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The Lamb in the Structure of the Book of Revelation

Donald Guthrie

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Even a cursory glance through the book of Revelation shows that 'the Lamb' is the dominant title for Jesus. It occurs no fewer than 29 times, whereas Jesus Christ occurs only seven times and Christ four times. Since it is so dominant the title Lamb must provide an important clue for determining the purpose and meaning of the whole book. The distribution of the passages throws significant light on the structure. The purpose of this essay is to explore the reason for the use of the Lamb title and its implications for the understanding of the whole book.

LAMB IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Although at first sight it may seem that the references to the Lamb are evenly spread throughout the book, an examination of the distribution of the occurrence shows a definite pattern which is of great value in arriving at a right understanding of the structure of the book. Most of the 29 references to the Lamb occur in worship passages, which is at once highly significant.¹ Whereas the Lamb is clearly presented as ultimately victorious, he is especially central in the worshipping community. This will become clear in the following analysis.

THE FIRST WORSHIP PASSAGE (5)

It is important to note that this passage is a continuation of Chapter 4 where the focus of worship falls on the One Who sits on the throne.² Indeed it is part of the intention of the whole scene in chapters 4 and 5 to set the stage for the dramatic introduction of the Lamb to the readers. After the magnificent ascription of praise to God there is what might be called a dramatic interlude.³ John sees the sealed book and recognises that no-one was worthy to open it. So closely does the writer identify with the scene that he weeps as if he were a part of his own vision.⁴ It is in response to his sorrows that the Lamb appears on the scene. It is remarkable that in his introduction the Lamb is first referred to as a Lion.⁵ It might seem much more appropriate in a book which deals so extensively with judgment and concentrates on the superior power of God for the Lion of Judah to be selected as the most significant title for Christ. Particularly is this so since the Lion of Judah was a messianic title (cf. 2 Esdras 11:

¹ J. Ellul, *Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation* (Eng. tr. 1977), 232, who divides the Apocalypse into five parts, recognises that these sections are framed and specified by passages which can be called liturgical. He includes various passages in addition to the worship passages mentioned in this article.

² Ellul, *op. cit.*, 49, points out that the Apocalypse does not tell us anything about God *ad intra* but remains remarkably discreet. The book concentrates on the one who has been upon earth. He points out how different this is from other religions.

³ As G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (1974), 120, remarks, 'the delay has the dramatic effect of focussing attention on the action of the Lamb'.

⁴ Ellul, *op. cit.*, 147, comments that the bitter weeping indicates that man will never know either the secret or the meaning of his history. Only the Lamb can disclose the action of God in history.

⁵ Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (1964), 94, selects The Lion of Judah as a main title for the second section of his commentary. He therefore speaks of the Lion appearing in the guise of a Lamb. This loses sight of the dominance of the Lamb.

37; 12: 31, where the messiah appears in the form of a lion).⁶ It first occurs in Genesis 49: 9, 10. Nevertheless, John sees the opening of the seals of the book being performed by Christ not in his role as Lion, but in his role as Lamb. There could hardly be a more striking or unexpected contrast. Some explanation of this sudden switch is necessary if the connecting links in the book are to be fully understood.⁷

Our first question must be whether the reader has been prepared in any way for understanding the significance of the sudden introduction of the slain Lamb in

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5: 6.⁸ The previous part of the book presents a very different view of Christ.⁹ He is seen in the glorious vision in 1: 12-16 as a Kingly figure whose eyes flashed like fire and whose words were like a sharp sword. In short, much more like a Lion than a Lamb. There is no suggestion of any wound that had been sustained. Nevertheless, prior to this there had been mention of those who had been freed from sins by his blood (1: 5),¹⁰ which has at least reminded the readers of the importance of Christ's death. That this is intended as a preparatory word is seen from the fact that the first song of the elders in praise of the Lamb specifically singles out the ransoming effect of the blood. We may take it, therefore, that the slain Lamb is intentionally introduced to focus on the central conviction that the Christian church is a redeemed community and that the Lamb is the representation of redemption as an accomplished act. The agent through whom God will achieve final victory is a symbol of sacrifice. In many ways Revelation 5 may be said to be the central scene of the whole book. Although the worship is in heaven, the readers are in this way invited to join in the adoration of the Lamb, for in 5: 13 the whole creation joins in praise to God and the Lamb.¹¹

