

THE COMING LAMB:  
JOHN'S APOCALYPTIC INTRODUCTION OF CHRIST AND ITS ESCHATOLOGICAL  
IMPLICATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

The word ἀρνίον occurs 30 times in the NT—once in John 21:15<sup>1</sup> and 29 times throughout the book of Revelation.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Lamb (ἀρνίον) is by far the most prolific title given to Christ in John’s latest work, appearing more than twice as often as any other christological label. Also, although John uses ἀρνίον liberally in Revelation, he is the only biblical writer that uses this particular term for Jesus.<sup>3</sup> While it would seem this peculiar and yet heavily endorsed title for Revelation’s principle character is deserving of special attention, only recently has any rigorous study been leveraged to understand what John is accomplishing with this term. Even then, conclusions reached are unnaturally univocal and do not reflect the sophistication of the Apocalypse of John in general and the apostle’s use of this term in particular. Therefore, after perusing several incomplete interpretive options for ἀρνίον, this argument hopes to reach a responsibly robust interpretation of John’s humble and glorious Lamb as witnessed in his apocalyptic introduction by means of a contextual-grammatical-canonical-historical hermeneutic that is focused on the authorial intent and what is reflected in the text of Revelation.

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<sup>1</sup> “So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, “Tend My lambs.”” Here, it is obvious that “lambs” (ἀρνία) is being used not of Jesus but of his disciples/followers. This means that John is the only NT writer and Revelation is the only NT book that uses the singular form ἀρνίον for “lamb” for anyone/anything, let alone Christ.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Whale, “The Lamb of John: Some Myths about the Vocabulary of the Johannine Literature.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 No. 2 (1987): 289–295. Whale is quick to correct the assumption that John reserves ἀρνίον exclusively for Revelation and points out that John does, in fact use it once in his gospel. However, this is a moot point for John uses the term exclusively in Revelation while endorses multiple words for the same in his gospel. This suggests that John is trying to say something deliberate and distinct about Christ.

<sup>3</sup> For more discussion on John’s unique use of ἀρνίον in Revelation see Loren Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation into its Origin and Rhetorical Force* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 22–25.

## INTERPRETIVE OPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

First, ἀρνίον is a peculiar choice for Lamb, especially as a reference for Christ, given what is used elsewhere of Jesus in the New Testament. For instance, John could have adopted what Paul employs in 1 Corinthians 5:7 when he calls Jesus the πάσχα (Paschal/Passover Lamb).<sup>4</sup> Such a choice would have immediately transfixed the literal image of a lamb to a familiar salvific, historically rooted, and figurative antitype. An even more obvious choice would have been ἀμνός which is what John the Baptist endorses when he introduces Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (quoting the LXX).<sup>5</sup> Αμνός is also used for Jesus in Acts 8:32 when Philip quotes Isaiah 53:7-8 (again from the LXX) saying, “a sheep [πρόβατον] is brought to the slaughterhouse, and as a lamb [ἀμνός] before its shearer is silent, thus he did not open his mouth.” First Peter 1:18-19 makes use of the same word when it says, “by means of the valuable blood of Christ, like that of a lamb (ἀμνός) without defect or blemish.” A third choice for lamb was also available to John in the word ἀρήν, a term used in Luke 10:3.<sup>6</sup> Any of these choices (πάσχα, ἀμνός, or even ἀρήν) would have been more literarily consistent with the existing biblical literature that was already being circulated by the end of the first century. One might also argue that these choices would have been better suited to connect the person of Jesus in the *eschaton* to a specific and previously developed christological motif.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover [πάσχα] also has been sacrificed.”

<sup>5</sup> John 1:29. John, the apostle, even repeats this title himself in John 1:36.

<sup>6</sup> See Lk. 10:3, “Go; behold, I send you out as lambs [ἀρνά, plural of ἀρήν] in the midst of wolves.” Although technically, ἀρήν is the noun of which ἀρνίον is the diminutive, these forms had lost their diminutive force by the time the NT was written. Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, πάσχα would have immediately connected Jesus to his christological function of appeasing God’s wrath, ἀμνός would have highlighted his christological ministry of atoning sacrifice, and ἀρήν would have identified him with his people and as one who suffers alongside his fellow lambs.

