

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 156—Why You Should Worship the Lamb (Revelation Chapter 5)

“The podcast that aims to start conversations about the oneness and unity of God and about the humanity of Jesus.”

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Introduction

Hopefully you all saw that I launched a youtube channel to accompany the weekly audio podcast. The videos are short, easy to watch, and intended so that you can share these truths with your friends, family members, and fellow truth-seekers. Please subscribe to the channel and look forward to the content, which I hope to produce weekly.

Last week we began looking at the call-and-response hymns in the Book of Revelation in order to see what they had to say about the worship practices of the early Christians. The Book of Revelation actually has seven hymns, and this episode will focus on the worship of Jesus, where Jesus himself is the object of singing and praise.

In this week’s episode of the BUP, we will explore the call-and-response hymn in Revelation chapter 5, where Jesus is unambiguously worshipped. Many BUs are uneasy about offering worship to Jesus, thinking that only God the Father is worthy of worship. Others think that different levels of worship should be given to God and Jesus in order to clearly distinguish God

from his son. In this week's hymn, we will explore why Jesus is worthy of your worship and seek to understand how the Book of Revelation invites its readers to participate in the worship of Jesus.

Will we discover that the hymn sung to Jesus proves that Jesus just is God? Or is it possible to worship a highly exalted human being who has demonstrated his worthiness to God? Let's find out on this week's episode of the BUP!

1. The Second Hymn in Revelation

- a. *And they sang a new song, saying, "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." Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." (Rev 5:9-12)*

- i. Call and response

1. Subject of the verb sing in v9 includes the 24 elders + 4 living creatures (reversed from the hymn in chapter 4)
 - a. Too often readers of Revelation read this passage as if they are spectators, rather than participants
2. The response from the hymn, begun by a group of singers consisting in part of the people of God, comes from 1000s and 1000s of angels.
 - a. Heaven responds to the worship of the people of God
 - b. There is a sense of approval of the contents of the worship offered by the people of God to the Lamb.
 - c. 1000s of angels also acknowledge the worthiness of the Lamb to receive power, wealth, might, wisdom, honor, glory, and blessing (7 in total)
 - i. wealth/riches is never offered to God in the OT, but money is surely offered to human kings. In other words, the worship given to the Lamb is consistent with what a highly exalted human king would receive, but not what we would expect for worship given to the Lord God.

2. The Role of the Readers in the Call-and-Response Hymn

- a. Within this hymn, we can discern a number of key points regarding the ideal worship that is to be performed by readers of the Book of Revelation
 - i. The new song is sung directly to Jesus
 - ii. Jesus is acknowledged for his worthiness, particularly his worthiness as the agent of God's redemptive purposes. The lamb takes God's scroll and is able to open it, revealing its messages to readers within the narrative of Revelation.
 - iii. Worshippers of the Lamb include in their hymn the reason why Jesus is worthy
 - 1. he was slaughtered (not slain), Passover overtones
 - 2. He purchased, with his blood, persons for God
 - a. The hymn to Jesus distinguishes God and Jesus, rather than collapsing them into a single being
 - 3. Scope of redemption--every tribe, tongue, people, and nation
 - 4. He made these redeemed persons into a kingdom already
 - 5. He also made these redeemed persons into priests to our God
 - a. Recall that the 24 elders draw upon the representation of the 24 priests that worked in the temple
 - b. Again, Jesus and our God are distinguished, rather than confused
 - 6. They will reign on the earth
 - 7. (In no part of this hymn is the lamb qualified for his worthiness with talk about being God, being divine, or being of the same substance with the Father)

3. The Implications for Worship Within a Monotheistic Setting

- a. *and one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping; behold, 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." And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes (Rev 5:5-6)*
 - i. Christology--the object of worship is defined
 - ii. Powerful lion, a warrior image.
 - 1. Gen 49:8-10 - lineal descendant of Judah will rule
 - 2. Isa 11, the shoot of David - a lineal descendant of David, ruling

3. Human being, a powerful royal figure (not God, not an angel, not a divine being)
- iii. A weak lamb, redemptive, rescuing, salvific
 1. Just as the passover lamb helped rescue the people of God from the grips of the evil king Pharaoh, the passover lamb of God redeems people from the dominion of the dragon
 2. Standing as if slain
 3. Seven horns = fullness of power
 4. Seven eyes = fullness of wisdom
 - a. Both of these attributes show up after the indication that the powerful lion has died as a lamb and has stood back up in resurrection. These are post-resurrection attributes, from Jesus' exaltation. These are not attributes given to the lion, given before his death.
 - i. Not a divine person who dies, but a human being who dies and is exalted in status afterward.
- iv. The hymn to the Lamb never confuses God and Jesus. They are consistently distinguished. The hymn is directed to a human king who died, has been raised, and subsequently highly exalted by God.
 1. No compulsion to sing this song to Jesus--the people of God voluntarily sing it in honor of his worthiness.
- v. It is also noteworthy that the Holy Spirit is completely absent from this hymn.

In conclusion, we have observed that...

The Book of Revelation places heavy stress on worship and its importance within the lives of faithful believers. Among the seven hymns contained within the Book of Revelation, the hymn in chapter 5 is unambiguously sung to Jesus, the Lamb. We first noted that the ideal readers of the Book of Revelation are the ones who initiated the hymn sung to Jesus. This suggests that the passage intended to persuade readers to join in this manner of worship, rather than simply read about it. While the believing people of God sing the call portion of the call-and-response hymn that describes the worthiness of the Lamb, the angels of heaven respond with an approval of that worthiness. In doing so, the angels sing about seven things of which the Lamb is worthy, and this list is consistent with what we would expect of a highly authorized human king.

Second, we observed that the contents of the hymn sung to Jesus detail why he is worthy. We saw that Jesus is worthy because he acted as a slaughtered lamb in his death, he used his blood to purchase people for God, his scope of those purchased come from all tribes, languages, races,

and peoples, he has already made these redeemed persons into a kingdom, he has initiated them into the priesthood, and put them on a path of reigning on the earth in the future. Jesus is not described as being God, being divine, or being consubstantial with the Father. His worthiness is predicated on being distinct from God, along with having an attribute that God does not have--mortality.

Lastly, we looked at why Christians should sing this worship hymn to Jesus while remaining strict monotheists. The hymn to the Lamb is sung after the Lamb is described. This object of worship is a lineal human descendant from Judah and from King David. This means that Jesus is a bona fide member of the human race, rather than an angel or even God himself. The powerful royal overtones of Jesus are further defined as one who conquered by dying and rising. Of noteworthy significance is that the seven horns and seven eyes are attributed to the Lamb after his resurrection and exaltation, not before. Throughout the hymn to Jesus, he and God are carefully distinguished and the two are never collapsed into a single being or person.

So why should biblical unitarians worship Jesus? Answer: the Bible depicts faithful people of God voluntarily initiating worship to Jesus, singing to him a new song about how worthy he is. In other words, it is biblical to worship Jesus in the manner that is spelled out in chapter 5.

Thanks for tuning into this week's episode of the BUP! Join us next week as we continue to explore the worship hymns in the Book of Revelation, looking at the call-and-response hymn in chapter 7, where worship is given to both God and to Jesus.

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