

Zechariah's Flying Scroll and Revelation's Unsealed Scroll

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One of the larger puzzles in the Book of Revelation has to do with the contents of the seven-sealed scroll in chapter 5 that is opened in 8:1. The contents of the seals with which this scroll is sealed become evident in the course of chapter 6, but no comment is made about the inner contents of the scroll itself when it is finally opened in 8:1, after the seventh seal is opened. The only statement made there is that there was silence in heaven for about half an hour when it was opened. To determine the nature of the inner contents of the scroll, we are reduced to examining potential relations in three different directions: with the rest of the book of Revelation, elsewhere in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, or extrabiblical sources such as the papyri. This problem arises because, as David E. Aune remarks in his massive reference commentary on Revelation, the text “contains no explicit indication as to the contents of the scroll.”¹

The parallels Aune dismisses most readily are the extra-biblical parallels. These come from Greco-Roman papyri, especially from Egypt. The fact that this scroll in Revelation was written on both sides calls to mind the doubly written legal documents. These came in two varieties, either as military papers (1:342) or as testaments or wills (1:342).

Biblical parallels are taken more seriously, and Aune stresses the parallels with the scroll of Ezek 2:9–10 that was also written on both sides like this scroll in Revelation. That scroll of Ezekiel contained “the message of divine judgment that the prophet will announce” (1:343). In one way or another this is identified with the some of rest of the contents of Revelation. It could represent the rest of the book of Revelation (1:344, see also 2:507). It could represent the “book of destiny,” the foreordained eschatological plan of God that cannot be known until

¹ D. E. Aune. *Revelation*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52A (Dallas: Word, 1997), 343. The additional volumes in this series are vol. 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) and vol. 52C (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998). The references in the body of this study are cited from this work by volume and page.

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the period of fulfillment (1:345). It could also contain the record of the sins of mankind for which the Lamb has made atonement (1:345). Or it could contain the rest of the Old Testament, especially the Torah (1:345). A variant here is drawn from a book of the covenant that was used in the enthronement of kings. It could also represent a bill of divorce for the Old Testament Jerusalem when the Lord marries the New Testament Jerusalem (1:346). Finally, it could represent the Lamb's Book of Life mentioned later in Revelation (13:8, 17:8, 21:27).

From this welter of possibilities I have previously favored the idea that this scroll represents the Book of Life of the Lamb. Here in Rev 5 we have the book and we have the Lamb, and thus the further references in Revelation simply put these two elements together. The equation is a simple one: the scroll represents the roll or roster of all the saints of all the ages who will go into the kingdom with the Lamb when he comes the second time. Since the Second Coming is in view at the end of the sixth seal, such a connection with the seventh seal is a logical one.

In giving some attention to the first six chapters of the book of Zechariah in both writing and teaching, another possibility has come into view, but before that possibility is examined, some of the more general connections between Zechariah and Revelation's seals should be reviewed. One of the more prominent features of the book of Revelation is its four horsemen, found in its first four seals. These are obviously modeled upon the four horsemen of Zechariah's first vision (1:7–11). They reappear in Zechariah's eighth vision (6:1–8). The different colored horses serve different purposes in these two visions of Zechariah. In the first vision they are messenger horses that have come into Jerusalem to proclaim that there is a time of peace in which to build the temple. In the eighth vision they are connected with chariots, war weapons that are going out to the points of the compass to establish that peace. The use of this symbol in Revelation is more directly connected with the first vision, where the horses and their riders serve the purpose of relaying messages, in Revelation's case the prophetic messages of what is to come.

A connection with the second vision of Zechariah can be made to the fifth seal of Revelation, although the connection is slightly more indirect. Both involve the image of the altar in the courtyard. In Zech 1:18–21 the four horns of an undescribed altar are said to represent the powers that have broken down and scattered the Lord's people from Judah. Then the workmen come to break those horns and give release and return to the people of God so they can come back to their land and reestablish themselves and their temple. In Revelation's fifth seal we also see an altar, and in this case that altar also represents the oppression of the people of God, the church in this case. The blood of martyrs is poured out at the base of that altar just as the blood of sacrifices was poured out at the base of the altar, in the courtyard in Old Testament times.

