

INTRODUCTION to REVELATION chapter 5

1 THE THEME

2 THE STRUCTURE

- a. The structure of chapter 4 and 5
- b. The division of chapter 5

3 THE CONTENTS

- a. The message of the scroll in heaven (5:1)
- b. The message of breaking the seals of the scroll (5:2-4)
- c. The message of the Lion, the Lamb and the Root (5:5-7)
- d. The message of the cross (5:8-10)
- e. The message of the vision which is from eternity to time and back to eternity (5:13-14)

4 THE BACKGROUND.

- a. The scroll (5:1)
- b. Incense (5:8)
- c. Singing a new song (5:9)

1 THE THEME

GOD CARRIES OUT HIS ETERNAL PLAN THROUGH THE LAMB

2 THE STRUCTURE

a. The structure of chapter 4 and 5

In structure, chapter 4 and chapter 5 belong together. See the introduction to chapter 4.

b. The division of chapter 5

Revelation 5:1-7 reveals the enthronement of Jesus Christ in heaven.

Revelation 5:8-12 reveals the living creatures, the elders and the angels in heaven praising Jesus Christ.

Revelation 5:13-14 reveals all creatures in the universe praising God and Christ who share the throne.

The living creatures and elders respond to this praise.

3 THE CONTENTS ¹

The message of this chapter is that God, who sits on his throne in the centre of the universe, carries out his eternal plan for this earth and its people *through Jesus Christ*. Jesus Christ died to make atonement for sins and he was resurrected and lives *to reveal and execute God's eternal plan of salvation and judgement*. All creatures should acknowledge that.

a. The message of the scroll in heaven (5:1)

There is A BOOK IN HEAVEN with God! It is a book in the form of a scroll. No religious book on earth is a copy of this book, because it is sealed. It is also not revealed to any prophet in history, but only to Jesus Christ. He is the only One worthy to break the seals and open the scroll! He is the only One able to reveal and execute its contents! This is because he only died to make atonement for sins and he only was resurrected from the dead and lives forever! The enthronement of Jesus Christ in heaven is depicted by the Lamb receiving the scroll out of the hand of the throne Occupant.

The scroll with writing on both sides contains God's decisions with regard to the history of the world and the history of the Church within the world. It contains the unsearchable plan or purpose of God that becomes historical events in the salvation history in 'the end of the ages'². These great and all-determining historical events that announce the coming of the kingdom of God are apocalyptic (grand and violent) events, because they reveal and execute God's eternal plan of salvation and judgement. God, who sits on his throne in the

¹ cf. Bavinck, chapter 3

² The end of the ages is the whole New Testament period. See the end of the introduction to section 2.

centre of the universe, carries out his eternal plan for this earth and its people through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ reveals and executes God's eternal plan of salvation and judgement.

This scroll has a completely different character than all other books on earth! The secular or religious books on earth *record* what events took place on earth in the past. They reveal the lives of certain secular or religious people, their words and their accomplishments and the wars they fought. But by reading this scroll in heaven the events on earth *are called into being and set in motion!* It does not reveal what already happened, but reveals what will happen soon (1:3)! The moment Jesus Christ reveals the words of this scroll in heaven the apocalyptic events begin to happen!

What God did in creation he also does in revelation! By speaking a word at the creation God called the empirical (visible and measurable material) things that did not exist before into existence (Genesis 1:3; Psalm 33:6; Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3). And by speaking Christ calls the events of the history of salvation and judgement written in the scroll into happening! The moment Christ breaks one of the seals he causes its contents to be revealed and he causes those events to actually happen (chapter 6)!

b. The message of breaking the seals of the scroll (5:2-4)

For a long time no-one in the universe could be found that was worthy to open the scroll, reveal its contents and cause its contents to be set in motion. As long as the scroll remained closed the created things and the historical events on earth stagnated and there was absolutely no progress!

