Disney drawings appear in the book, we understand that they are not real. The description of the extra heads, swords for a tongue, snakes for a tail, horns growing out of horns, extra eyes, overwhelm our imagination and we realise they are not meant to be pictured in our heads or drawn, but we are to understand the different parts as symbols that tell us something about the creature.

The problem for us as modern readers is that the world whose symbols are being used is not our world. Symbols, like jokes, work best when they don't have to be explained. Yet we have no choice but to seek the explanations if we are to understand the book and interpret it correctly. Much of the symbolism of Revelation comes from the Old Testament, so, in my experience², reading the Old Testament with understanding will help us understand Revelation. In this paper I am not going to explain all of the symbols, but focus on discussing the most important of the symbolic creatures.

In many ways the Lamb is one of the more accessible of the symbolic characters in the book. Although here too there are difficulties in visually representing the description.

“Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”³

¹ Barclay p 215.

² When I first became a Christian, I struggled with understanding Revelation. A friend said to me that understanding the Old Testament would help. I thought that was a huge task as the Old Testament is so large. Now, 40 years later, I have gradually built an understanding of most of the Old Testament and it has helped me to understand Revelation.

³ Revelation 5:6 – all quotes from the Bible are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

In the search that I did for artwork representing the Lamb, I didn't find any with seven horns or seven eyes. It just seems too difficult to draw or paint in a way that would carry meaning. The marks of having been slain were there in some images I found, with the Lamb bleeding into a communion chalice.⁴



I must say I personally find this picture a bit repulsive. I think it is the contrast between the gentleness and innocence of the lamb, with the banner of victory over evil, and the bleeding.

What does the Lamb symbolise

In the Christian Church we understand that the Lamb of God is Jesus. In my Church we sing “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world”⁵ Sunday after Sunday in our communion services and understand that we are singing something important about Jesus.

The symbol carries a cluster of images, in no particular order:

- John the Baptist seeing Jesus walking towards him and saying “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”⁶
- That great passage from Isaiah 53 that seems to describe Jesus’ earthly life and death, centuries before he was born. “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”⁷
- The lambs eaten at Passover each year in remembrance of the protective blood smeared on the doorposts of the Hebrews so that the plagues of Egypt would not harm them and they could escape in the Exodus. We also remember that Jesus was killed during the Passover period.
- The perfect lambs, without defect, offered in regular sacrifices to God, as symbols that we offer our best to God.

⁴ This picture is from the Wikipedia article “Lamb of God”.

⁵ A New Zealand Prayer Book page 426.

⁶ John 1:29.

⁷ Isaiah 53:7.

- The scape goat that carries the sins of the community out of the community each year.

You might associate different ideas with the phrase, but you get the idea.

In addition to these images, the apocalyptic literature written in the period between the Old and New Testaments developed the image of the Lamb. This literature presents a conquering lamb who will appear in the days of final judgement and destroy evil in the form of beasts. John the Baptist might have seen the Lamb in this way, when he referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God.⁸

The Lamb in Revelation is more like that image than the images of the sacrificial Lamb in the Old Testament. Although he has the marks of being slain and the effect of the blood is to cleanse, no details of the death are mentioned.

The appearances of the Lamb in the book

I referred to Revelation 5:6 before, but as it is a key passage in our understanding of who the Lamb is, I'll read it again.

“Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”

The scene is heaven, with the Lamb as the centre. It bears the marks of being slain and we are reminded of Thomas seeing the marks of crucifixion on Jesus' resurrected body.⁹ The marks are also a reminder of Christ's sacrifice that overcame evil.

The wounds are a contrast with the rest of the picture, the seven horns and seven eyes. The horn was a symbol of power¹⁰. They signal that the Lamb is omnipotent, with ultimate power, but not corrupted by it. Seven is the number of perfection.

The seven eyes are the seven spirits dispatched to watch the earth¹¹. They symbolise the all-seeing omniscience of God, as there is nowhere God cannot see what is going on.

The marks of death contrasted with the symbols of total power and knowledge show that the tragedy of death has turned to triumph.

In this scene there is another figure, not the Lamb, seated on the throne. This seems like a reference to God the Father.

The scene is represented in this painting.

⁸ Ford P 31.

⁹ John 20: 24 – 29.

¹⁰ These are horns on the head, not trumpets.

¹¹ Zechariah 4:10.