If we, therefore, see the rationale of the Lamb imagery as being a reminder to the readers that God is going to achieve victory by totally unexpected and apparently inappropriate means, we shall appreciate why the Lamb title occurs so many times. It is important, however, to note that in this first vision the attributes of the slain Lamb are at once brought out. The sevenfold ascription of power, wealth, wisdom, might, honour, glory and blessing (5: 12)¹² are intended to set the slain Lamb in right perspective. He is no symbol of weakness, but of strength

⁶ Esdras 12: 31 reads 'As for the lion which you saw... this is the Messiah whom the Most High has kept back until the end'. The context shows that he will come in judgment. Cf. the comments by M. A. Knibb in *The First and Second Books of Esdras* (1979), 251, 252.

⁷ The Lamb figure is derived from Jewish Apocalyptic-Cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 124f.; R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (1977), 145; R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (1920), I. 141. In 1 Enoch 90: 9, the Maccabees are horned lambs. In Test. Jas. 19: 8f., a lamb destroys Israel's enemies.

⁸ Those familiar with John's gospel would be familiar with the Lamb imagery to denote Jesus, especially in his sacrificial role (cf. Jn. 1: 29). At the same time this Lamb in Revelation 5: 6 has powerful horns which introduce another role, i.e. of irresistible might (cf. R. H. Mounce, *op. cit.*, 145, 146).

⁹ Several of the features of this vision are derived from the Book of Daniel. As J. Sweet, *Revelation* (1979), 72, remarks, 'the eyes come from the angel of Daniel 10: 6.' This feature of the vision is intended to represent intense spiritual insight.

¹⁰ Some texts have *lousanti* (washed) instead of *lusanti* (loosed), but the latter seems the more strongly attested. Both readings would, nevertheless, supply an interpretation of the relation between Christ's death and man's sins.

¹¹ G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (1972), 94, thinks that we have in the linking of the Lamb with God in 5: 13 'the raw materials of a trinitarian theology'.

¹² This ascription clearly shows that the sovereignty of the Lamb is redemptive (cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 128).

through suffering. A similar sevenfold ascription occurs in 7: 12, although this is attributed to God.¹³

Before leaving this first scene we note that the Lamb stands in the centre of the throne (5: 6) and is linked with Him who sits upon the throne (5: 13). He is as much the object of the homage of the elders (5: 8) as God Himself (4: 10). This shows yet another important aspect, i.e., that he is clearly identified with the nature of God. What the Lamb does, God does. There is complete accord between them.

THE FIRST JUDGMENT PASSAGE (6)

There is no disputing that the subject of chapter 6 naturally follows on from chapter 5. The scene we have just been considering has shown the worthiness of the Lamb to open the seals. It is then followed by a description of the opening by the Lamb of the first six seals. The Lamb is therefore the initiator of the first series of judgments. Following upon the opening of the sixth seal there is mention of the wrath of the Lamb (6: 16).¹⁴ Clearly the character of the Lamb is not intended to be seen as meekness or gentleness, otherwise the reference to the wrath of the Lamb would be inappropriate. But the wrath is entirely in line with a Lamb who carries out judgment.

THE SECOND WORSHIP PASSAGE (7: 9-17)

As with the first worship passage, so here there are four mentions of the Lamb. The rapid switch from a judgment scene to a worship scene is characteristic of the

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book as a whole and shows that the reader is intended to see the judgments in the light of heavenly reality. The reference to the great multitude standing before the Lamb is notable not only for the centrality of the Lamb, but also for the linking of the Lamb with the throne of God (7: 9).¹⁵ There is no possibility of the Lamb being separated from the purposes of God. What applies to the Lamb applies equally to God. Since this thought has already occurred in the first worship passage it is evident that it carries much importance for the development of the Lamb theme. This is endorsed by ascription of salvation to the Lamb as well as to the One on the throne (7: 10).

