

Dispensational Implications of the Rev 5:9–10 Textual Variants

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Abstract

Revelation 5:9–10 presents the reader with a set of textual variants that have proved troublesome for interpreters of this passage in the history of the church. These are, first, the addition by some scribes of the first person plural pronoun, ἡμᾶς (“us”), either before or τῷ θεῷ (“for God” in an attempt to supply a direct object to ἠγόρασας (“purchased”) while others substitute τῷ θεῷ with ἡμᾶς altogether in verse 9, second, this move usually results in the substitution of αὐτούς (“they”) with ἡμᾶς (“us”) in verse 10, and, finally and most significantly, the textual variant concerning the tense of the verb βασιλεύω (“to reign”). The manuscript evidence is evenly divided between the present (βασιλεύουσιν—“they reign/are reigning”) and the future (βασιλεύσουσιν—“they will reign”). Through the examination of both external and internal evidence, this paper will seek to demonstrate that the omission of τῷ θεῷ in many MSS and most of the major English translations, has affected the succeeding variants of the text, and that, once resolved, evidence points to the future of the verb βασιλεύω as the more preferable reading. Additionally, through the examination of the larger context of Rev 5, it will be argued that the resolution of these variants finds support as well as lends support to Dispensational hermeneutics, resulting in a pretribulation timeline that is imbedded in the pericope.

Introduction

Nearly all key exegetical commentators of the book of Revelation note the intricate textual variants in Rev 5:9–10. That is, while a few conveniently avoid the issues, many have attempted to deal with them in one way or another. However, most commentators fail to emphasize the immense significance of these variants to the major eschatological theological systems held by various ecclesial traditions.

A notable exception to this general trend is Paige Patterson’s *Revelation: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*.¹ After noting that many textual variants “have little impact on crucial interpretive conclusions,” Paterson argues that on rare occasions, some variants “may, in fact, exercise considerable impact.”² His assessment is that the variants in Rev 5:9–10 belong to the latter category. He is correct in this assessment. Indeed, as this paper seeks to demonstrate, it can justifiably be argued that the way these variants are resolved, has significant implications on Dispensationalism. So, what are the issues and how have scholars attempted to resolve them?

The Textual Variants of Rev 5:9–10

¹ See Paige Patterson, *Revelation, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of the Holy Scripture* (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2012).

² *Ibid.*, 169.

The first of these variants pertains to the wording of Rev 5:9. The issue here is extremely significant as it plays a major role in the identification of the direct object of ἡγόρασας (“purchased”). According to the available manuscript evidence, the reading τῷ θεῷ is found only one manuscript: codex A (Alexandrinus—5th century). On the other hand, many other codices include ἡμᾶς either before or after τῷ θεῷ. The ones that place it before are 94 (6th century) and 2344 (11th century) while these ones place it after: **Σ** (Sinaiticus—4th century) 2050 (1107) **Ⲙ** (Majority Text) [lat] sy.³ Others are **P 046** (10th century) 1006 (11th century) 1611 (10th century) 2053 (13th century) *al*. Finally, there are those mss that delete τῷ θεῷ altogether and replace it with ἡμᾶς altogether. These are 1 2065* (15th century) Cypr v_{gms} *al*.⁴

The other two variants are in Rev 5:10. Again, both of these have immense theological implications. Concerning the first variant, many manuscripts have the third person, αὐτούς (“them”) instead of the first person “us” (ἡμᾶς). These are **Σ A 046** among others.⁵ According to Bruce Metzger, the third person pronoun, “which is overwhelmingly supported, was replaced by ἡμᾶς in several versional and patristic witnesses, followed by the Textus Receptus.”⁶ Emphasizing the significance of the resolution of this variant, Robert Mounce states that “The TR carries out its identification between the elders and those for whom Christ died by reading βασιλευσομεν [‘we shall reign’] instead of βασιλεύουσιν [‘they shall reign’] of **Σ P 1 82 2036 2059** *al g vgw* or the βασιλεύουσιν [‘they are reigning] of **A 046 2060 2329** *al*.”⁷ Thus, as it can be noticed, all of these variants are interconnected and are attempting to respond to the larger question of the identity of the ones that were “purchased” (ἡγόρασας—v. 9).

Finally, the second variant in 5:10, pertains to the tense of βασιλεύω (“to reign”). As noted above, there are basically three variant readings for this verb. First, the reading βασιλευσομεν [‘we shall reign’], is attested in 2432 *al*. And, while the resolution of the variants, is attempted below, Metzger is probably correct in stating that “it is obvious that βασιλευσομεν ... is a secondary development, arising from the introduction of ἡμᾶς in the preceding verse.”⁸ This leaves the other more attested readings. The present form βασιλεύουσιν [‘they are reigning], is attested in **A 1006 1611 1841 2329** **Ⲙk**, while the future form, βασιλευσομεν [‘we shall reign’], is attested in **Σ 1854**

³ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 360.

⁴ *Ibid.* See also J. K. Elliott, “The Distinctiveness of the Greek Manuscripts of the Book of Revelation,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 48, no. 1 (1997).