So from where does John derive ἀρνίον and what must he mean? Examination of biblical and extra-biblical literature has unfortunately yielded a multiplicity of potential meanings assigned to this word. Though Louw and Nida claim that ἀρνίον can refer to either a sheep of any age, a lamb, or a ram,<sup>8</sup> Loren Johns points out that “all occurrences of the word ἀρνίον in biblical and classical Greek refer to a young sheep or lamb.”<sup>9</sup> Robert M. Mounce believes that John’s use of Lamb in Revelation is derived from the literature of Jewish apocalyptic, holding that John is merging the two ideas of the Lamb as victim and the Lamb as leader.<sup>10</sup> Evidence for this interpretation of John’s Lamb can be found in 1 Enoch 90 in which the Maccabees are described as “horned lambs” (similar to what is envisioned in Revelation 5). Also, in the Testament of Joseph, a lamb destroys the enemies of Israel.<sup>11</sup> David Macleod believes that, in part, John uses the “unusual Lamb” in Revelation to suggest that like these other apocalyptic works, Jesus is the “warrior Lamb.”<sup>12</sup> Beale reaches a similar conclusion when, based on the same grouping of texts, he states, “The slain lamb thus represents the image of a conqueror who was mortally wounded while defeating an enemy...the messianic Lamb, becomes interpreted as a sacrifice that not only redeems but also conquers.”<sup>13</sup> However, though John may have had this in mind, he would have served this interpretation better if he had used ἀμνός instead of ἀρνίον as these other apocalyptic sources have.

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<sup>8</sup> Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s. v. ἀρνίον.

<sup>9</sup> Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Mounce, “The Christology of the Apocalypse.” *Foundations* 11 No. 1 (Spring 1968): 42–45. R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*. Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), exii–vi.

<sup>11</sup> Testament of Joseph 19:3, “And I saw that from Judah a virgin was born, wearing a linen garment; and from her a lamb without spot came forth, and on its left side it was as a lion; and all the beasts rushed against it, and the lamb overcame them and destroyed them to be trodden.”

<sup>12</sup> Donald Macleod, “The Christology of Chalcedon,” in *The Only Hope Jesus: Yesterday, Today, Forever*, edited by Mark Elliot and John McPake (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2001), 337.

<sup>13</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 351.

Perhaps what is meant by ἀρνίον in Revelation might be ascertained by looking at the potential predicates and/or Old Testament types John may have had in mind. After all, allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures abound in John's work and the Septuagint even uses ἀρνίον on occasion.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, the apocalyptic Lamb could be a reference to the sacrificial system (after all, the Lamb is depicted as slain, his death has some expiatory force, and the phrases “in the blood” and “redeem” elicit this association). However, the apocalyptic vocabulary is not sacrificial and the OT primarily uses ἄμνος for these atoning lambs. Second, Revelation's Lamb could be understood as the Paschal Lamb of the Exodus (inasmuch as Passover Christology existed in the early first century, there is widespread critical support for this interpretation, and literary similarities between Revelation and the Exodus abound). However, πάσχα, not ἀρνίον, would have made for a more distinct connection between Revelation and Exodus and the Passover victim was not always a lamb. Third, the Lamb of the Apocalypse may serve as the antitype for Isaiah 53:7 (as both contexts include the image of the slaughter). However, ἄμνος, not ἀρνίον, is used in Isaiah and the suffering servant motif at work in Isaiah is absent in Revelation. Fourth, Daniel's vision of a ram and a goat in Daniel 8 might provide a potential background for the apostle's Christology (as this passage is one of the only OT passages in which humans are symbolized as animals, both have apocalyptic undertones, and both contexts cry out for justice). However, Daniel reveals that the two horns of the ram and the male goat is not Christ.<sup>15</sup> Fifth, the Lamb could be understood in comparison with the *Aqedah* of Genesis 22 (the tradition of the story believed that the ram had been prepared before the foundations of the world and, according to Johns, both contexts involve vulnerability). However, no explicit appeal

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<sup>14</sup> It is used on rare occasions to speak of lambs in the LXX (Jer 11:19; 50:45; Ps 114:4, 6; Isa 40:11).

<sup>15</sup> Dan. 8:21 states “The shaggy goat *represents* the kingdom of Greece, and the large horn that is between his eyes is the first king.”

is made to the Abraham episode in the Apocalypse and the traditions surrounding the Abrahamic story could have been later than the writing of Revelation. Finally, the vulnerable Lamb might be ascertained by a cursory look at ἀρνίον’s usage in the LXX, however, delimiting the victorious Christ to such proves precarious and unnaturally univocal.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, each of these choices for their own set of reasons is found wanting. Therefore, an alternative must be pursued that can provide a more robust and altogether more fitting interpretation of Revelation’s protagonist—an alternative that allows the text of the Apocalypse to supervene of the meaning of important terms.