If the scroll had remained sealed, change in the situation and condition of the congregations would not have been possible. The congregation in Ephesus would have continued being a dead orthodox congregation that holds on to the Christian truth, but lacks Christian love (2:1-7). Likewise, the congregation of Sardes would have carried on being a congregation persecuted by other religions (3:1-6). And the congregation of Laodicea would have carried on as usual being a congregation locked in deadly self-deception, a congregation threatened by materialism, affluence and worldliness (3:14-22).

As long as the scroll remains sealed, the congregations cannot be wiped out, but they also do not blossom up to their final glory! Then history on earth seems to have no end and the struggles of the Church do not seem to lead anywhere! Then the created things and the historical events do not grow towards their final destiny! This fact makes everything on earth very tiresome. There is no definite battle and there is also no definite victory! New reformations are followed by new deformations, worldliness and contamination! Times of revival are followed by times of grey and cold deadness. The Church experiences history as a time of flood (high tide) and a time of ebb (low tide). And the world regards history as an endless circle – everything is repeated over and over again. There seems to be no end to the hopeless events on earth.

As long as the scroll remains sealed, also Satan has no definite victory! He can persecute some believers unto death, but he cannot destroy them! He whips up nations to hate everything associated with Jesus Christ, but he does not succeed to wipe out the name of Jesus Christ! Also Satan and his associates experience history as a time of flood and a time of ebb.

Neither the Church nor Satan can break the seals of the scroll. Neither is able to gain the final victory! When the Church cannot see a definite end to this struggle on earth she becomes discouraged and she feels utterly powerless. When there is no one able to break the seals of the scroll the events on earth turn into an endless nightmare!

Why does the history of this world continually lie under the doom of indecision? Why can this monotony and endless circle of struggle never be broken? We cannot answer this question, but realise that there are hidden mysteries in life and that the history of this world is something more than a struggle for power! One cannot say that if God wills he could defeat Satan and end this struggle, because also Satan has a certain legal position. By the fall of man into sin, the world in a particular way has been subjected to Satan. "The whole world (without Christ) is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). Satan is called "the prince of this (evil) world" (John 12:31). He leads the whole (evil) world astray (12:9). And he is called "the god of this age who has blinded the minds of the unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 4:4). That is why the events taking

place on this earth are so puzzling, so bewildering and so terrifying. It seems as if the world is bewitched and the historical events lie in a ban of enchantment.

It is by breaking the seals of this scroll that the events taking place on this earth can be brought to a definite end! By opening this scroll Jesus Christ wipes all appearance and illusion away and causes everything in this world to become what they really are!

While the leaders of this world always think in terms of their war potential and power struggles, God thinks in completely different terms!

c. The message of the Lion, the Lamb and the Root (5:5-7)

A mighty angel in a loud voice proclaimed, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” There is One who can open the scroll, but he does not do it right away. It is as if he waits to see whether any other being challenges him to take on this great work. But no one in heaven or on earth or in the world of spirits could open the scroll or even look into it. No mighty political king and no religious prophet in the history of this world stepped forward to open the scroll!

It is irrefutably clear that Jesus Christ (the Lion of Judah, the Root of David and the Lamb of God) is the only One that can break the seals and open the scroll (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5)! Not one of the angels that serve God in heaven and not one of the four living creatures that represent God’s creation, but one of the elders representing the Church was given the privilege to proclaim the answer. John must know and feel that he is not standing alone, exiled on an island, faced with the many questions in history of this world. John is a part of God’s world-wide community of believers, the Church, that received the Word and from that Word he may spell the answers to the problems that daily face the Church. “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

Jesus Christ is the Lion of God’s people Israel. He is not ‘a lion’ that conquers the world by the force of a worldly army or by religious wars. His power lies in his radical submission. He is the Lion, because he is the Lamb that gave himself to be slaughtered on the cross as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of those in the world that accept him. None of the rulers of this age understood God’s hidden wisdom, for if they had, they would not have crucified Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:8).