⁵ Henry Cowles summarizes concerning this: “in v. 10 there is a general concurrence of the best authorities (headed by the Alexandrian and Sinaitic) in giving ‘them’ instead of ‘us,’ the sense being that the song purposely includes not only the ransomed in heaven but all the then struggling ones of earth and indeed who should through future ages ‘believe on Jesus through their word.’ These authorities favor also the reading ‘unto their God.’ Also many say, a *kingdom* (instead of ‘kings’), and some, a *priesthood* (instead of ‘priests’) (Henry Cowles, *The Revelation of John: With Notes, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical* (New York, NY: D. Appleton & Company, 1871), 95.

⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 2002), 666.

⁷ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation, The International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 148 n 25.

⁸ Metzger, 666–7.

2050 2053 2344 $\mathfrak{M}\tau$ A lat co; Hipp Cyp.⁹ Textual critics, therefore, have continually wrestled with both the present and the future here. However, as already indicated, this is not an isolated variant. Whichever way one resolves it has resounding implications in the identification of the 24 elders mentioned in verse 8, the direct object of “purchased” as well as the nature and the timing of the kingdom in question here. Patterson, emphasizing the complexities involved here, summarizes:

All the problems relating to the identification of the 24 elders have not yet been resolved because v. 10 reports, “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth.” Two textual problems surfacing here complicate the issue. The first is that the text certainly reads, “You have made them” to be a kingdom and priests. This is inconsistent with the reading above if *hēmas* or “us” is to be included in the text. Now we would have the strange turn of events that in the song of the elders in v. 9 they sang “With your blood you purchased us”; but in continuation of the song in v. 10, “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God.” In brief, why the change from “us” to “them”? The problem is further extended by the next verse, which says, “And they will reign on the earth.”¹⁰

With this understanding, it becomes imperative that these variants be resolved as a package. As this paper tries to do this, it will also extrapolate the Dispensational implications. However, this can only be justifiably done through an examination of the context of Rev 5:9–10.

The Context of Rev 5:9–10: Dealing with the Variants

The Context

Revelation chapter 5 continues the scene of chapter 4—the throne-room vision. However, the focus now “moves from the central figure on the throne and the worshippers to an inscribed book in the hand of God [vv. 1–2].”¹¹ The book ($\beta\iota\beta\lambda\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$), which is most likely a “scroll,” is said to be on the right hand of the one who is seated on the throne (God). As Grant Osborne argues, the right hand symbolizes power and authority.¹² “Here,” he further writes, “the scroll is ‘on’ ($\acute{\epsilon}\pi\acute{\iota}$, *epi*) rather than ‘in’ ($\acute{\epsilon}\nu$, *en*) the hand of God, thus picturing it lying on God’s open palm.”¹³ The scroll

⁹ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 136 n 33.

¹⁰ Patterson, 172.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹² Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 247.

¹³ *Ibid.* Osborn adds that “Behind this [the open scroll scenario] is Ezek. 2:9, 10 (also Dan. 12:4; Isa. 29:11, 12; Jer. 36:1–25), where a scroll with words of ‘lament, mourning, and woe’ written ‘on both sides of it’ is found in the hands of God and shown to Ezekiel. The message of judgement given to Ezekiel provides the background to the scroll and the seven seals here” (*ibid.*).

is further described as having been written “front and back” (ὄπισθεν, *opisthen*—literally, “on the other side.”¹⁴ Naturally, the reader is faced with these questions: what is this scroll and what are its contents?

While there are many different ways concerning the identity of the scroll, there are three that are most prevalent in scholarship. First, there are those who see the book as the *book of redemption* (the book of life). According to them, this book contains “the names of all true believers, written down before the foundation of the world (cf. 3:5; 13:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27).”¹⁵ They also argue that the book is written in both sides because “the names of the redeemed are too numerous to be contained only inside the book.”¹⁶ The problem with this view, however, is that there are no such pointers in the context. As Osborne explains, “the judgements and rewards stressed in chapters 4–6 make this unlikely; the emphasis is on events (‘what is to happen soon,’ 4:1), not names.”¹⁷ Therefore, for these reasons, this view is untenable. The second view identifies the scroll with the OT, “especially the Torah, with its blessings and cursings stipulating the covenantal laws.”¹⁸ However, again, while in some other contexts such as Matt 5:17 and 2 Cor 1:20, Jesus is said to be alone able to “open” the prophecies of the OT, the context here is different. “The emphasis here,” writes Osborne, “is on the future, not just the past; and the death of Christ (5:6, 9, 12), more than OT prophecy, is central.”¹⁹ Therefore, the context does not support this view.²⁰

The third view combines the ideas of a “contract deed, sealed with seven seals and with a description of the contents written on the back,” as well as that of a “heavenly book containing God’s redemptive plan and the future history of God’s creation... perhaps detailing the prophecies in this book.”²¹ This view best fits the context. Osborne helpfully summarizes:

The elements so closely resemble the Jewish and Roman contract deed that the background must be found there. Nevertheless, the place of it in the book goes

¹⁴ Ibid., 248.