### THE HUMBLE AND GLORIOUS LAMB OF REVELATION

What follows is a contextual-grammatical-canonical-historical approach to interpreting the Lamb of Revelation, particularly as he emerges in Revelation 5:6-10. Few passages are more contextually significant, literarily meaningful, and vividly presented in the book of Revelation than this group of verses.<sup>17</sup> Even Caird has refers to these verses as some of the most important

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<sup>16</sup> Upon closer inspection, the verses upon which Loren Johns’ leans so heavily (Jer 11:19; 50:45; Ps 114:4, 6; Isa 40:11) to reach such a conclusion do not necessarily nor explicitly convey a vulnerable subject nor do they even apply to God’s people. In spite of this, Johns assumes that vulnerability is nearly always associated with ἀρνίον and even endorses this meaning in the very few places it is found in extra-biblical literature. In so doing, Johns proves guilty of what D. A. Carson calls a “false assumption of technical meaning”—“In this fallacy, an interpreter falsely assumes that a word always or nearly always has a certain technical meaning—a meaning usually derived from either a subset of the evidence or from the interpreter’s personal systematic theology.”<sup>16</sup> Not only is Johns guilty of this fallacy, but one might also argue that Johns is guilty of “semantic obsolescence.” This infraction is defined as follows: “Here the interpreter assigns to a word in his text a meaning that the word in question used to have in earlier times, but that is no longer found within the live, semantic range of the word. That meaning, in other words, is semantically obsolete.”<sup>16</sup> Johns commits this when he assumes that the vulnerability associated with ἀρνίον remains consistent in the ever-fluid and evolving literary world (especially as one considers the time difference between the completion of the LXX and the writing of Revelation). Could not the connotation of ἀρνίον have changed between the writing of the LXX and the writing of the Apocalypse of John? A third hermeneutical strike against Johns’ program is his endorsement of “an appeal to unknown or unlikely meanings.”<sup>16</sup> Johns commits this when he assumes that in Revelation—in which Jesus is clearly depicted as a conquering, victorious, powerful warrior king—ἀρνίον must continue to convey something about vulnerability. However, vulnerability as a theme in Revelation does not seem tenable, especially as it pertains to how Christ is delineated. This list of potentialities articulated in this paragraph is elucidated by Johns in *Lamb Christology*, 128ff.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Guthrie, “The Lamb in the Structure of the Book of Revelation.” *Vox Evangelica* 12 (1981): 64–71. 64. “Indeed it is part of the intention of the whole scene in chapters 4 and 5 to set the stage for the dramatic

in the Book of Revelation<sup>18</sup> because it is in this passage that the main protagonist is introduced (that is, in the prophetic section of Revelation) and sets in motion the judgment that envelopes the better part of the book. It is also in this passage that ἀρνίον is used for the first time and the only time this term is employed without the definite article. Though every other use of ἀρνίον is arthrous (containing the definite article), in Revelation 5:6 the term is anarthrous (absent a definite article), thereby indicating that at least potentially, every subsequent use refers back in some way to the first occurrence connotatively and/or hermeneutically.<sup>19</sup>

### Contextual Analysis

In the verses leading up to 5:6–10, there is a great deal of potential literary energy that when released successfully instigates the judgments that are unleashed upon the earth through the seals, trumpets, and bowls. “After these things” (Μετὰ ταῦτα) in verse 1 of chapter 4 successfully divides chapters 1–3 and the next major unit (chapters 4–22). Not only does the temporal change marked in 4:1 suggest a degree of literary separation, but phrases like “in the Spirit” and a pervasive use of “like” followed by vivid descriptions of places (4:2), people (4:4), phenomena (4:5), and creatures (4:8) successfully imbue the text with a worshipful and other-worldly connotation that is absent from the previous chapters. This worship reaches a climax in

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introduction of the Lamb to the readers.” Here, Guthrie also points out that Revelation 4-5 is the first worship passage of the Apocalypse.

<sup>18</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 73. On these verses William Hendrickson writes “They relate Jewish Messianic hopes to the distinctively Christian good news of the advent of the Messiah in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but a Messiah of a character so wholly unexpected by the Jews that they rejected him.” *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1967), 109.

<sup>19</sup> Possible functions of the definite articles attached to the “lamb” as it is found elsewhere in the Book of Revelation include the following: anaphoric (denoting previous reference—a reference that is typically anarthrous because in its original or first occurrence it is being introduced), *par excellence* (pointing out that the Apocalyptic Lamb is in a class by itself as introduced in Revelation 5:6-10), monadic (indicating that, as in Revelation 5, the Lamb is one-of-a-kind). Though a case might be made for each of these in the various contexts in which ἀρνίον is found, these possibilities in general and the anaphoric function in particular indicate that the first anarthrous use of Lamb is of special interpretative significance, especially as it pertains to the arthrous examples that follow. For discussion on these possible functions see Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 217ff.

verse 8 of chapter 4 when a doxology rings out over the halls of a heavenly scene—“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.” This worshipful verse is then, in many ways, mirrored by three stanzas of praise that are offered in the remainder of chapter 4 and into chapter 5.<sup>20</sup> However, the worship that is expressed by the heavenly inhabitants of these two chapters is temporarily interrupted by a scene that breaks out in the beginning of chapter 5.