¹³ All the subsequent worship passages are attributed to God. As J. Sweet, *Revelation*, 312, points out, although the Lamb is associated with the throne, worship in the final New Jerusalem scene is directed to God alone.

¹⁴ In commenting on the expression 'the wrath of the Lamb', Mounce, *op. cit.*, 163, notes that only once is the word wrath used of Jesus in the gospels (Mk. 3: 5). But he thinks there is less difficulty if the Lamb is primarily messianic rather than sacrificial. On the subject of wrath in God, cf. L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (3, 1965), 162ff. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb* (1957), 159-180, comes to the conclusion that wrath is a process of retribution. Cf. also R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (1951) [http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/wrath_tasker.pdf].

¹⁵ W. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (1940), 112, comments that 'to stand before the throne and the Lamb means to have fellowship with, to render service to, and to share in the honour of the Lamb'.

There is another mention of the blood of the Lamb, which is the means by which those who have endured tribulation have cleansed their robes (7: 14). The readers are not permitted to forget the Lamb's redemptive purpose.¹⁶

The most distinctive feature of this second worship passage is the description of the Lamb in terms of a Shepherd (7: 17). This combination of Lamb and Shepherd is understandable, although surprising. The idea of the Lamb guiding the people of God to springs of water is a fascinating variant of the familiar shepherd theme. This section is permeated with Old Testament language (cf. Ezek. 34: 23; Ps. 23: 1, 2).¹⁷ The words of Revelation 7: 16 combine the concept of shepherding in the sense of caring for the flock with the dominant Lamb figure in a way which shows how easily John's thought moves from one idea to the other. The shepherd theme is so deeply engrained in Christian thought because of the use of it by Jesus. If the readers had known John's gospel they would at once have recognised a connection with John 10 (Jesus the good shepherd). Since the same idea is echoed in 1 Peter 2: 25 and Hebrews 13: 20, it was evidently a favourite idea among the early Christians.¹⁸ The reason for its introduction just prior to the blowing of the trumpets and further serious judgments is evident enough. It is intended as an encouragement to the readers to reassure them that the Lamb who judges is also the Lamb who shepherds.¹⁹

THE SECOND JUDGMENT SEQUENCE AND THE THIRD WORSHIP PASSAGE (8: 1—11: 19)

It is remarkable that in these four chapters there is no specific mention of the Lamb although it is clearly he who opened the seventh seal since he initiated the whole series and opened all the other seals. The account assumes rather than states that all the trumpets sequence, including the interim revelations between the sixth and the seventh trumpets, were due to his activity.

In the worship passage which unexpectedly follows the blowing of the seventh trumpet, the absence of reference to the Lamb is surprising, especially in view of his presence in the other worship passages. This one, however, concentrates on thanksgiving to God. Where Christ is mentioned (11: 15) the messianic title rather than the Lamb title is preferred. One reason might be because of the introduction of the male child in the next section, which could be a reference to the historic mission of Christ, although it is more probable that the male child is Mother Zion.²⁰ Nevertheless, this at once leads on to the next mention in 12: 11. Another reason might be the identity of the worshippers, who in this case do not appear to be representatives of the Church. If they are angels this would account for the expression, our Lord and his Christ.²¹

¹⁶ This shows some element of co-operation on the part of the Lamb's followers (cf. J. Sweet, *op. cit.*, 153) but the emphasis nevertheless falls on the blood of the Lamb (cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 147).

¹⁷ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 149, compares the lamb-shepherd idea with the Palestinian practice of sheep going ahead of the flock. In this case the idea would not seem so incongruous as at first sight.

¹⁸ The idea of the Lamb leading his flock to springs of water suggests that only through the Lamb can the redeemed have uninterrupted fellowship with God (cf. W. Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, 114).