¹⁵ Beale, 339.

¹⁶ Ibid. See also D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible: A Study of the Book of Revelation* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1961). A proponent of this view, Niles explains: “In Jewish thought, ‘the scroll of Life’ was a register of the citizens of God’s Kingdom. Also, in Greek and Roman cities a book was maintained containing the names of its citizens. From it the names of those degraded were expunged” (ibid, 55 n 10).

¹⁷ Osborne, 248.

¹⁸ Ibid. See especially Pierre Prigent, *Apocalypse Et Liturgie, Delachaux Et Niestlé (Cahiers Théologiques 52)* (Paris: Delachaux et Niestle, 1964), 46–79. See also Lucetta Mowry, “Revelation 4–5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71 (1952): 75–84.

¹⁹ Osborne, 248.

²⁰ Beale further clarifies, noting that “against this view is the observation that the books of Daniel 7, Daniel 12, and Ezekiel 2–3 [whose background the context here reflects] do not symbolize the OT but primarily decreed events of judgment” (Beale, 340).

²¹ Osborne, 249. Osborne further explains concerning the former of these ideas: “This type of deed has an ancient history; it was used by the Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans. The contract would be written on the inner side, rolled up and sealed with seven seals, and a short description would be written on the outer side” (ibid). In the Jewish culture, this kind of a contract would be “sealed by at least three witnesses, with the number attesting to the importance of the document” (ibid). It was used in divorce cases—see Deut 24:1, 3; Is 50:1; Jer 3:8; Mk 10:4; Matt 5:31; 19:7 (ibid).

beyond the contract deed to the heavenly tablet containing the purpose and the end of redemptive history.... it summarizes the whole of biblical truth, beginning with the foreshadowing of the plan in the OT and the progressive unveiling of it in Christ. It was the death of Christ that anchored God's redemptive plan, and the rest of Revelation describes the events that will bring that plan to completion. The judgment of the nations (as in "the words of lament and mourning and woe" written on the scroll in Ezek. 2:10) in the seals, trumpet, and bowls is part of that plan, especially when we see how the judgments present a final opportunity to the nations for repentance (9:20, 21; 15:4; 16:9, 11).²²

Therefore, given the enormity of the contents of the scroll, the reader understands why, when there is there was no one found "worthy – ἄξιος"—v. 2)²³ "in heaven or on earth or under the earth to open the scroll or look into it" (v. 3), John weeps bitterly (v. 4).²⁴ As G. B. Caird explains, John's weeping here is pretty significant. "Until the scroll is opened," he writes, "God's purposes remain not merely unknown but unaccomplished."²⁵ Thus, it is of uttermost importance that one be found who is worthy (ἄξιος) of opening the scroll.

²² Osborne, 249.

²³ As David Aune explains, "the term ἄξιος, 'worthy,' does not simply mean 'able' i.e., the opposite of οὐδείς ἐδύνατο, 'no one was able,' in v 3), but it means rather 'qualified' in the sense of having the proper qualifications to perform this special task (David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, vol. 52, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 347. Further, Buist M. Fanning helpfully summarizes concerning this adjective: "The adjective 'worthy' (ἄξιος) carries the basic meaning of 'fit, deservin,' but it is filled in significantly by its contextual usage, especially in Revelation 4:11 and 5:9, 12. This is not so much a moral or spiriual worthness in the normal sense but a status, rank, or eminence gained by a combination of inherent being or nature and the accomplishment of actions that accord with and flow from that nature. So in 4:11... the Lord God Almighty is proclaimed 'worthy' of worship because he alone is the creator and sustainer of all things: this comes from his inherent being as God Almighty, both his nature and his concordant actions are celebrated. In 5:9, 12 a similar straus or rank is accorded to the Lamb because of his inherent nature and his redemptive accomlishment on the cross" (Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020], 215).

²⁴ The meaning of the phrase "in heaven or on earth or under the earth" has been debated in scholarship. It would suffice here to just state that, in addition to the comprehensive nature of the statement, the tripartite identity of these places is consistent with Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian worldviews. "Using this dramatic device," Aune contends, "the author emphasizes the uniqueness of the conquest of Christ, which he mentions in v 5. Only here and in v 13 is the three-level cosmos of heaven, earth, and the underworld mentioned (in v 13 the sea is added), though in vv 3, 13 the emphasis is on the beings who populate each of these three zones. The comprehensive way of referring to each of the three major zones of the cosmos is a way of saying 'nowhere in the entire universe'" (Aune, 348). In terms of the usage of the phrase in other parts of the NT, Paul's words in Phil 2:10 as well as those of Ignatius of Antioch in *Trallians* 9.1, are to be noted. Aune further summarizes: "The same three divisions of the cosmos are mentioned in the context of the well-known Christ hymn in Phil 2:10: 'every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth [ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων],' and a similar conception occurs within a creedal context in Ignatius *Trall.* 9:1, 'those in heaven and on earth and under the earth [των επουρανιων και επιγειων και υποχθονιων].' Both of these passages emphasize the denizens of the three-level cosmos (primarily supernatural beings) as in Rev 5:3, 13" (ibid).