The interruption is introduced by a phrase indicating a new observation—“I saw in the right hand . . .” (5:1).<sup>21</sup> Here, John witnesses a seven-sealed book and hears “a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice . . . ‘Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?’” (5:2). Though the reader might assume that the one who was holding the book (the one who “sat on the throne”) could break this volume open, John learns that no one yet present in the scene can, by all appearances, expose the contents of this mysterious scroll. Fearing that no one can open the book, break its seals, and thereby implement the things that are revealed therein, John weeps.<sup>22</sup> John’s weeping ceases when he is told that “the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals” (5:5). In other words, a hero exists that has provided salvation and as a direct result is qualified to provide salvation for John’s present distress (opening the seven-sealed scroll and paving the way for the

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<sup>20</sup> 4:11, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.” 5:9–10, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth. 5:12, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory.”

<sup>21</sup> See the major division suggested in 4:1 by “After these things I looked, and behold . . .”

<sup>22</sup> John had been promised in 4:1 that he would be shown “what must take place after these things.” Therefore, this closed book, for John, represents a barrier keeping him from seeing/experiencing what God is going to do. John is therefore weeping over the apparent indefinite postponement of God’s final and decisive action. See Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation, An Exegetical Commentary*, 2 Vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1992), I.386.

eschatological judgment and salvation to be disclosed in the remainder of the Apocalypse).<sup>23</sup> The description attributed to this hero is two-fold. First he is described as the “Lion of the tribe of Judah,” indicating a “kingly might and boldness” that is similar to what is portrayed in Genesis 49:9 and Proverbs 28:1.<sup>24</sup> Second, he is depicted as the “root of David,” a title that John will eventually use again in 22:16. In Isaiah 11:1, 10, this label identifies the Lion as the head of the Davidic kingdom that was prophesied in the OT. Taken together, these messianic labels indicate that it is by virtue of this hero’s unique membership in David’s family that he is called the greatest of the tribe of Judah and a branch from the root of this regal line.<sup>25</sup>

However, the figure that appears after this introduction does not match the title and description he is given in verse 5. When John turns to look at the regal hero, not a lion, but a “Lamb” (ἀρνίον) emerges onto the scene, “standing as it slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth” (5:6). This Lamb takes the scroll from the hand of the one who sits on the throne, thereby eliciting the worship and praise of those present in verses 9–10. While praise was limited to the one who occupied the throne in chapter 4, worship is extended to this Lamb in verses 9–10 and then again in verse 12 in response to his ability to take the scroll and set into motion what John and the world have been waiting for—the *eschaton* complete with its judgment and final victory.

### **Grammatical Analysis of Revelation 5:6–10**

Before a complete interpretation of this passage can be achieved, special attention needs to be given to what the diagrammatical analysis demonstrates. First, much of what this passage

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<sup>23</sup> MacLeod, “Lion who is a Lamb,” 328–29. “The breaking of the seals is preparatory to God’s people entering the promised inheritance . . .”

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *Revelation*, 387. Gen. 49:9, “Judah is a lion’s whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He couches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him up?” Prov. 28:1, “The wicked flee when no one is pursuing, but the righteous are bold as a lion.”

<sup>25</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols (Nashville: B&H, 1933), 6:333–34.

has to say is contingent on the understanding ἀρνίον.<sup>26</sup> Again, verse 6 of chapter 5 contains the first time that John employs this term. Additionally, and as mentioned earlier, ἀρνίον is by far the most frequent designation for Christ in Revelation (appearing more than twice as frequently as any other label for the Jesus in the Apocalypse). For John this is especially telling, for, as witnessed in his gospel, John often uses different synonyms for the same concept.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the special use of ἀρνίον for Christ in Revelation might indicate that John is deliberately conveying something of theological significance. However, understanding what this significance is requires that the reader pay close attention to how John juxtaposes the “Lamb” of verse 6 with the “Lion” in verse 5.

### **Toward and Interpretation of the Lamb**

John appears to be intentionally highlighting the antithetical nature of these two images—Lion and Lamb—and their connection to one figure who embodies the connotations of both. As has already been determined, “Lion” is a direct reference to the powerful and royal line of Judah and David. Its use appears to present Christ as the prophesied Davidic King.<sup>28</sup> This particular title refers back centuries to the days of Jacob who, while on his deathbed, blessed his sons and prophesied over them saying “Judah is a lion’s whelp from the prey, my son, you have gone up.

