

Lord of History (Revelation 5:1-6:2)¹

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Introduction

Why has the synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America appointed a full-time professor to teach Church History at the seminary? Are there not more important subjects for future pastors to be focusing on? This paper wants to propose that Revelation chapter 5 offers a compelling answer to the first question. We study Church History because it is the preoccupation of heaven! And it is the preoccupation of heaven because heaven's occupants are preoccupied with Christ, who is the Lord of History! The angels and the redeemed watch spellbound as the Lamb unfolds God's purposes in history for men and nations, with the express purpose of redeeming to God a people from every tribe, tongue, nation and people (5:9). So in Revelation chapters 5-6, we have in view a representation of God's purposes in history, namely the Lamb has been slain, and God's redemptive purposes in these last days — the Years of our Lord (*Anno Domini*) — are about to be revealed!² This paper will consider the three things that John saw.

The Scroll of History

Most commentators agree that what John saw was likely a scroll rather than a codex, which is an early kind of book.³ The same image is found in the OT apocalyptic visions of Daniel chapters 7 and 12, and Ezekiel chapter 2, where scrolls are opened, or in the case of Ezekiel, eaten. In each case, the Scroll represents the gradual unfolding of God's purposes in judgment and redemption across the subsequent centuries of history.

The scroll of history has an Author. The One who holds the scroll (v.1) is "seated upon the Throne." He possesses all power as the Omnipotent Sovereign God. And He holds the scroll of history in "his right hand" — the hand of executive power. He is "[the] Lord God Almighty who was, and is, and is to come!" (Rev. 4:8). The Holy Triune God transcends time as he is Self-existent and sovereign over all that He has made.⁴ Furthermore, the contents of the scroll of history are "written." They have been determined by its Author. History is purposeful. Nothing

¹ *The following is an edited text of the inaugural address delivered by Dr. David G. Whitla, on October 18, 2019, as the Professor of Church History at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary.*

² Alexander McLeod, *Lectures upon the principle Prophecies of the Revelation* (New York, 1814), 60: "The Book which appeared in the right hand of God, and was given to the messiah, contained the outline of those events which were after that time to come to pass."

³ G.K Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), 342-343.

⁴ Ps.135:6: "Whatever the LORD pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places." As we see in the previous chapter of Revelation, the Lord is surrounded by innumerable holy beings who do not cease to praise Him: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created" (Rev. 4:11).

in the course of history “just happens” by the whims of men, or impersonal laws of nature. Rather, these are all directed by the sovereign hand of the Author of History. Things “happen” in history because “it is written.” This affords great comfort for us who stand on the stage of history, facing difficult providences like those listed in the next chapter — illness, economic crisis, political upheaval, war, persecution, etc. They are all written in God’s Scroll! And all these things work together for good to those who love Him! (Rom.8:28).

The scroll of history has one volume. As professors and students of history know, history is such a vast subject that it takes a lot of books to contain it, indeed, like the many books John said could be written about Jesus (Jn.21:25). But unlike Schaff’s classic multi-volume *History of the Christian Church*, or Latourette’s *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, God’s History Book has only one volume! It must be massive!⁵ There is only one scroll, one story! It is a seamless metanarrative in the mind of God though it contains countless billions of sub-plots played out in different ages, nations, cultures, and individuals. The scroll has one volume as there is only one providential plan for history. God needs no plan B as Paul says, it is all “the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph.1:11).

The scroll of history is comprehensive. It is ‘written inside and on the back’ (v.1). No detail of history escapes God’s purpose. It incorporates the minutiae of your life and mine (Ps.139:15-6). God’s plan is perfect, predestined, and comprehensive. It is God’s glory that He engages with history, and not only with the “big names” in the story – the Napoleons and Hitlers, Luthers and Calvins – that every high school history student should know of. In the course of history, He is also intimately engaged with the nobodies! “In His *Scroll* they all were written, the days fashioned for *you*!” The days fashioned for *me*! This day. Tomorrow. The day you were born; the day you will die. The amazing thing about the Author of history is that God is concerned with the great historical mass migrations of Huns Arabs, and African slaves; but equally written in his scroll are the wanderings of each one of His children,⁶ as the Psalmist says, “You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not written in Your scroll?” (Ps. 56:8). So the scroll is comprehensive and we are all included, but John faces a problem.