Real greatness in the eyes of God is not the proud religious leader, or the fiery warrior and the invincible hero that conquers people and nations by his political, legal, religious plots and by the power of his money and army. The history of this world will not be brought to its final destiny by wars, terrorists, bribery and religious lies. The history of this world will be completely unravelled and brought to its final glorious destiny (the new earth) by the One who, although he is God, emptied himself and took on the nature of man. Then he humbled himself even more and submitted himself to be the Servant of man. Finally he submitted himself to the cross (Philippians 2:5-8). Jesus Christ is the only Lion (the only King), because only he became the Lamb (the One who was crucified on the cross)!

Jesus Christ is ‘the Root’ and ‘the Offspring’ of David (22:16). The historical king David was king of God’s Old Testament people. But prophecy throughout the Old Testament pointed to the real King, Jesus Christ, who would establish the real Kingdom of God and be the real King of all God’s people in history. Jesus Christ is both the *divine* Origin and eternal Father of this historical king David and also his *human* Offspring or Descendent within time.

Jesus Christ is the only One in creation and in the history of man that can break the mysterious bewitchment of the world, the ban of enchantment on the events in history and the illusion that everything is not what it really is. God gives the scroll only into the hands of Jesus Christ! In all other hands on earth the scroll would become an object of idolatrous veneration and worship!

d. The message of the cross (5:8-12)

The moment the scroll is given into the hands of Jesus Christ, the four living creatures (who represent the whole creation) and the twenty four elders (who represent the whole Church in history) fall down, not to

worship the scroll, but to worship the One who is worthy to open the scroll! Christians do not venerate a Book in heaven, but worship the One who reveals and executes the contents of this Book! The Lamb is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because only he was slain and with his blood he purchased his people from every nation and every language (5:9-10). The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ at his first coming is the basis and centre of all human history! All powers in heaven, on earth and in hell gathered around this one event in human history and fought for its outcome (12:7-9; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:8; Colossians 2:15). Since creation all history pointed forward to the cross, and after Christ's first coming all history points back to the cross and forward to Christ's second coming. At this one event in human history God and his Christ and his Church gained their final victory. At the cross Satan and his powers from hell and his followers on earth suffered their definite defeat! At his first coming Christ bound the strong man Satan and established his kingdom. And he said: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:28-30)! Every person must choose whether he is with Jesus or against Jesus. There is no neutral ground!

The four living creatures, who represent the powers of nature, remembered the darkness that came over the earth, the earthquake and the opening of graves (Matthew 27:45-53). God's creation realises that also its destiny is completely linked to this one day and it eagerly expects to be liberated from its bondage to decay and to be brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:19-21)!

The twenty four elders, who represent God's Church (God's people in the Old and the New Testaments), remembered their fear and fleeing from the cross. God's people (the Church) see the fulfilment of the Law (the sacrifice of animals) (Hebrews 9:12-14) and the Prophets (the Servant of the Lord led as a lamb to the slaughter to be crushed for our sins)(Isaiah 53:5,7). They sing that Jesus Christ with his blood had purchased people from every nation and language (5:9).

The angels in heaven always longed to catch a glimpse of the message of salvation that was entrusted to the Church of believers (1 Peter 1:9-12). They had strengthened Jesus Christ when he struggled in prayer before he died (Luke 22:43). They had witnessed the terror of death, but also the joy of Easter when they lifted the stone from the tomb to reveal to people that Jesus Christ, who was dead, is alive for ever (1:18; Matthew 28:5-7). They sing his praises. By the blood shed on the cross God reconciled to himself not only all things on earth, but also all things in heaven (Colossians 1:19-20). The fall into sin had also affected the angels in heaven, but the world of angels is also saved from their kind of brokenness through the death of Christ on the cross.