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<sup>26</sup> Grammatical analysis reveals that in 5:6 the interpretation of the direct object of the main independent clause (ἀρνίον) is dependent on the two complex dependent participial phrases that are used by John to describe him (“standing as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes . . .”). Also, as mentioned earlier, it is worth reiterating that ἀρνίον in verse 6 is anarthrous, indicating that it is without previous reference in the Apocalypse and thereby requiring special interpretative care. The relative temporal phrase in verse 8—“when he had taken the book,” – betrays why the Lamb was worshipped. This “worthiness” is further evidenced in verses 9-10 by means of the explanatory ὅτι clauses that are attached to the phrase “worthy are you.” The horned and slain Lamb is described as worthy not only because of what he is presently doing (taking the book), but because of what he has already accomplished—“. . . purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God . . .” (5:9-10).

<sup>27</sup> See John’s use of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in John 21 as an example.

<sup>28</sup> Kostenberger, Andreas, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarels, *The Lion and the Lamb: New Testament Essentials from the Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 387.

He crouches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him up?”<sup>29</sup> As Judah is perpetually connected to Christ (as Jesus emerges from his family line), this eschatological connection helps demonstrate Christ’s place as the long –awaited champion of the Jews. Employing this figure of the lion, 2 Esdras 12:31 says, “this is the Messiah”<sup>30</sup> and appreciates him for his glory, strength, and worthiness to judge the wicked. The description of this Lion does not cease with this reference to Judah. Instead, John also calls the Lion the “Root of David.”<sup>31</sup> Alluding to Isaiah 11:10, this title describes the Lion as that descendent of David who will restore the long-awaited Davidic kingdom.<sup>32</sup> These references imbue the figure in question with connotations of victory, power, and prestige.

However, when John turns to view this “Lion,” he beholds something unexpected—a “Lamb.” “Lamb” hardly denotes the same prestigious connotations as “Lion of the tribe of Judah” (and “Root of David”). The former is one of the humblest creatures while the latter regal, powerful, and glorious. The theme of humility in connection with ἀρνίον (distinct from other words for lamb in the remainder of Scripture) is consistent with how this word is used in the LXX. Jeremiah 11:19 employs ἀρνίον alongside the qualifier “gentle” and “led to the slaughter” demonstrating the humble ways in which a lamb was both viewed and used in connection with sacrifice for sin. Not only that, but Isaiah 40:11 states “like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing

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<sup>29</sup> Gen 49:9. See also Macleod, “Lion who is a Lamb,” 332.

<sup>30</sup> The full quote of 2 Esdras 12:31–33 reads “And as for the lion whom you saw rousing up out of the forest and roaring and speaking to the eagle and reproving him for his unrighteousness, and as for all his words that you have heard, this is the Messiah whom the Most High has kept until the end of days, who will arise from the offspring of David, and will come and speak with them. He will denounce them for their ungodliness and for their wickedness, and will display before them their contemptuous dealings. For first he will bring them alive before his judgment seat, and when he has reprovved them, then he will destroy them.”

<sup>31</sup> Rev 5:5.

<sup>32</sup> Caid, *Revelation of St. John*, 74, Mounce, *Book of Revelation*, 131; David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1997), 350–51. Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 254.

ewes.” This demonstrates that the humility of a lamb is so severe that its survival depends on the care and protection of a shepherd. Therefore, while *πάσχα* and *ἀμνός* are employed elsewhere in the NT for lamb (to more specifically draw from the Passover tradition and the pervasive sacrifices of the OT respectively), John chooses a more connotatively neutral and altogether unique term in an effort to highlight something different—humility (especially when juxtaposed alongside the use of “Lion” in verse 5)—and applies this to Revelation’s most important character.

This interpretation is supported by the participial phrases attached to this term in verse 6 beginning with “standing, as if slain,…” in verse 6. The only way for a lamb to be more humiliated than it already is to have it slain. Here, the obvious reference is to the death of Christ, who, even though slain, is erect and alive in this heavenly scene.<sup>33</sup> In other words, while the marks of death are visible, they are not debilitating.<sup>34</sup> This provocative image, along with the descriptions that follow of the Lamb, help demonstrate that while John may be capitalizing on the humility of the Lamb, there is more at work in this term and the connotations it is capable of eliciting.

This becomes clearer as the next participial phrase is uttered “having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God” (5:6). In one breath, John depicts the Lamb as slain and in the next he assigns images of dominion and rule to this humble figure. Inasmuch as the OT uses the horn as a symbol of strength and power,<sup>35</sup> seven of them together in this context

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas, *Revelation*, 391.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4 Vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1903), 4:607, H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 78. Isbon T. Beckwith, *Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 510.