*The scroll of history is sealed.*⁷ No-one can look at it unless and until someone is found worthy to open it and execute its redemptive purpose in time. A search for a worthy Lord of history is instigated, but proves fruitless, as it says in verse 3 “And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it.” Try as he might to govern his own destiny, man is helpless to do so! Many have echoed the appalling words of William Henley’s famous poem *Invictus*, who defied the Lord of history using the very words of Revelation 5-6:

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*⁸

But John the Apostle says, no one is the “master of their fate,” as no angel, elect or fallen, no man, woman or child could be found to open and read the scroll! Hence something remarkable

⁵ Cf. the massive scroll Zechariah saw in Zech. 5:2.

⁶ In Hannah’s Song, (1 Sam. 2:7-8), she marvels, “The LORD makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap, To set them among princes And make them inherit the throne of glory. ‘For the pillars of the earth are the LORD’s, And He has set the world upon them.’”

⁷ It is God’s “*mystery*” (μυστήριον); cf. Rev.10:17.

⁸ William Ernest Henley, *A book of verses* (London: D. Nutt, 1888), 56–57.

is witnessed in heaven — someone is weeping! (v.4).⁹ The idea that there would be no guiding hand in history is an appalling thought to the Apostle! But John has no reason to weep! There is someone worthy to read the scroll of history: *The Lord of history*.

The Lord of History

Who is the Lord of history? Who is worthy to open the seals? The Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is also the Lamb. These two OT images paint a vivid picture of Christ as King and Priest.¹⁰

The Lamb is the Lord of History. The Lamb is the executive cause of history, or the administrator of history. Jesus Christ as mediatorial King is the divine agent of history, the One who actively carries out the plan of history, executing God's Plan in time. The triune God is its Author (5:1) as the scroll is in His right hand. But His anointed King who rules as Mediator is the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth have been entrusted by the Father (Matt. 28:18). This is exactly what Daniel saw in Dan.7:13-14, "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed."

Jesus Christ is Lord of History! His losing of the seals enables the scroll of history to unfurl. Hence when the Lamb does so in subsequent chapters, history Anno Domini unfolds century by century! But when He does so, it is not simply so that the history will just sort of gush out of the scroll of its own accord. Jesus doesn't turn on the faucet of history and then walk away while it all splashes out in no particular order! History is not, to use William Paley's famous analogy, like a watch that Jesus winds up and then lets it go to do its own thing. The scroll is not an audiobook where Jesus hits the play button and then just sits back to find out what comes next. No, the Bible does not teach an impersonal determinist view of History like those proposed by Enlightenment Deism, or Hegel or Marx. When Jesus opens the seals of the scroll of history, he reads (v4) the words of the scroll, suggesting that He personally reveals God's foreordained plan of history as the scroll unfurls, and brings it to pass moment by moment, century by century, millennium by millennium. The Lord of history speaks an efficient word (Eph.1:11). The reigning Lord of history, Jesus reads the scroll and history happens! The timeline is populated with Gospel triumphs and setbacks, heretics and heroes, wars and truces, presidents and dictators, celebrities and nobodies. Indeed, as Scripture says, "For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever" (Rom.11:36). The Lord Jesus reads the scroll, and the free actions of man, devil and beast, and the prayers of the saints (v.8)¹¹ execute the will of the One who sits on the Throne.

There is so much that is mysterious to us regarding God's sovereignty, but as the Westminster Confession says, "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency

⁹ The original implies a loud wailing. Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Leicester, IVP, 1989), 93. John *weeps* because no one is found to *open* the seals and to *read the scroll* and *look at it* (v.4); but Jesus wipes the tears from his eyes when He *opens the scrolls*.

¹⁰ McLeod, *Lectures upon the principle Prophecies of the Revelation*, 65: "As all the purposes of God are administered by Jesus Christ, and thus committed to him to be administered, the [scroll] must include the whole scheme of the divine government."

¹¹ See Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2012), 110.

of second causes taken away, but rather established” (WCF 3:1). There is a profound and mysterious collusion between the responsible actions of God’s creatures in time and the all-powerful King on the throne of heaven, executing the will of God in the affairs of men! From our perspective, it’s often a jumbled mess, written on the front and back! But from God’s perspective, a perfect plot is being worked out. And the Lamb has power to do so. He has seven horns which are symbolic of His strength, and He has 7 eyes speaking of His great wisdom and omniscience to do so – which we are told represent the Spirit of God. The reigning Lord of history carries out the metanarrative of history by the active and comprehensive agency of the Holy Spirit, poured out at Pentecost, who is “sent out into all the earth.” The earth is the stage upon which the drama unfolds; and there is no part of it that is exempt from the powerful operations of His Holy Spirit (v.7).