Jan van Eyck painting "Ghent Altarpiece", finished 1432. Detail: adoration of the lamb¹²

If you look carefully, this Lamb too is bleeding into a chalice. The seven horns are hinted at in the rays coming from the Lamb's head, but the seven eyes are not represented. The angels and the twenty-four elders are there adoring the Lamb. The sun and the dove in the background hint at the Trinity.

I am going to briefly look at each of the passages where the Lamb appears before summarising what these passages are telling us, and what meaning we might take from the presence of the Lamb in the book.

In the rest of Chapter 5 the Lamb receives a scroll from Him seated on the throne. He is worshiped by four living creatures, and twenty-four elders, with golden bowls and incense (the

¹² This picture is from the Wikipedia article "Lamb of God".

prayers of God's people.) They sing that the Lamb is worthy to open the scroll, because of his sacrificial death. Then the angels join in the worship.

In Chapter 6 the Lamb breaks, in order, six of the seven seals on the scroll. Each seal signals a new disaster. Breaking the sixth seal on the scroll triggers an earthquake and some people want the mountains to fall on them so they do not have to face the vengeance of the Lamb.

Chapter 7 has another picture of a vast crowd from every nation, tribe, and tongue standing before the throne and the Lamb. The crowd are robed in white and waving palms (a reminder of Jesus entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey while the people waved palms). There is more worship in song. The white robes of the people are described as washed in the blood of the Lamb. The blood of Jesus has washed away sin – so the clothes the clothes are symbolically white.

In Chapter 8 the seventh and last seal on the scroll is broken, followed by silence in heaven for half an hour. Then seven trumpets are blown after incense is offered by the seven archangels. The trumpets herald disaster.

The next chapters are mainly about wars and disasters and contain references to Christ, but no mention of the Lamb.

The Lamb is referred to briefly in Chapter 13:8 – “All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.”

In Chapter 14 the Lamb is back in the main action. He is standing on Mt Zion surrounded by 144,000 with His name and His Father's name written on their foreheads. These 144,000 are described as men who kept themselves from women, and followed the Lamb wherever he goes. As the first fruits of ransomed humanity, they are the only ones who could learn the song. The scene also contains harps, throne, elders, and singing.

Chapter 14 also contains a thought that Glasson describes as “sub-Christian”¹³. “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever.”¹⁴

Chapter 15 contains the song of the Lamb, sung by those who won the victory over the beast.

The Lamb does not appear while the seven bowls of wrath are poured on the earth.

In Chapter 17 there is a brief mention of a war waged against the Lamb, who will defeat the enemies. The Lamb is described as Lord of Lords, King of Kings, and his victory will be shared by his followers who are called, chosen and faithful.

¹³ Glasson p 86.

¹⁴ Revelation 14:9-11

Chapter 19 contains songs of victory, and recaps the previous scenes of worship of the Lamb. As before there are songs, twenty four elders, and four living creatures worshipping – finally the Lamb is mentioned in the verse “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”¹⁵

Chapters 21 and 22 describe the Holy City (Jerusalem) which is called the bride of the Lamb. There is no Temple in the city because the Lord almighty and the Lamb are its Temple. Similarly, the city has no sun or moon because the Lamb is its lamp. The only ones who can enter the city are those whose names are in the Lamb’s book of life. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city.

The meaning of the Lamb

The references to the life of Jesus as described in the Gospels establish that the Lamb in the book of Revelation represents Jesus. In the description of the Holy City to come it is clear that the Lamb is God.

There are two scrolls in the book that are associated with the Lamb. The first is the scroll sealed with seven seals that unleashes evil and disaster when the seals are broken. The Lamb does not create evil, but allows it to happen for a while until the final defeat. The other scroll contains the names of those who have faithfully followed the Lamb, and will live. The book of life has probably been written by the Lamb.

The Lamb in Revelation has earned the right to be worshiped by his sacrificial death and by his victory in the ultimate war with evil. He is worshiped by representatives of all in heaven and earth; the four living creatures, angels (including the seven Archangels), and the twenty-four elders (probably the twelve heads of the tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples of Jesus), and those who have faithfully followed Jesus.

The appearance of the Lamb in the worst parts of the book, reminds us of the hope we have in God and in Christ.

Truly, “Worthy is the Lamb”.

¹⁵ Revelation 19:9

References

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Questions for discussion

How do we know that the Lamb in revelation is Jesus?

What does the Lamb in the book of Revelation add to our understanding of Jesus?