<sup>35</sup> See Num 23:22; Deut 33:17. See also 1 Sam 2:1; 2 Sam 22:3; 1 Kgs 22:11; Ps 75:4; 132:17; Dan 7:20–21; 8:5. Thomas also points out that later books in the OT it “symbolizes dynastic force or kingly dignity and is thus used in Apocalypse several times (Rev. 12:3; 13:1; 17:3, 12).” *Revelation*, 392.

indicate the fullness of power that rests on this all-powerful warrior-like Lamb.<sup>36</sup> Something similar may be said about the seven eyes which indicate the inescapable view by which the Lamb discerns the world and all that happens within it. Some have connected this set of eyes to Zechariah 3:9 and 4:10, believing that they indicate the Lord's ability to remove iniquity from the land of Israel.<sup>37</sup> However, the explanatory relative clause that closes verse 6 ("which are the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth"), seems to support what Thomas and others have concluded concerning the Lamb's eyes—that "not only is he omnipotent, as indicated by his seven horns, he is also omniscient."<sup>38</sup>

The greatness of the Lamb is further illustrated in his being "worthy . . . to take the book and break its seals" (5:9–10). In fact, this is why the Lamb is worshipped in the same manner as the occupier of the throne in 4:8. "Worthy" (ἄξιός) was applied to the enthroned figure first in 4:11. This same worthiness is applied to the Lamb in verses 9-10 of chapter 5 and then again in 5:12. John connects the worship of the Lamb to the worship of the Father in an effort to demonstrate their shared divinity (as only God is an appropriate recipient of worship in John's writings). As Macleod rightly concludes, "His worthiness to open the scroll and inherit the kingdom is based on the victory he won as the Lamb on the cross"<sup>39</sup>—Jesus' greatest *and* most humble act.

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<sup>36</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 351, "That the Lamb has seven horn signifies the fullness of his strength, since 'seven' is figurative for fullness elsewhere in the Apocalypse and in biblical literature." Kelly, *Revelation*, 90. Ladd, *Revelation of John*, 87. "Here, we must guard against the temptation to visualize the Lamb...the symbols of Revelation are intended to communicate truth, not to serve as photographic reproductions . . .". Mounce, "Christology of Apocalypse," 44. See also Swete, *Apocalypse*, 78–79.

<sup>37</sup> Zech 3:9, "For behold, the stone that I have set before Joshua; on one stone are seven eyes. Behold, I will engrave an inscription on it," declares the Lord of hosts, 'and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day.'" Zech 4:10, "For who has despised the day of small things? But these seven will be glad when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel—these are the eyes of the Lord which range to and fro throughout the earth."

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, *Revelation*, 392. Thomas believes that those who believe the "eyes" are connected to Zechariah 3:9 and 4:10 are pressing the meaning of the OT source of the words too far. See also Mounce, "Christology of Apocalypse," 44, Swete, *Apocalypse*, 78-79, Charles, *Revelation*, 141, Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 6:334–35, Caird, *Revelation*, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Macleod, "Lion who is a Lamb," 335.

A tentative interpretation of this passage and its most central term, especially given the context in which it is found, involves Jesus' unique ability to set in motion the *eschaton* and thereby the ultimate salvation (glorification) of his people. This ability is afforded him because he (the Lion of the Tribe of Judah) humiliated himself to the point of death (a Lamb standing as if slain)<sup>40</sup> and as such has been given all power (seven horns) and perception (seven eyes), to continue to perform God's will. Because of this, he is worthy of worship. The christological statement made here (accentuated by the image of the ἀρνίον) successfully portrays Jesus in his humblest and therefore most glorious light (His passion).<sup>41</sup> This symbol affords Christ equal status with God, the praise of all present in this heavenly spectacle, and the kind of literary capacity necessary to house many other Christological themes within its domain.<sup>42</sup> It is this image in which John decides to cast Jesus throughout the remainder of Revelation.

### Canonical and Historical Analysis

Beginning with what is more contextually significant (Johannine literature, the NT, and the OT) and continuing to what is more contextually remote (extra-biblical literature), the remainder of this study will investigate whether or not the interpretation already given requires any alteration or nuance. First, the tentative interpretation above is analogous to what is found in Johannine literature. For example, Paul Rainbow acknowledges that in the beginning of John's

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 334. "John was assured that the Lion 'has overcome,' which, as noted earlier, refers to His defeat of Satan, sin, and death at the cross." Osborne calls this "a great Christian paradox—Jesus has 'conquered' primarily not through military might, though that is to come, but through his sacrificial death (5:6, 9, 12)...As the Royal Messiah, Jesus wages a messianic war against evil, and the major weapon that defeats the enemies of God is the cross. This cosmic victory enables him 'to open' the scroll." Osborne, *Revelation*, 254.

<sup>41</sup> "The crucified Christ is central to the Book of Revelation." McDonald, "Lion as Slain Lamb," 31.