²⁵ G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, *Harper New Testament Commentaries* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966), 73. As Caird further explains, "John has been brought up on the messianic hope of the Old Testament, which promised that one day God would assume his kingly power and reign openly on earth, punishing the wicked and redressing the wrongs of the oppressed. Especially in persecution God's people had longed for that day

It is no wonder that it comes as a huge relief to John when his sorrow is interrupted by one of the 24 elders (a group of beings first introduced in 4: 4, and said to be “dressed in white clothing and had golden crown” [στεφάνους]), who assures him that he need not weep because “the Lion of tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered” and thus, “he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5). While it is clear that the “Lion of Judah” here refers to the Messiah (cf. Is 11:1, 10), debates continue as to the exact identity of the “24 elders.” This is especially so as, in verse 9, these elders respond with a new song when the Lion of Judah takes the scroll from the right hand of God. In other words, their song in verses 9–10, as noted above, thrusts the reader into the complex textual variants. Attention now moves to the resolution of these.

Rev 5:9–10 Textual Variants: Attempted Resolution and Dispensational Implications

As noted above, the variants of verse 9 are interconnected, and tied to the prior question of the identity of the 24 elders first mentioned in 4:4. Since the chapter divisions are later, the context is that of the worship of the Lamb by the “four living creatures and the twenty-four elders” (v. 8). The variants are in the context of the “new song”²⁶ that the creatures and the elders were singing in praise of the Lamb, who is “worthy to take the scroll.” The basis for the Lamb’s worthiness is because He was “killed,” and at the cost of His blood, has “purchased [for God—ἡγόρασας τῷ θεῷ] persons from every tribe, language, people and nation” (v. 9c). Thus, as indicated above, the first variant concerns the dative phrase τῷ θεῷ here.

The issue here pertains to the direct object of the aorist ἡγόρασας (*ēgorasas*)— “purchased.” As Patterson comments, here, “the verb *agorazō* appears in the aorist tense, referencing the completion of this purchase.”²⁷ As noted above, the evidence for the inclusion of the phrase τῷ

to bring an end to their sufferings, but also to vindicate their faith. For there is a limit to the capacity of faith to survive in the face of hostile fact; unless in the end right obviously triumphs over wrong, faith in a just God is utter illusion. God must ‘vindicate his chosen who cry out to him day and night’ (Luke xviii.7). John weeps with disappointment because the hope of God’s action appears to be indefinitely postponed for lack of an agent through whom God may act” (ibid).

²⁶ According to Osborne, the phrase ᾠδὴν καινὴν (“new song”) reminds the reader of other places where the song is meant to be a celebration of God’s faithfulness. These are: Ps 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9 and 149:1 (Osborne, 259). Osborne further explains: “The song is composed of three parts: the acclamation of the worthiness of the Lamb (5:9b), the salvific work of the Lamb (5:9c), and the effects for the followers of the Lamb (5:10). The first part (‘you are worthy’) repeats the celebration of the worthiness of God in 4:11 and continues to be the consistent theme in the book regarding the unity between God and Christ. It also flows out of the opening question of this chapter, ‘Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’ (5:2, 4–5). Christ is now to investigate the judgement of God by ‘taking the scroll’ that contains the final history of this age and ‘opening its seals.’ The infinitive λαβεῖν (*labein*, to take) points to the action of verse 7, in which Christ ‘came and took’ the scroll from the hand of God [the Father]. He now takes over the divine task as judge of the earth (John 5:22, 30; 8:16; 9:39)” (ibid., 259–60).

²⁷ Patterson, 168. As he further comments, “the price of this purchase is specific. The method of payment employs the blood of Christ. The language of vicarious sacrifice ties closely to the Day of Atonement, Passover, and to passages like Lev 17:10–11... The Apocalypse abounds with high Christology and a theology of atonement commensurate with what is found in Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. In this the book of Revelation differs sharply from other apocalyptic literature” (ibid, 168–69).

θεῶ (“to God”), by itself here, is small. Metzger notes that “the evidence for τῷ θεῶ is slight (A eth).”²⁸ Instead, more evidence points to the placing of ἡμᾶς (us) either before or after τῷ θεῶ. The resolution of this variant is extremely significant as it involves the identity of the twenty-four elders (who are the one singing the new song here) as well as the resolution of the succeeding variants. As Tony Garland bluntly comments, “There are small variations in the manuscript evidence for verses 9 and 10 which impinge on a significant theological issue: the identity of the twenty-four elders.”²⁹ Indeed, this may have some implications on the timing of the Revelation events (if one insists on a sequential approach to these chapters). Essentially, the divide here is between the reading adopted by the UBS’s 3rd edition, which reads: “because you were slain and with your blood you purchased to God out of all nations” and the more extensively favored reading: “because you have purchased *us* to God by your blood.”³⁰ How should the issue, then, be resolved?