¹⁹ R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 176, rejects M. Rist's view that this shepherd vision was intended as an indoctrination of prospective martyrs. Mounce thinks this premeditated doctrinaire theory does not do justice to the Seer's integrity.

²⁰ Cf. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 198.

²¹ Cf. Mounce, *op. cit.*, 230f. He refers to Psalm 2: 2 which was understood messianically in the early church (Acts 4: 26-28).

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THE REVELATION OF THE DRAGON AND THE BEASTS (12: 1-13: 18)

After the references to the war in heaven and the casting out of Satan, a heavenly voice declares that the brethren who belong to the Kingdom of our God have conquered the accuser by the blood of the Lamb (12: 11). Again the stress is not on the power of the Lamb, but on his redemptive effectiveness. In this same section the Lamb is again mentioned in 13: 8 in a reference to the Lamb's book of life.²² The significance here of the Lamb lies in the strong contrast which exists between his followers and the followers of the beast. In spite of the power of the beast, Christians are assured of security in the Lamb, which would have been a real encouragement to readers who were under pressure for their faith.

THE FOURTH WORSHIP PASSAGE (14: 1-5)

Again the Lamb comes into prominence. He is seen standing on Mount Zion together with the 144,000 who had God's name inscribed on their foreheads.²³ These 144,000 are also twice described as those who had been redeemed, which must clearly have been brought about through the act of the Lamb.²⁴ There is in this passage a close relation between the Lamb and those accompanying Him. It is, therefore, of some importance here to identify the 144,000.

Various reasons have been proposed for concluding that they represent a select group, i.e., the Lamb's special followers. They are described as first-fruits, which is said to distinguish them from the rest and they are further noted for their asceticism. But the word first-fruits need not imply priority of time, as if there were others of the same kind to follow, and the reference to virgins may imply not asceticism, but the fact that these 144,000 have escaped pollution.²⁵ There are no strong reasons, in fact, for seeing in this group a select company either of celebrities or martyrs. It is more reasonable to see them as representative of the whole of the redeemed people of God.²⁶ The number is almost certainly symbolic. In this case the Lamb standing in the midst of his people is highly suggestive, for such a vision just prior to the solemn announcement of the last judgments would provide a profound encouragement to the readers. They would know without doubt that the victorious Lamb was on their side.²⁷ The three references to the Lamb in this passage are indicative of his central position.

²² It is only here and in 21: 27 that the book of life is attributed to the Lamb. Mounce, *op. cit.*, 256, traces the idea of a register to Deuteronomy 32: 32-33.

²³ Mounce, *op. cit.*, 267, draws attention to the parallel in 2 Esdr. 2: 42-47, where a young man is seen on Mt. Zion in the midst of a great crowd. He is identified as the Son of God.

²⁴ Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 222, regards the number as signifying completeness and considers that the whole company of God's people is in mind.

²⁵ M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (1940), 268, maintains that the virgins are those who have renounced all sexual relationships. R. H. Charles, *op. cit.*, 11. 9-11, holds that the reference to virgins is the work of a monkish interpolator. P. Carrington, *The Meaning of the Revelation* (1931), 237, relates it to the rejection of pagan rites involving Temple prostitution. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 223, insists on a symbolic interpretation—i.e., abstention from fornication with the prostitute Babylon.

²⁶ As Mounce, *op. cit.*, 270, points out the 144,000 are here seen as the Bride of Christ, awaiting the time of marriage. It may well be that the description of them as virgins is with the purpose of linking them with the Bride. As J. Sweet, *op. cit.*, 222, notes, their maleness is simply part of the military metaphor.