<sup>42</sup> The conclusion reached thus far desires to extend what others like Beale have already argued. Beale says, "there are two different proposals for the background of the 'slain Lamb.' Some prefer to see it as a reference to the OT Passover lamb, while other favor Isa. 53:7...However, neither should be excluded..." Beale, *Revelation*, 351. A robust understanding of ἀρνίον demonstrates that it is inclusive of potentially many Christological motifs between the paradoxical domain of utter humility and superior glory.

gospel, Jesus is described as the “Word made flesh” (λόγος made σὰρξ).<sup>43</sup> According to his view “the evangelist wants us to read the entire book as the story of the Logos-become-flesh who laid down his life as God’s lamb.”<sup>44</sup> Immediately after this claim, Rainbow draws parallels between “Word made flesh” and “Lamb as if slain.” John uses the former (“Word made flesh”) in his gospel to highlight the divinity of the Son by emphasizing his incarnation while John uses the latter (“Lamb as if slain”) in his apocalypse to demonstrate the glory of the Son by accentuating his humility.<sup>45</sup>

That Jesus is depicted as gloriously humble in Johannine literature is evident in passages like John 4:34 in which Jesus says “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work.” Such a statement renders Christ a uniquely modest deity. This sentiment is repeated just one chapter later when Jesus says “I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.”<sup>46</sup> However, perhaps one of the most humble descriptions of Jesus is made in John 10:11ff when in another pastoral passage Jesus speaks about his unique authority alongside his utter humiliation saying—“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Here, goodness/greatness is juxtaposed alongside a willingness to humble oneself—particularly, as it pertains to Jesus’ humblest act on the cross.

However, the theme of humble greatness is not limited to Christ’s passion. While in the upper room, John describes how Jesus “began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.”<sup>47</sup> Though a foreshadowing of an even greater act of

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<sup>43</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>44</sup> Paul A. Rainbow, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles, and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 183.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, Rainbow draws special attention to the Lamb’s humility as witnessed in Christ’s atoning sacrifice.

<sup>46</sup> John 5:30.

<sup>47</sup> John 13:5.

service that he would soon accomplish,<sup>48</sup> the lesson is explained by Jesus as follows—“If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.”<sup>49</sup> The acuity of Jesus’ humiliation in this act is highlighted by Peter’s revulsion at the idea that Jesus, his teacher and Lord, would stoop to wash his feet—an act reserved for the humblest of servants.<sup>50</sup> However, this is exactly Jesus’ point: the greatest is not the one who would never wash feet, but the one who will choose to humble himself even to the point of performing such an activity.

These findings prove consistent with what is found elsewhere in the NT. In Matthew 23:11–12 Jesus says “but the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”<sup>51</sup> Applied to the interpretation already given of Revelation 5:6–10, the one who humbled himself the most as the slain Lamb is the same one who is exalted high enough to be able to break open the seven-sealed book.

The dispute concerning greatness among the disciples in Luke 22:23ff echoes these principles. In response to their quarrel Jesus states,

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called ‘Benefactor.’ But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> D. A. Carson, *John*, Pillar Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 463. “Peter and the others will understand later . . . [that] this does not refer to the footwashing, but to the passion to which the footwashing points.”

<sup>49</sup> John 13:14–15.

<sup>50</sup> Andreas Kostenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 405.

<sup>51</sup> See also Luke 14:11; 18:14.

<sup>52</sup> Luke 22:25–27.

To silence the argument the disciples were endorsing, Jesus turns greatness on its head and introduces his followers to the paradox of humility affording that which is praiseworthy—pointing to himself as the example *par excellence* of this phenomenon.

These concepts are also found in the OT. Therein, God makes a habit of choosing the humblest people to do the most extraordinary things. Throughout the OT, the barren,<sup>53</sup> youngest,<sup>54</sup> fearful,<sup>55</sup> hesitant,<sup>56</sup> sorrowful,<sup>57</sup> cowardly<sup>58</sup> were used by a mighty God to do what was praiseworthy and glorious. Not only that, but the people of God were in a perpetual state of humility (i.e. slavery or exile) and yet remained the Lord’s promised ones. In many ways, the OT is full of ἀπνίους—the humblest of creatures—who are used for glorious purposes.

That ἀπνίον conveys humility and subsequent glory is supported not only by the few OT passages in which this word is used,<sup>59</sup> but also by the extra-biblical usage of this term. Though Louw and Nida’s lexicon claims that this term can refer to either a sheep of any age, a lamb, or a ram,<sup>60</sup> as was mentioned earlier, Loren Johns reveals that all examples of the word in biblical and classical Greek refer to a young sheep or lamb.<sup>61</sup> Nowhere does it refer to an adult ram in literature that predates the Apocalypse.”<sup>62</sup> This is confirmed later by passages in the Mishnah which state, “Lambs must be no more than one year old . . .” in the context of types of sacrifices offered.<sup>63</sup> These humble creatures, made even more humble by their youth, were especially

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<sup>53</sup> See Sarah in Gen 11:27ff, Rachel in Gen 29:29ff, and Hannah in 1 Sam 1:1–2.

