

LION

By the time of the New Testament, lions were very rare in the Holy Land – but still could be found occasionally in the Jordan Valley. They are now totally extinct in that part of the world. But it had not always been so, and they are frequently mentioned in the Old Testament. They are seen always as ferocious beasts – as indeed they are. So in the vision of the Messianic Days to come, part of Isaiah's vision is of lions and calves lying down together, with a little child to lead them. They represent the wildest of the wild. That is why Daniel is put into the lion's den to test whether his God can save him – they are the ultimate enemy for human beings. They were one of the things the shepherds needed to protect their sheep from. The Psalms are full of their bloodthirstiness – 'they are like lions, waiting for me, waiting to devour me.' 'They open their mouths like lions, roaring and tearing at me.'

But their very strength and courageousness also stood as a symbol for the people of God. In Genesis 48 we read 'you are like a lion's cub, O Judah, you return from the prey my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down'. And in Numbers 23 and 24 'The nation of Israel is like a mighty lion.'

So this imagery came to be used by the inter-testamental writers as they looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, God's messenger who would bring in the kingdom, and restore the fortunes of Israel. He would be the all-powerful conquering lion.

And then we have this one reference in the New Testament which we heard in our reading just now from Revelation 5. Who is worthy to open the scroll and break the seven seals? The elder says that the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, has won such a victory that he has the power to open the book and its seals. But what the next verse, which we didn't hear, goes on to say is this 'And I saw a Lamb....'. Now I have mentioned twice that sheep and goats easily got mixed up. But no-one surely could confuse a lion and a lamb! Here is St John the Divine showing us a totally new way of reading all that had been said in all those years of looking forward to the coming Messiah. They had expected a warrior, a lion, a conquering hero. He would wield ultimate power. But look – that lion is in fact the lamb!

John goes on to describe this lamb in detail. He bears the marks of his death, but he also has seven horns and seven eyes. In the Old Testament a horn stands for sheer power on the one hand, and for honour on the other. And in that period between the Old and New Testaments, there were the great heroes of Jewish rebellion against foreign invasion – the Maccabees. And their symbol in the First Book of Enoch is a horned lamb. So for John's readers, this was an echo they would immediately hear. Jesus, the king on the donkey has defeated the enemy.

The seven eyes the lamb possess are based on a verse from Zechariah – the seven spirits sent out into the earth – 'the eyes of the Lord which run to and from through the whole earth.' This means the omniscience of God. The lamb is all powerful and all-knowing. No wonder the lamb can fulfil the hopes they had of the lion.

The great scholar H.B. Swete, who lived about a hundred years ago referred to the paradox this sets before us of the 'majesty and majesty' of Jesus. Graham Kendrick, who is one of the best of the modern religious song writers, twenty year ago wrote these words which pick up that description. He fills it with all the seeming paradoxes that today presents to us – meekness and majesty, human and divine, eternity and time, power and humility, sacrifice and triumph, death and life, seen and unseen, stooping and raising.

Meekness and majesty
Manhood and Deity
In perfect harmony
The Man who is God
Lord of eternity
Dwells in humanity
Kneels in humility
And washes our feet

O what a mystery
Meekness and majesty
Bow down and worship
For this is your God
This is your God

Father's pure radiance
Perfect in innocence
Yet learns obedience
To death on a cross
Suffering to give us life
Conquering through sacrifice
And as they crucify
Prays: 'Father forgive.'

Wisdom unsearchable
God the invisible
Love indestructible
In frailty appears
Lord of infinity
Stooping so tenderly
Lifts our humanity
To the heights of His throne

Putting all these opposites together is exactly what John does in seeing the Lion and the Lamb as one.