At the heart of the eight visions of Zechariah, in chapters 3 and 4, are two prophecies given about two persons: Joshua the high priest in the first case and

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Zerubbabel the governor in the second case. It is interesting to note in this connection that the introductory sanctuary scene of Rev 4–5 also deals with two main persons, God the Father in Rev 4 and Christ the Lamb in Rev 5. Even the name is parallel in the second case in Revelation with the first case in Zechariah, for the name of Joshua is ultimately the name of Jesus, who is represented as the Lamb in Rev 5. The message in Zechariah is about Zerubbabel building the temple so that Joshua could serve in it, and this refers to the earthly temple in Jerusalem. The great throne scene in Rev 4–5 deals with the temple that God built and not man. In it God presides, but Jesus the Lamb ministers by opening up the seals.

The holy spirit is present in both Rev 4 and 5 as the seven lamps or torches blazing before the throne in Rev 4:5 and as the seven horns and seven eyes that are sent out into all the world from the Lamb in Rev 5:6. This language is paralleled by the description of the four horses in Zech 6:5 as “the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world” (NIV). The same theme recurs in Zech 3:9 with the seven eyes engraved on the stone before Joshua the high priest. Even more specific is the connection with the two witnesses of Rev 11:4, identified as the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. The connection with the two olive trees that pour the oil of the holy spirit down through the two golden pipes into the great golden bowl and the seven lamps with seven lips in the prophecy to Zerubbabel is clear.

There are other more general connections between Revelation's seals and the visions of Zech 1–6. The young man in the third vision goes to measure Jerusalem with a measuring line in his hand (Zech 2:1), while the rider of the black horse in the third seal measures with the balance scales (Rev 6:5). In the same seal there is a measurement of the wheat and barley. In Old Testament times these were measured out by the ephah that is seen in the seventh of Zechariah's eight visions (5:5–11).

In summary, there are both general and specific connections between the symbols used in Zechariah's eight visions in chapters 1–6 and the book of Revelation, and more specifically with the seven seals of chapter 6. That calls attention to the connection between the flying scroll of Zech 5:1–4 and the scroll that is unsealed in Rev 8:1. Aune has called attention to the parallels between this scroll in Revelation and the scroll in Ezek 2:9–10, but the parallels of that scroll, which was then eaten by the prophet in Ezek 3:1–3, is much more similar to the little scroll the prophet eats in Rev 10:8–11, where the scroll that the prophet eats is sweet in his mouth but bitter in his belly. The language connecting those symbols is also different. The scroll or book in Rev 5 is called a *biblion* eight times, whereas the little scroll or book in Rev 10 is called a *biblaridion*, with a diminutive ending, four times.

Since the connection of Ezekiel's scroll that was written on both sides lies elsewhere in Revelation we should look for another parallel to the scroll that is

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sealed in Rev 5 and unsealed in 8:1. The flying scroll in Zechariah is unsealed, like the scroll in Rev 8:1. It too has been written on both sides, like the scroll as it is described in Rev 5:1–2. Perhaps the reason this scroll did not come to Aune's attention was that Zechariah's scroll was open and flying, while the scroll in Rev 5 was still rolled up. When the seventh seal is opened in 8:1, however, that scroll is also opened up to view, just as was the case with the flying scroll in Zech 5.