[e. The message of the vision which is from eternity to time and back to eternity \(5:13-14\)](#)

The vision in Revelation 4:1-11 speaks of the rest of God on his throne *in eternity*. *God is in the centre*. But the vision in Revelation 5:1-12 speaks of the action of God through Christ *in time*. *Now Christ is in the centre*. The fullness of God dwells in Christ and through Christ God reconciles everything in heaven and on earth to himself (Colossians 1:19-20; Ephesians 1:9-10).

The final vision in Revelation 5:13-14 speaks of the glory of him who sits on the throne and of the Lamb *for ever and ever*. *Again God is in the centre*, but then it is God as He has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, his first coming, his sacrifice on the cross and his completed work of salvation!

Before his first coming the things of this world seemed enchanted: the things in the world were not what they seemed to be. The things in the world did not seem to change.

But after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ this enchantment has been broken, the things become more and more what they really are and the history of this world presses on towards its final destiny. It is Jesus Christ who breaks the seals and opens the scroll. This causes events in history to happen that would bring everything in creation to its final destination! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ at his first coming brought time and eternity together and at his second coming all will be taken up into eternity.

Therefore the whole created universe and all redeemed people praise God and the Lamb because of their work in creation and redemption. All things must ultimately glorify God (Romans 11:36). His will is being carried out in the universe (4:11). The throne rules, that is, God the Father rules through God the Son. The Lamb reigns and therefore the Church need not fear its tribulations (trials and persecutions).

4 THE BACKGROUND

a. The scroll (5:1)

Psalm 40:7. Long before Christ's first coming there was already known a scroll (or the Old Testament scrolls) in which stood things written about the Messiah.

Psalm 139:16. The Psalmist was aware that "all the days ordained for me were written in your *book* before one of them came to be".

Isaiah 29:11-12,18. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that God's vision or revelation given during the Old Testament period to Israel was nothing but words sealed in a *scroll*, which even the literate could not read, because it was sealed. The scroll remained sealed and therefore its contents could not be revealed or executed. God's Old Testament people remained spiritually like people who could not read. Therefore the contents of the scroll could not be understood even if they were able to read. But "in the day" of revelation, the deaf would hear the words of the scroll and the eyes of the blind would see the vision or revelation of God's words (cf. Matthew 11:5). This meant that during the Old Testament period God's decrees concerning certain matters had not yet been revealed or executed and thus could not be understood. But in the day of Christ's first coming the words of the scroll in heaven would be revealed, executed and understood (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:14-16).

Jeremiah 36:1. The prophet Jeremiah had to write on a scroll on earth all God's words that he spoke concerning his people and the nations.

Ezekiel 2:9-10. The prophet Ezekiel saw in his vision a hand stretched out to him with a scroll that was unrolled before him. On both sides there were written words of lament and mourning and woe, things that would overcome God's people.

Daniel 10:21; 12:4; cf. 8:26. The angel Michael revealed that God's plan which he revealed to the prophet Daniel was written in the *Book of Truth*. But the prophet Daniel had to close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. The words and the scroll that recorded them denote the message(s) of the man in linen recorded in Daniel 10:11 to 12:3. By placing this vision at the end of the book, Daniel hints at applying them to the book as a whole. Daniel is to close up and seal these messages. The expression suggests not merely conserving them but withholding them from being read (Daniel 8:26). The words would only be understood at a later time! This is confirmed by the words that follow, "Many will hurry to and fro to increase knowledge", but unable to find a word from God! The contents of the scroll would remain sealed until it is God's time to reveal it.

"The days are coming ... when I will send a famine ... of hearing the words of the LORD. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it" (Amos 8:11-12). When the seals of Daniel's book would be broken (during the Antiochene crisis in the second century B.C.) that famine would end.³ Then God's people (the wise) would understand (God's words), even though the wicked would continue to be wicked throughout the following centuries (Daniel 12:9-10).