²⁷ There is some significance in the fact that the blamelessness of the 144,000 is described by the same word used of Christ as Paschal Lamb in 1 Peter 1: 19.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE LAST. JUDGMENT AND THE FIFTH WORSHIP PASSAGE (14: 6-15: 8)

This solemn announcement is preparatory to the final events. It centres on God's wrath which is displayed before the angels and before the Lamb (14: 10). It is important to note that the Lamb is mentioned after the angels as if the most grievous part of the act of judgment for those who bear the mark of the beast will be the sight of the Lamb against whom they have warred. The whole section focuses on the grapes of wrath as the Lamb looks on.²⁸

In the worship sequence which follows those who have conquered the beast sing a song of praise which is described as the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb. The content of the song shows clearly that it has little to do with Moses.²⁹ There are, however, some parallels with the song of Moses and the children of Israel in

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Exodus 15. Both songs are sung on a sea shore, although in Revelation 15 it is a sea of glass. Both songs celebrate God's intervention on behalf of His people. Nevertheless the song in Revelation 15 celebrates, as the Exodus passage does not, the truth and justice of God. Moreover, in Revelation 15 the song is sung by the followers of the Lamb, and celebrates the judgment of God on His enemies. The theme of the song is that when God judges, all peoples will come to worship Him. It is called the Song of the Lamb because the Lamb in this book is the chief agent of judgment.³⁰ He is completely identified with God in the final victory over evil.

THE SEVEN BOWLS OF WRATH AND THE OVERTHROW OF BABYLON (16-18)

This section, which marks the climax of the judgment scenes, has only two references to the Lamb (in 17: 14) in a context which focuses on the clash between the beasts and the kings on the one hand and the Lamb on the other. This passage sums up the message of the whole book when it affirms that the Lamb will conquer his enemies. The contest is made to appear totally one-sided in that the power and the authority of the beast and his agents are completely outclassed by the Lamb who is Lord of lords and King of kings, a title which Christ bears at his parousia in Revelation 19: 16.³¹ The vivid poetic description of the utter destruction of Babylon in chapter 18 is meant as a strong contrast to the triumph of the Lamb.³²

²⁸ In commenting on the idea of judgment in the presence of the Lamb, J. Ellul, *op. cit.*, 176, writes, 'Which means expressly that it is the becoming aware, the knowledge of who Jesus Christ is, that is the essential point of the suffering of these rejects.'

²⁹ I. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (r.p. 1979), 676, 677, has a careful discussion of the meaning of the ascription of the Song of Moses and the Lamb. He thinks the Apocalypticist had the Song of Deuteronomy 31: 19ff. in mind.

³⁰ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (1966), 199, recognises this song as expressing the essential optimism of John's theology. He rightly points out that passages where symbolism is not used should control our understanding of his symbolism.

³¹ H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (2nd 1907), 223, cites some words of Suetonius regarding Domitian in which the emperor claimed a similar title.

³² As M. Rissi, *Time and History* (Eng. tr. 1966), 79, points out 'the power of Antichrist on earth is at home in the political sphere in a special way'. This political pressure is in strong contrast to the non-political triumph of the Lamb.

THE SIXTH WORSHIP PASSAGE (19: 1-10)

As the book nears its climax and before the parousia takes place, a heavenly worship scene extols God with a fourfold Hallelujah, the last of which announces the marriage of the Lamb.³³ The imagery here is of a gentler kind with the Lamb as the bridegroom and the Church as his bride. The bride is seen already dressed for the occasion, and her garment is described as bright and pure fine linen,³⁴ a striking contrast to the gaudy appearance of the defeated harlot. The song of rejoicing on this occasion is sung by a great multitude, but the worship has already been prepared for by the 24 elders, the four living creatures and even a voice direct from the throne.

This scene focuses on the climax of the relation between Christ and the Church. All is prepared for the marriage supper of the Lamb.³⁵ In a book which says so much about judgment, it is striking that so happy an event as a marriage supper should be celebrated at the end. It must be noted that this is mentioned before the parousia, after which another kind of supper is to be celebrated—that of judgment (cf. 19: 17f.).

THE PAROUSIA AND THE GREAT WHITE THRONE (19: 11—20: 15)

In this section Christ appears, but not in the form of a Lamb. He is rather a warrior who deals summarily with His enemies. The issue is never in doubt. But for the moment the characteristic Lamb is in the background. Nevertheless he becomes prominent again in the final section.