The text of Zech 5:1–4 is very specific about what is written on its two sides. The two-sided text contains the Ten Commandments. The text of the commandment prohibiting stealing is read by the prophet on one side and the text of the commandment that prohibits bearing false witness is seen on the other side of the flying scroll. The flying scroll has a direct connection with the earthly sanctuary, just as the scroll in the hand of the Father is located in the heavenly sanctuary. Zechariah's flying scroll measures ten by twenty cubits—the size of the Holy Place of the tabernacle in the wilderness. As the flying commandments came out of the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place they passed through the Holy Place on their way to bring their “curse” to the homes of those who broke those commandments. Thus the Ten Commandments were not dead letters left behind in the Ark of the Covenant when it was hidden at the time of the exile. Even in the second temple that was built by Haggai, Zechariah, Joshua, and Zerubbabel, these commandments were still in effect, still active principles meant to govern the life of the people who lived in post-exilic Judah.

If the ten commandments were written on the two sides of the flying scroll in Zechariah, then one can think of them as being written on the two sides of the scroll that is unsealed in Rev 8:1, for by context and content this provides the best parallel in the Old Testament to explain the symbol for the content of the scroll in Revelation. In Zechariah the flying scroll was to fly into the house of the violators of those commandments. In Revelation one can think of the unsealed and now unfettered scroll of those same commandments flying to earth to convict the violators of those commandments of their guilt. That is precisely the response we see among the wicked at the end of the sixth seal, where they call for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them and hide them from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. All of this occurs at the time of the Second Coming of Christ. One may think, therefore, of a manifestation of the Ten Commandments at the time of that Second Coming. The flying scroll of the Old Testament flew only to the homes of the violators of those commandments in Judah. At the Second Coming the flying scroll will be manifested to a whole world of violators of those commandments.

The best parallel for the scroll in Rev 5 within the book of Revelation is the Lamb's Book of Life. Outside of Revelation, the most direct symbolic parallel of that scroll is the flying scroll of the commandments in Zechariah. Can these two features be harmonized? One may think of the commandments as the heart

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of the scroll and the names of those who have lived according to those commandments surrounding that central feature. Of course no human being has ever been able to keep this law perfectly, so all of the persons listed in the Lamb's Book of Life have been redeemed from the curse of the law by the blood of the Lamb. Thus, there is a correlation between the scroll as containing both the names of the redeemed and the commandments they have broken but from whose penalty they have been redeemed. The wicked here on earth are not so fortunate, for they have willfully violated those commandments and refused to turn to God, from whom they could find forgiveness for the violations of those commandments through the blood of Jesus. They rejected both a life lived by those commandment and a life lived for the Savior who could have redeemed them from the curse of the law.

That leaves the final question: what is the meaning of the silence in heaven that occurs when the scroll is unsealed and unloosed to do its work. Aune cites three possible significances of this silence. First, this silence allows the prayers of the saints to be heard (2:507). Second, it may represent an eschatological return to primordial silence (*ibid.*). Third, it could be seen as a prelude to a divine manifestation (*ibid.*). If this silence is connected with the Second Coming of Christ that becomes evident at the end of the sixth seal, then the last two features bear upon this concluding event. With Christ and the angels absent from heaven, it is natural that there is silence there during their absence. All of the noise and commotion at this time takes place on earth. There the great earthquake at the end of the sixth seal occurs, when all the islands and mountains are moved out of their places. There the wicked call for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them and hide them. There Christ blows the trump of the archangel and his angels go out to the four winds, the corners of the earth, to gather the saints, both living and resurrected, together to be with Christ. Then they ascend to the sea of glass that is before the throne (Rev 7:9–17, Rev 14:1–5, Rev 14:14–16, Rev 15:1–4, 19:11–16, 20:4–6, 21:2–3, 21:10). Then the brief silence in heaven is broken as the saints of the Most High come home to celebrate with joy the deliverance that has been worked for them. The songs of the redeemed will echo through the courts of heaven as they sing the song of Moses and the Lamb (Rev 15:3–4) as they celebrate on the sea of glass before the throne. After this brief interlude of silence they come to celebrate what the plan of redemption has accomplished in their own persons.

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