<sup>54</sup> See David in 1 Sam 17:14.

<sup>55</sup> See Moses in Exod 3–4 and Elijah in 1 Kgs 19.

<sup>56</sup> See Jonah in Jonah 1–2.

<sup>57</sup> See Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 1–4.

<sup>58</sup> See Gideon in Judg 6.

<sup>59</sup> Jer 11:19; Jer 50:45; Ps 114:4, 6; Isa 40:11; Song 8:23.

<sup>60</sup> Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s. v. ἀπνίον.

<sup>61</sup> Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 22.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Mishnah Para 1:3. This passage defines “lamb” (ἀπνίον) more precisely as not more than one year old. Though this occurrence is two centuries removed from the writing of John’s Apocalypse, it demonstrates that at

qualified for sacrificial use. Therefore, the semantic range of ἀρνίον as witnessed in extra-biblical literature suggests that humility of a very special kind is at least potentially integral to the connotation of this term.

The image of humble sheep also emerges in 1 Enoch 89. Although God's people were described as bulls early in the chapter, Isaac's son Jacob is depicted as a sheep as is Jacob's twelve sons and Moses after him. One might say that bulls become sheep upon the emergence of Israel (Jacob). These sheep spawn other sheep who are then led by a series of "seventy shepherds" (alluding perhaps to Jeremiah's prediction that Israel's exile will last for seventy years).<sup>64</sup> Once strong bulls, these apocalyptic sheep demonstrate the humble place that God's people occupied on the world's stage, especially in times of tribulation and exile. At times this apocalyptic tribulation is self-induced, as witnessed in Zechariah 11:4–17. Here, the shepherd-sheep imagery takes on a new flavor when the prophet is depicted as a "shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter."<sup>65</sup> Having disobeyed their natural shepherd, Yahweh, the sheep are handed over by God to other shepherds to be disciplined<sup>66</sup> for a time.

The word ἀρνίον itself along with the preexistent themes of humility and greatness seem to work together on both a linguistic, historical, and thematic level outside of and within the Canon to support the interpretation given for Revelation 5:6–10—namely that Jesus' unique status as witnessed in his ability to take the scroll and set in motion the end times, is confirmed in

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least on a historical level, there are uses of the term that appear to imbue ἀρνίον with some level of meaning that renders the humility of the creature in question especially humble.

<sup>64</sup> F. J. Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and its World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 90. See also 1 Enoch 89:59. Others hold that the number seventy corresponds to Daniel's seventy weeks of years and the common division of history into seventy generations. See Jeremiah 25. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*. (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 68ff.

<sup>65</sup> Zech 11:4.

<sup>66</sup> Greg Carey, *An Introduction to Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 59. David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 90. "Yahweh cedes power to malevolent human rulers."

his matchless glory which is wondrously encased in the humblest of forms—“the Lamb standing as if slain.” Because none could humble themselves greater than Jesus did, no one is as gloriously capable of doing what he will accomplish in the *eschaton*.

## CONCLUSION

In Revelation 5:6–10, Jesus is cast as a brilliant paradox that accentuates not only his matchless glory but his uncompromising humility. Augustine reached a similar conclusion regarding this term as connected to this passage when he said,

“Who is this, both Lamb and lion? He endured death as a lamb; he devoured it as a lion. Who is this, both lamb and lion? Gentle and strong, lovable and terrifying, innocent and mighty silent when he was being judged, roaring when he comes to judge.”<sup>67</sup>

The words used (particularly ἀρνίον), descriptions offered (seven horns and seven eyes), worship witnessed, precedent given (in both the Old and NTs), and even the extra-biblical usage of the same term support these claims. By employing a peculiar term in this midst of his opening description of Christ, John allows himself the literary freedom to accomplish his goal of describing a humble and therefore glorious God-Man that he calls to mind no less than 28 additional times throughout the remainder of this letter in a variety of contexts (always, following Revelation 5:6, with the definite article of previous reference). Because John endorses a relatively unique term (ἀρνίον) bereft of formal historical connotations, it is malleable enough to be imbued with more general themes like humility and glory. Because of its unique semantic range bookended by the related poles of utter humility and supreme glory, ἀρνίον is not as limited as other more developed terms and can therefore encompass a variety of multivalent christological considerations (including but not limited to the more univocal interpretive options of the Passover Lamb, superior sacrifice, victorious one, etc.).

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<sup>67</sup> Augustine, *Sermon 375*.

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