THE NEW JERUSALEM (21: 1—22: 5)

In this section the Lamb is mentioned seven times, more than in any other single passage. His preeminence in the new community is undeniable. The bride is

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described as the wife of the Lamb (21: 9), for her importance is due entirely to her relationship to the Lamb.³⁶ When the apostles are mentioned as being inscribed on the foundations they are named as apostles of the Lamb (21: 14). The Lamb is linked with God Almighty as the temple of the New Jerusalem (21: 22). More over he is twice linked with the throne of God (22: 1, 3). He is further linked with God in the provision of light for the city (21: 23). He reflects the glory of God to such an extent that he is called the lamp. It is not surprising, therefore, that the register of the members of the city is called the Lamb's book of life (21: 27), as previously mentioned in 13: 8 (but note, the Lamb is not mentioned in 20: 12).

³³ I. Beckwith, *op. cit.*, 721, considers that 19: 1-5 belongs to the preceding chapter and not to the following. In other words the Hallelujahs are to be linked with God's act in destroying Babylon.

³⁴ The garments are described as 'the righteousness of the saints' which, as L. Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (1969), 227, rightly notes, cannot mean the righteous deeds of the saints, but rather 'sentence of justification'. This is so totally contrasted with the raiment of the harlot. Cf. the reference to white robes in 7: 9, 14.

³⁵ W. Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, 179ff., explains the marriage supper of the Lamb in terms of Jewish procedures. This brings out the significance of this event. It will mark the point when all the promises of the gospel will be realised.

³⁶ The use of the word 'wife' rather than 'bride' reflects the greater attention attached to betrothal in eastern cultures than western. Cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 318, 319, on this.

From the preceding survey of evidence we may deduce various important features about the whole book. If the Lamb is the Key the predominant feature is not judgment but salvation. The apocalypse in some sense supplies a display of strength, but its major purpose is encouragement. Glimpses of the Lamb punctuate the book, almost always in the worship scenes. We must, therefore, proceed to enquire in more detail about the background of the Lamb title, since this is so vital for a true assessment of the apocalypticist's purpose.

Since the Lamb is presented as one who has been slain, there can be no question that the sacrificial lamb must be in mind. This links it at once with the words of John the Baptist concerning Jesus in John 1: 29. In spite of some objections that the Lamb of God in this passage is not expressed in sacrificial terms,³⁷ it is difficult to see how the removal of sin by a lamb could be understood in any other terms than in terms of sacrifice. It is significant that although very little is said in this book about the death of Christ and its interpretation, at the centre of heavenly worship is the prominent figure of the slain yet triumphant Lamb. It is clearly not accidental that in this vivid pictorial way the centrality of the cross is so presented. The method of conquest is so totally alien to the use of force that it serves as an object lesson. Conquest by sacrifice must be seen as a viable alternative. In the end at the coming of Christ victory is achieved without a fight,³⁸ God establishes His rule through the powerful agency of His Son.

Granted this, however, there still remains the question why so much of this book is devoted to descriptions of judgments. The answer must again be sought in the worship passages. The holiness of God (4: 8), His power (4: 11; 11: 17; 19: 1) and His justice (15: 3; 19: 2) form the background against which the judgment scenes are placed. There could be no other satisfactory consummation of history. The judgment scenes are an indispensable part of the account of the Lamb's victory. The agencies of evil are seen exerting their power in an attempt to crush the people of God, but in spite of the unleashing of violence their efforts are ultimately futile. The final triumph of the Lamb is no surprise to those who have taken note of the high praise given to him throughout the worship passages. The promise of the establishment of righteousness in an alien environment was a vital encouragement to first century Christians. It has never ceased to be so to all those who have read this book with a true understanding of the centrality of the Lamb.

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³⁷ Cf. C. H. Dodd, *An Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (1953), 230ff.

³⁸ It will not do to relate this conquest to mass conversions (cf. H. B. Swete, *op. cit.*, 254). The whole context speaks of judgment not salvation (cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 283, 284, who rightly sees the conquest in terms of the Lamb's victory over all his enemies).