Why is Jesus the Lord of History? For He is worthy. It is not so much for his raw power to do so, as His worthiness in his mediatorial office because “He has prevailed to open the scrolls!” or “has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” Jesus has conquered Satan, sin, and death on the Cross. The Cross is at the very center of history because it qualifies Christ to be Lord of History. King Jesus is presently enthroned in heaven unfolding God’s purposes in history *Anno Domini* because of His mediatorial work. The inhabitants of heaven tell us in verses 9 and 10, “for you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe and nation and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.” So the scope of His mediatorial kingship is global, and the goal of His mediatorial kingship is “to make us kings and priests to our God, [to] reign on the earth.” Jesus as ruling Mediatorial King, is subduing all nations to His rule. Also, He does so not simply in His essential kingly estate, but in His Mediatorial kingly office. The choirs of heaven above and the creation below together marvel at the slain Lamb’s global missionary goal in history *Anno Domini*, by declaring His worthiness to receive all tribute from the nations (cf. Hag. 2:4), and all necessary qualifications to execute this task in history (v.12-13).

The Study of History

The Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary has acquired a new history professor. But history is not just for “professors of history”. It is for “professors of the faith”. The Book of Revelation means what its title says: a Book of once-hidden things that are now revealed for the edification of God’s people. The very first verse of the book says, it is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants – things which must shortly take place.”¹²

History is supposed to be studied. Why had John wept? “I wept much because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it” (v4). But as the Lord of History breaks open the seals and unfurls the timeline of history in chapter 6, what are we bidden to do? In chapter 6:1, a heavenly voice of thunder says to John and to us, “Come and see!” In fact, four times we are invited with John to “Come and See!” (6:1,3,5,7). In these four instances, each of the living creatures, in turn, invites us to audit a History class! In Eph.3:9-10, Paul speaks of God’s plan that “through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” There is a heavenly audience that beholds the unfolding drama of history as the Lord of history breaks the seals, judges His enemies, and builds the church. And like John, you and I are invited! It is also the slain Lamb who makes the study of history possible (v4). It is a blood-bought privilege of the Church to explore the redemptive

¹² While Revelation 5 and subsequent chapters give us a *big-picture view* of the events in these Last Days, we hesitate to offer a full historicist interpretation of every jot and tittle. We do not attempt to identify which verse describes Nero or Napoleon. The danger, as Alexander McLeod put well, is that “*It is with the expounder of prophecy as with the writer of history – difficult to hold a pen uninfluenced by prejudice of partiality.*” And the esteemed McLeod was one who tended to read Revelation with the newspaper open! Alexander McLeod, *Lectures upon the principle Prophecies of the Revelation* (New York, 1814), xi.

metanarrative of history.¹³ One cannot “open the scroll or look at it” without the Lamb. But He was slain so you may! And you and I are invited to do so! For history is supposed to be studied, as Church History is the Church’s legacy of comfort in times of present tribulation. When Asaph was distressed at the calamities befalling him and the church in his day, the first thing he did was to pray. The second thing he did was to study history, as it says in Ps.77:5: “I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times.” Of course, it was Biblical history he examined; he looked for the footsteps of God’s faithfulness in the past in order to make sense of his present, and gain hope for the future! (cf. Dan. 9; Neh. 9).

History is supposed to be interpreted. Historiography is to history what hermeneutics is to Scripture. We are to interpret history in line with the Scripture’s declaration of God’s purposes for history. History unfolds in linear time. It is not cyclical. The scroll has a starting point and a terminus, a finishing point. It also has a telos – a purpose, or ‘end’ – a plotline supplied by the Author. History is His Story. God is the Author and Christ is the Storyteller. Our Interpretation of history must, therefore, focus on the conquest of the Lamb In Revelation 6:1-2, the Lamb imagery changes, and we see instead a Rider on a white horse. Revelation 19 tells us that “He who sat on it was called Faithful and True ... on His head were many crowns ... out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it he should strike the nations, and He shall rule them with a rod of iron ... and He has on His thigh and on His robe a name written: King of Kings and Lord of lords.” In these Years of our Lord, Christ rides on a white horse, with His focus being the building of His Church, and subduing the gates of hell who would attempt to prevail against His purpose! The study of history must also have as its interpretive focus Christ’s unstoppable conquest of the nations, which is what the Lamb is doing today! He is accomplishing the Great Commission!¹⁴ But it is not the interpretive focus of most History Professors! By careful objective study, secular historians may, of course, write accurate histories, and provide extremely helpful resources for the Christian historian. But even though they deny the overarching purpose of the divine storyteller, they are simply uncovering what the Lamb had already purposed to do!¹⁵ Church history may be the Cinderella discipline¹⁶ in the university

¹³ And it is common grace that unbelievers for whom Christ did not die may also examine history as He unfolds it. Yet because their eyes are not opened, their understanding is darkened to see the redemptive metanarrative that is unfolding all around them. They deny the hand of providence.