When the seals are finally broken, then God's people would understand Daniel's message: In the book of Daniel *God reveals the way he looks at past and present and future history*. Kingdoms and kings, even very powerful antichristian kingdoms and kings, come and go (they are temporary) (Daniel 2:21)! The godless and wicked rule of the antichristian kingdoms would only last for 'a time, times and half a time', that is, for a time determined by God, a divinely limited period of affliction that would not extend endlessly, but would unexpectedly be broken off"! See the number 3½ in the introduction to chapter 12. In the mean time God's kingdom is everlasting and continues to grow (Daniel 2:44; 4:3,34-35; 7:14,27) and God remains sovereign over the kingdoms of men (Daniel 4:17,25; 5:21)! Daniel addresses the kingdoms of the world in general, whether they are to some extent doing what God wants them to do (Romans 13:1-7) or whether they have become instruments of Satan (Revelation 13:1-10).

³ Goldingay, p. 309

Events in human history unfold as a pointless sequence of invasions, battles, schemes and frustrations. Military power and political manoeuvring are central themes; but military issues are not always settled by the size of an army, and political schemes come to nothing, whether pursued by means of battle or by means of alliance. It is a tale of selfishness, irrationality, and chance. Human beings formulate far-reaching plans but keep being frustrated by each other. Neither power nor politics take people anywhere. History is not the outworking of a just purpose, nor is it the hand of God directly visible in it.

According to Daniel, the theological interpretation of the history of kingdoms and kings is the following: The four great empires (Daniel chapter 7) contained one another by each terminating the rule of the last. The king of the north (the Seleucids of Syria) and the king of the south (the Ptolemies of Egypt) (Daniel chapter 11) mutually contained each other by frustrating each other's aspirations to a wider empire over a period of centuries, thus protecting each other from reaching the ultimate arrogance that must provoke God to intervene. That provocation is also offered when war and politics become interwoven with religion.⁴

In the light of this, God encourages his people to refuse to collaborate with the anti-Christian forces and if necessary to stand their ground to the end!

Zechariah 5:1-4. The prophet Zechariah saw in his vision a flying scroll, twenty cubits long and ten cubits wide (a cubit = half a meter). It contained the curse that was going out over the whole land. The sin of God's people would be completely destroyed and the land would be sanctified.

b. Incense (5:8)

In the Old Testament incense had to be offered on the incense altar in the tabernacle or temple every morning and every evening (Exodus 30:1-8; 40:26-27). The rising of the smoke of the incense signified the rising of prayers to God (Psalm 141:2; Luke 1:10; Revelation 5:8; 8:3-5).

c. Singing a new song (5:9)

Psalm 33:1-4. God's people should sing a new song to the LORD after he has spoken his word of righteousness and truth to them and after he has dealt faithfully with them.

Psalm 40:1-3. God's people should sing a new song to the LORD after he has heard their cry and lifted them out of the slimy pit of mud and mire and set their feet on a rock. They can sing a new song, because God himself puts that new song in their mouths! Singing new songs to the Lord leads to other people taking notice and putting their trust in the LORD.

Psalm 96:1-3. God's people should sing new songs to the LORD that proclaim his salvation, declare his glory and make known his marvellous deeds among all people.

Isaiah 42:1-10. God's people should sing a new song to the LORD after he has revealed to them that the Messiah (Servant of the LORD) would come. The Messiah would be chosen by God; possess God's Spirit; bring justice to the nations; not shout in the streets; not break a bruised person; not snuff out a smouldering person; and not falter discouraged people. He would establish justice on earth; the distant nations would put their hope in him; he would be the fulfilment of the covenant of God with his people and a light for other people that would join God's people. He would open the eyes of the blind, free captives from prison and release the people who sit in darkness. God's people must sing about this!

Application. Let people who are inspired or have the gift write and compose new songs. Especially setting the words of the Bible to music is very effective!

⁴ Goldingay, p. 316