The major textual battle picks up precisely at this point. The basis for the decision taken by the 3rd edition of UBS is Metzger’s own conclusion on the issue. In an analysis quoted by many commentators, Metzger resolves the issue this way:

Although the evidence for τῷ θεῶ [tō theō] is slight (A eth [Ethiopic]), this reading best accounts for the origin of the others. Wishing to provide ἡγόρασας [ēgorasas] with a more exactly determined object than is found in the words ἐκ πάσης φυλῆς κ.τ.λ. [ek pasēs phylēs ktll], some scribes introduced ἡμᾶς [hēmas] either before τῷ θεῶ [tō theō] (94 2344 al) or after τῷ θεῶ [tō theō] (2053 1611 1006 046 ⋈ al), while others replaced τῷ θεῶ [tō theō] with ἡμᾶς [hēmas] (1 2065* Cyprian al). Those who made the emendations, however, overlooked the unsuitability of ἡμᾶς [hēmas] with αὐτούς [autous] in the following verse (where, indeed, the Textus Receptus reads ἡμᾶς [hēmas], but with quite inadequate authority).³¹

This is the same position advocated by Osborne. He writes concerning the variant:

5:9. The text-critical problem here is essential for the identification of the elders in chapters 4–5. If the text should read ἡγόρασας τῷ θεῶ ἡμᾶς with ⋈ 046 1006 1611 et al. (94 2344 et al. place ἡμᾶς before τῷ θεῶ, then the twenty-four elders (5:8) are indeed human rather than angels. There are several problems with this,

²⁸ Metzger, 666.

²⁹ Tony Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, vol. 1 (Camano Island, WA: SpiritAndTruth.org, 2004), 313.

³⁰ Patterson, 169.

³¹ Metzger, 666. John Niemelä makes this interesting position concerning Metzger’s view here: “Note that Metzger rated this reading as ‘{C}’ in 1971, indicating division within the UBS committee. The reading τῷ θεῶ ἡμῶν has far stronger Alexandrian (as well as Byzantine) manuscript support than τῷ θεῶ so some members of the committee preferred that reading. Since then, Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (Fourth Revised Edition)*, (N.p.: United Bible Societies, 1994), 666, has revised this problem to an ‘{A},’ despite listing the same scant evidence” (John Niemelä, “Revelation 5, the Twenty-Four Elders, and the Rapture” (paper presented at the Message of Life Ministries, California, N.d.), 9 n 6.

however, and most prefer to omit “us.” Although there is not a lot of manuscript evidence for “purchased for God” (A eth), Metzger (1994: 666) is probably correct in asserting that the shorter reading best explains the longer. Later scribes provided an object to tell the reader who was “purchased for God.” Moreover, if “us” is part of the text, then the four living creatures as well as the elders (5:8) would have been redeemed, and the living creatures are certainly celestial beings.³²

And, as Niemelä comments, “Most modern English versions of the New Testament have a decided preference for the Greek texts of Nestle-Aland and/or the United Bible Society.”³³ Why, one wonders, would these textual critics go with the reading that has the least evidence (by their own admission)? Is this the only possible resolution of the issue, in other words?

The major weakness with this resolution, as advocated by Metzger and others, is that it ignores a significant amount of *external evidence* in reliance on scanty *internal evidence*. To illustrate this, as Niemelä points out, Metzger avoids mentioning the observations made by Hoskier, in 1929, concerning this variant. He writes:

Oddly enough, he avoids mentioning Hoskier’s observation about manuscript Alexandrinus.... His two volume work is a standard reference work on Revelation. Hoskier says, But what shall we do in this doctrinal and important verse [Revelation 5:9] in the matter of the omission of ἡμᾶς by A only? ‘Who hast redeemed us.’ **The Alexandrine MS. [A, Alexandrinus] drops the word between two columns.** Nevertheless Tischendorf, Westcott and Hort, and the Revisers follow suit with this authority only. No cursives [e.g., minuscules], not a, B [Hoskier’s name for 046], or P [*hiat* C], no Versions but *aeth* [e.g., Ethiopic] which is unreliable in such a matter, frequently balking at any difficulty [such as juxtaposing first person (v 9) with third person (v 10)].³⁴

In other words, according to Hoskier, “Alexandrinus ‘drops the word [*hēmas*] between columns.”³⁵ In doing so, “the scribe ended a line of text on the bottom of one column. Then, he started at the top of the next column. The word *hēmas* should have been the first word on the top of the second column, but the scribe [likely] suffered a mental lapse.”³⁶ Patterson arrives at the same conclusion, noting that the translating committee chose the easier way here than to deal with the evidence. “This amounts to a decision on the part of the textual committee,” he writes concerning the term *hēmas* here, “that because of the grammatical inconsistency of ἡμᾶς and the αὐτοῦς of verse 10,

³² Osborne, 268.

³³ Niemelä, 8.

³⁴ Ibid., 10. See H. C. Hoskier, *Concerning the Text of the Apocalypse*, 2 vols. (London: Quartitch, 1929, reprint, n.p. Good Books n.d.), 1:xxvi.