¹⁴ As Acts 1:1 reads: “*In my former book, Theophilus, I told you all that Jesus began to do and to teach ...*” Acts is thus about *what Jesus is continuing to do* and to teach now he is invested with Kingly power as mediator. He is drawing all peoples to Himself!

¹⁵ In much the same way as David Attenborough might uncover truth about what the Creator has made, while yet resisting Him.

¹⁶ Anthropocentric historiography is the order of the day in the academy. Whatever the current trend is in our secular culture, its worldview gradually comes to infiltrate our interpretation of history: We are increasingly seeing the demise of the traditional milestones BC/AD with BCE/CE; *gendered* histories, *LGBT* histories, demand that history must be retitled as “*Herstory*”. To attempt to study history without reference to the Lord of history is a fool’s errand and is actually often *really boring*! Yes, in common grace, *secular historians* in the Academy may discern *patterns* and *causes* and *effects*, and draw *accurate conclusions*. *Research scholarships* are awarded; *quantitative research methods* are pursued; *empirical data from the past* is discovered in archives, *sifted* for hidden treasures, *selected* for relevance, and *interpreted* in dissertations; *PhDs are awarded*. Brilliant and objective historians publish *fascinating research* that advances our knowledge of the past. But for all this, *the Scroll remains sealed*! It is *all* found to be *meaningless* without Christ! They have answered many important “*What*” questions, but are no closer to answering the “*Why?*” History as a discipline is to be interpreted. In academic institutions, history has sub-disciplines like *social* history, *economic* history, *political* history, *military* history and was has become known as “*religious* history”. But the Apostle John reminds us that *all* of it is “*Church History*” – i.e., all of it is *servicing Christ’s overarching purpose to build his Church* (Matt 16:18) and gather his elect from *every nation, tribe, tongue and people*.

department of historical studies, a subsidiary discipline of minor importance to the academic. But it is not how the Bible views it! In the final analysis, all events in world history will find their relative significance to the extent that they have been connected with this driving theme: “He went out conquering and to conquer!”, or as Jesus told the disciples, “I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it!”¹⁷ There are many literate history teachers in the world, but they find history as a scroll which is sealed, for they are illiterate when it comes to the Book of God and so they lack the key to understanding the metanarrative of His Story! They do understand that history is supposed to be studied and that history is supposed to be interpreted. But they do not understand, finally, that history is supposed to produce doxology (6:8-14).

History is supposed to produce doxology. Is it not what Revelation 5 teaches as the ultimate purpose of the study of history? The Lamb opened the scroll of history and they sang a new song! (v9). Does your study of history produce doxology? Shame on us if we think history is boring! Revelation 5 has shown us the heavenly history class, bursting with anticipation as the reigning Lord of history unfolds His story, seal by seal! There is no boring history, just boring history teachers! And the most boring of the lot are those that write the storyteller out of His story, and reduce God’s gripping drama to statistics, graphs, and the cause and effect of a universe with no one at the helm. That’s why little Jack doesn’t like history, for “All history and no doxology makes Jack a dull boy.”¹⁸ But just listen to the roar of praise that goes up in heaven as the saints and angels behold the spectacle of history: “You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (v9). When we learn to see history from heaven’s perspective, we too will join the chorus and praise the Lord of history.

¹⁷ As Beale points out, “removing seals connotes execution of the contents of a document.” Beale, 343. It is as the Mediatorial King of Nations breaks the seals that His temporal judgments go forth upon the nations in the history of the world. These are summarized in ch.6: nation-shaking events like War (v3-4), Economic crisis (v5-6), and Famine (v7-8). But these great events that rightly preoccupy the world’s scholars and fill History Channel specials have their historical significance only as the context in which the Lamb exhibits and extends His kingly rule. The reigning Christ has been unfolding this scroll for over 2000 years; the seals have been opened throughout the years *Anno Domini*, bringing centuries of church advancement despite war, economic disaster, famine and all the other judgments on earth represented in chapter 6. All this is a matter of public record: the unbelieving historian looks at the scroll and tries to make sense of it. But it is not enough to look at the scroll; we must know the One who is unfolding it! They are like the prophets of Isaiah’s day, Isa.29:11-12: “The whole vision has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one who is literate, saying, ‘Read this, please.’ And he says, ‘I cannot, for it is sealed.’ Then the book is delivered to one who is illiterate, saying, ‘Read this, please.’ And he says, ‘I am not literate.’”

¹⁸ As we study history, we admire a stunning masterpiece. However, we praise not the masterpiece, but the Artist.