

Study Aid: Learning to See What John Saw - Understanding Book of Revelation Imagery

Chapter 4 & 5: “Wings with Eyes” & “Lamb Horns”

by Daniel Thornton

In Apocalyptic literature the imagery described can sound fantastic and mysterious, often interpreted as portending *hidden meaning*. Is this really the case? Or have we simply lost touch with descriptions of imagery depicting what used to be common cultural understanding for John's 1st Century readers?

Of “Wings with Eyes” – Revelation 4:6-8

A scene strange to us in the Modern Western World occurs within John's description of *God's Throne Room*, where he depicts *living creatures* with six wings, “*full of eyes around and within*.” To ancient readers, this imagery communicated vigilance and awareness—certainly it was not intended to portray a strange monstrosity.

Here John is recalling similar Old Testament imagery as in Isaiah 6:1–3 - “Seraphim with six wings before the throne...”, and Zechariah 4:10 - “The eyes of the LORD watching over the earth”. This descriptions of “eyes” across the ancient world certainly indicated *Divine watchfulness*, and the meaning of the composite “living creatures” was better understood for the 1st Century Israelite from Ezekiel's previous apocalyptic visions.

John describes four living creatures resembling:

1. A lion
2. An ox
3. A man
4. A flying eagle

This imagery can be derived from these key Scripture references:

- **Ezekiel 1:4–10** — Four-faced cherubim
- **Ezekiel 10:14–22** — Cherubim associated with the throne
- **Psalms 148** — All realms of creation called to praise the LORD

Each form represents a domain of created life:

- **Lion:** Wild animals / sovereignty
- **Ox:** Domesticated animals / strength and service
- **Man:** Humanity / wisdom and stewardship
- **Eagle:** Birds of the heavens / transcendence

Together, the four living creatures symbolize **the fullness of creation represented before God's throne**, participating in worship and proclamation.

Okay, But what of the strange “*wings with eyes*”?

Across the ancient Near East and Mediterranean world, the **peacock** was widely associated with **royal courts**, **divine splendor**, and **vigilance**. While not exclusive to throne rooms, peacock imagery and symbolism commonly appeared in palace settings, sacred spaces, and later Byzantine art as a visual marker of authority, watchfulness, and exalted presence.

Byzantine court mosaic:



The imagery then, is vigilant and watchful “living creatures” around the throne—with **peacock** wings full of eyes.

“Wings full of eyes”:



Of “Lambs with Horns”: Revelation 5:6

Another bizarre description occurs in Revelation 5:6: “...*And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.*”

When first read, this passage can be perplexing. It has long been understood that the Christian motif of “Suffering Servant” (*Isaiah 52:13–53:12*) in the OT, interpreted as “Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah” within the NT, both are what John sees as “a Lamb... as though had been slain”. This imagery has long been clear understanding within the Church. But what isn’t always clearly understood are the “horns”. Certainly the scripture wasn’t describing a Jesus as a “lamb with antlers”, was it?

First we need to recall the reference to the Seven Spirits of God in the Old Testament. It comes from **Isaiah’s “Sevenfold Spirit”**.

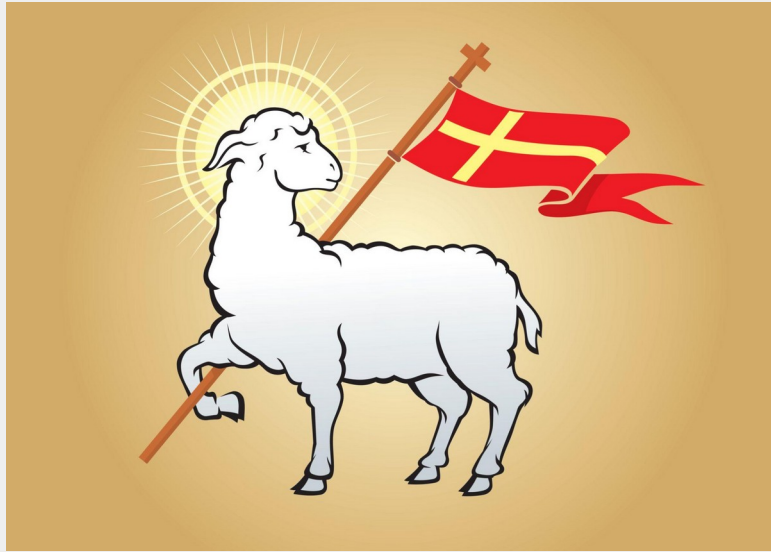
In **Book of Isaiah 11:2**, the Spirit resting on the Messiah is described as a **sevenfold completeness**:

- Spirit of the LORD
- Wisdom
- Understanding
- Counsel
- Might
- Knowledge
- Fear of the LORD

John is *not inventing a new theology* here. He’s **visually encoding Isaiah** in the words of his description. In this context it is important to understand what a “horn” represents. Its meaning signifies “ultimate authority”.

Yet secondarily, we need to think of how translators interpret words from one language to another, attempting to capture a direct meaning. This is especially critical in the use of descriptive metaphors for a visual images. Yes a “protuberance” in one language might accurately be translated as “horn” in English. But since the context is the *Throne Room of God*, here in Revelation 5, we also need to think of the protuberance spiritually, as in “halo”. When thought of in the case a “protuberance” or “halos” of light suddenly brings clarity to John’s visual imagery. It is most accurate to think of the horn imagery in this case as functioning symbolically as visible signs of authority in much the same way crowns or halos do in later iconography. Halos were, and still are, often depicted in Christian artwork.

Standard “Lamb of God” Motif in artwork:



Example of the exact scene in an Eastern Orthodox motif, the “horns” are actually 7 *Spirits of God* as rays of light:



Now think of even more modern “halo” imagery when thinking of “horns”...



Now coming into focus, while maintaining the meaningful interpretation of **authority**, we can see the visual imagery is best envisioned has **halos** rather than literal “horns”.

Regarding John’s **Revelation** imagery, in both use cases described here the interpretive *visuals* were more commonly understood to recipients of the early Church—and somewhat *lost int translation* for our *modern* time.