³⁵ Niemelä, 10.

³⁶ Ibid. Beale makes a similar suggestion, writing; “In addition, there is the possibility that the scribe of codex A accidentally dropped the ‘us’ when he went from the bottom of one column of the page to begin writing at the top of the next column (one column concludes with $\text{ἩΓ}^{\circ}\text{ΟΡΑΣΑΣ Τ}^{\circ}\text{Ω Θ}^{\circ}\text{ΕΩ}$ and the following column begins with $\text{ΕΝ Τ}^{\circ}\text{Ω ΑΙΜΑΤΙ ΣΟΥ}$)” (Beale, 360).

they decided to resolve the problem by taking the reading most weakly attested.”³⁷ Further, he states that this “decision to resolve one problem by creating a more serious one should be rejected in favor of the almost universally attested support in conclusion [*sic*—‘inclusion?’] of ἡμᾶς.”³⁸ Indeed, once one adopts this more attested reading of this variant, two major problems arise: first, who are the 24 elders speaking here and, second, how can the first person plural be reconciled with the third person plural of verse 10? These questions are the focus of the next textual issue.

The song that started in verse 9 is concluded in verse 10. Here, the singers proclaim; “You have appointed *them* as a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (NET). The first textual issue here is about whether the third person plural (αὐτούς— “them”) or the first person plural (ἡμᾶς— “us”), is the correct reading. The third person reading is the one attested in the best authorities. These include Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲱ); Codex Alexandrinus (A); Codex Vaticanus (B); in addition to 50 others (al 50; Codex Amiatinus (am); Coptic (cop); Syriac (syr); Armenian (arm); Ethiopian (aeth); and, all manuscripts of Andreas, Bishop of Caesarea (Andomn). On the other hand, the first person is found in some late inferior manuscripts, and these are the basis for the same reading in *Textus Receptus*. These include Clementine Vulgate (vgcl); Codex Fuldensis (fu); Codex Demidovianus (demid); Codex Toletanus (T); Codex Harleianus (harl); Codex Lipsiensis (lipss); all of Lachmann’s critical editions (omnlachm); Cyprian (Cyp); Fulgentius (Fulg); Maternus (Matern); Arethas (Are); Primasius (Prim).³⁹ Because of the inferiority of the manuscripts that support the first person, it is obvious that it is not the original reading.

However, the acceptance of third person in verse 10 does not mean a similar acceptance should be made for verse 9 as demonstrated above. While the issue is further addressed as the question of the identity of the 24 elders as well as the resolution of the final textual variant, the balance set here by Beale concerning both pronouns in verses 9 and 10, is helpful He writes:

It is usually thought that “us” both here and in v 10 is not original, and since “them” in v 10 is less disputed both on external and internal grounds, the “us” of v 9 is likely secondary. On the other hand, it may not be so improbable that “us” in v 9 and “them” in v 10 could both be original, since this would also be a difficult reading, but not impossibly difficult because the liturgical atmosphere could justify the change in person between v 9 and v 10. Also the parallelism of “he made them to God” (v 10) with “he redeemed to God” (v 9) might point to the presence of a specific object in the latter phrase.⁴⁰

³⁷ Patterson, 169 n 28.

³⁸ Patterson, 169 n 28.

³⁹ See Constantinus Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece, Ad Antiquissimos Testes Denuo Recensuit Apparatum Criticum Omni Studio Perfectum Apposuit Commentationem Isagogicam Praetexuit Constantinus Tischendorf, Editio Octava Critica Maior*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1869), 935–36.

⁴⁰ Beale, 360.

The larger question, however, is the identity of the 24 elders who are singing this song. Their identity hinges a lot on how these pronouns are read. In other words, who are the “us” of verse 9 and the “them” of verse 10?

Anyone who has attempted to identify these 24 elders has quickly realized how difficult this exercise is. Robert L. Thomas offers a helpful, albeit broad, summary of the views concerning the identity of these elders. He writes:

Attempts to identify the elders have fallen into two broad categories, one saying that they are men and the other that they are angels. Each category has three variations, the former one saying that the men are either representatives of Israel, representatives of the church, or representatives of both. The latter category sees the angels as representatives either of the OT priestly orders or of the faithful of all ages, or as a special class or college of angels.⁴¹

The identity of these 24 elders is directly tied to the resolution of these textual variants here. This is because these are the individuals (or part of the group) singing the new song here. As the reader recalls, the new song praises the Lamb for having purchased these elders by His own blood. For those who identify these as angels, the problem, of course is that the Bible leaves no room for the redemption of fallen angels. In other words, fallen angels are not direct recipients of the benefits of the blood of the Lamb—they are so only in a general manner—just like any other part of the groaning creation (Rom 8:19–23). Of course, for those who see the word us as missing in the text against the preponderance of evidence noted above, there is no difficulty in identifying these with *angels*. An example here is G. E. Ladd, who writes:

Far from supporting the identification between the elders and the church, this song of the elders clearly sets them apart from the redeemed. The elders themselves are not the redeemed, but they sing of those who are redeemed. Again, in 14:3, the elders are set over against those who have been purchased out of the earth who sing a new song which the elders cannot learn. There is no difficulty in

⁴¹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1992), 344–45. Arguing for the possibility of an angelic identification, for example, Beale writes: “The elders certainly include reference to OT and NT saints. They are either angels representing all saints or the heads of the twelve tribes together with the twelve apostles, representing thus all the people of God.... Probably the elders are angels who are identified with the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles, thus representing the entire community of the redeemed of both testaments (the songs in 15:3–4 may also point to the inclusion of OT and NT saints)” (Beale, 322). Patterson breaks these identities further down, as he writes: “Some have interpreted them to be 24 angels that make up a heavenly council. Although only two orders of angels are named in Scripture—the cherubim and seraphim, to see these 24 elders as the archangels of 24 orders of angels is possible. A second perspective connects them all to the church and views the 24 elders as representative of the entire church of God. On this explanation the number 24 represents a doubling of the complete number 12 and ostensibly would represent the church in its fullness. A third perspective would note the 24 as symbolic of the redeemed of all time represented by the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the Lamb. Though there are variations, these appear to be the major viable options for identifying the 24 elders” (Patterson, 152).

understanding the twenty-four elders as a body of angels who help execute the divine rule in the universe.⁴²

Thus, for Ladd and others who support the omission of the “us” here, identifying the 24 elders with angels is pretty easy.

On the other hand, a number of commentators identify the 24 elders here as believers (saints). Indeed, many see this identification as strong evidence for pretribulational rapture position. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, for example, presents three reasons as to why these are human beings. “First,” he writes, “these elders are clothed in *white garments*, which throughout the Revelation are symbols of salvation.”⁴³ Second, these individuals are wearing *crowns*. Agreeing with Walvoord, Fruchtenbaum clarifies that these crowns “are not *diadem* crowns worn by those who are royal by nature, which would have been the case had these been celestial beings.”⁴⁴ Rather, these crowns are the *stephanos* crowns, the crowns of an overcomer, the type of crown given as rewards to the members of the Church at the Judgement Seat of Messiah.”⁴⁵ His *third* and perhaps most significant reason is that there is nowhere else in the Bible where the term *πρεσβυτέρους* (elders) to describe celestial beings. Concerning this last point, John MacArthur is even more forceful, commenting:

Presbuteroi (elders) is never used in Scripture to refer to angels, but always to men. It is used to speak of older men in general, and the rulers of both Israel and the church. There is no indisputable use of *presbuteroi* outside of Revelation to refer to angels. (Some believe that “elders” in Isaiah 24:23 refers to angels, but it could as well refer to humans.) Further, “elder” would be an inappropriate term to describe angels, who do not age.⁴⁶

Finally, after providing a number of reasons for taking these individuals as humans, Laszlo Gallusz concludes by noting that the “designation of angels as ‘elders’ is unparalleled in biblical and Jewish

⁴² George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972), 74–75. Ladd bases his conclusion from his view that the “us” should be omitted. “If this were a correct reading,” he writes, “the reasoning would be sound; but this is another of the numerous instances in the Revelation where the Greek text behind the old King James Version is defective” (ibid, 74).

⁴³ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, Revised ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 165.

⁴⁴ Ibid. John Walvoord further clarifies; “The elders are described as being clothed in white raiment and having on their heads crowns of gold. There are two kinds of crowns in the book of Revelation, involving two different Greek words. One is the crown of a ruler or a sovereign (Gr., *diadem*), which is a crown of governmental authority. The other is the crown of a victor (Gr., *stephanos*), such as was awarded in the Greek games when a person won a race or some contest. This was usually made of leaves. The word here is the crown of a victor rather than that of a sovereign. It was made of gold, indicating that the elders had been rewarded for victory accomplished” (John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1966), 106.

⁴⁵ Fruchtenbaum, 165.

⁴⁶ John MacArthur, *Revelation 1–11 Macarthur New Testament Commentary*, New ed., vol. 32, *Macarthur New Testament Commentary Series* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1999), 149.

apocalyptic literature of the time.”⁴⁷ He further adds, “In addition, angels never sit on thrones, nor do they wear white crowns or white clothing in Revelation.”⁴⁸ Thus, while the “question of the identity [of these elders] is not the central interest of the author,”⁴⁹ there seems to be enough reasons to identify these as human beings (most probably, saints).

For Dispensationalists, one of the key implications of identifying these 24 elders as part of that saints is that it bolsters the pretribulationist rapture position of the church sequentially. As noted above, even the posttribulationist Ladd admits that if these 24 elders are identified as part of the saints, the pretribulation rapture position gains credibility.⁵⁰ Niemelä further clarifies concerning this implication:

If the twenty-four elders are human, then this passage is a formidable argument in favor of rapture preceding Daniel’s seventieth week. If they are human, the passage narrows down the timing of the Bema Seat, which necessarily follows the rapture... How so? The passage sets up a sequence of events: Verse 10 pronounces that Christ *has made* the twenty-four elders *kings and priests*. It also declares that the twenty-four elders *will reign on earth*. Singing about such pronouncements in regard to twenty-four humans would require that the Bema Seat has already occurred. For the Bema Seat to have occurred requires that the Rapture had occurred even earlier. Furthermore, just before the elders sang these words, Revelation 5:4 says that John wept much because no one was found worthy to open the opisthograph and to break its seals. The elders sing (in verse 9) that Christ is worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals. Revelation 6:1 is where Christ opens the first seal.⁵¹

Likewise, Walvoord makes the connection here, arguing that “only the church which is raptured before chapter 4 is properly complete in heaven and eligible for reward at the judgment seat of Christ.”⁵² He further that in this case, “the crowns of gold on the heads of the twenty-four elders would be fitting at this point and would seem to confirm the idea that these may be representatives of the church in glory.”⁵³ Thus, while, as Walvoord rightly observes, “identification of the twenty-

⁴⁷ Laszlo Gallusz, *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, vol. 487, *Library of New Testament Studies* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), 189. For a recent tracing of the identity of the 24 elders in the early church, see Luke J. Stevens, “Twenty-Four Elders: Revelation and the Old Testament Canon in Victorinus and Melito,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 30, no. 2 (2022).

⁴⁸ Gallusz, 189.

⁴⁹ Gallusz, 189.

⁵⁰ Ladd, 73–74.

⁵¹ Niemelä, 7.

⁵² Walvoord, 106.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 106–07.

four elders should not be dogmatically held,"⁵⁴ their identity as part of the body of Christ, who have received their rewards, bolsters the Dispensational pretribulationist position.⁵⁵

Finally, identifying the 24 elders as part of the body of Christ does not automatically exonerate the proponents from the noted textual issues relating to the pronouns. This is because, according to Rev 5:8–9, both the four living creatures, who virtually every commentator identifies as angels, join in singing the new song. The question, then, is this; how is it possible for these angels to declare that the Lamb has purchased “us” for God by His blood? This is especially so since, as it has been argued, the ἡμᾶς is the original reading of the variant here.

The most probable explanation is that the song is actually an *antiphonal* kind of music. An antiphonal music is that which is sang by two groups in an alternating manner. While this kind of music became prevalent in medieval Christianity, as Laura S. Lieber demonstrates, it has precedence in the OT.⁵⁶ “Psalms 118 and 136,” she writes concerning the evidence of this in the Psalms, “for example, probably reflect Jerusalem Temple liturgy. They share the refrain ‘for His loyalty endures forever’ (כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדוֹ) and display a structure that suggests antiphonal performance.”⁵⁷ Indeed, antiphony is not limited to poetic literature in the OT. As Lieber further explains, “Non-poetic biblical texts that entered liturgical use, such as Isa 6:3 (known in Hebrew as the *Qeduššah*, in Greek as the *Trisagion*, and in Latin as the *Sanctus*) and Deut 6:4–5 (the *Shema*) likewise can be seen as having an affinity for acclamation.”⁵⁸ Indeed, the latter here nearly reflects what seems evident in Rev 5. According to Lieber, in these antiphonal songs on non-poetic nature,

The biblical words are familiar, recitation highlights their aural cadence, and in the congregational context they enact a deep concept of unity: the *Qeduššah* unites the human congregation at worship with the heavenly hosts who are likewise at prayer, while the *Shema* expressly articulates divine singularity even as it constitutes congregational unity. The dialogical dynamic of liturgy, with its evocative scriptural words addressed by the community in a common voice to a remote yet present deity, resonates with the theatrical and civic settings and practices of acclamation.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁵⁵ This conclusion does not necessarily mean that one has to agree entirely with Patterson’s argument that only posttribulationists such as Mounce and Ladd support the identification of these as angels (Patterson, 171).

⁵⁶ See Laura S. Lieber, “With One Voice: Elements of Acclamation in Early Jewish Liturgical Poetry,” *Harvard Theological Review* 111, no. 3 (2018).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 412.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. See also Michael Tzvi Novick, “The Poetics of Yannai’s Sixth: Between Scripture, God, and Congregation,” in *Giving a Diamond: Essays in Honor of Joseph Yahalom on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Wout van Bekkum and Naoya Katsumata (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Eliyahu Schleifer, “Jewish Liturgical Music from the Bible to Hasidism,” in *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman and Janet Walton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); Thomas Arentzen, “Voices Interwoven: Refrains and Vocal Participation in the Kontakia,” *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 66 (2016); Margot Fassler and Peter Jeffrey, “Christian Liturgical Music from the Bible to the Renaissance,” in *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical*

With this understanding, therefore, specific stanzas of the song are sung by different groups. In this case, as Niemelä concludes, the singing of the song's stanzas would look like this: "*Elders sing: You have redeemed us to God out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. Living Creatures respond: You have made them kings and priests to our God. They shall reign on the earth.*"⁶⁰ Therefore, understanding the song as antiphonal in nature resolves this issue. It is also consistent with the resolution of the first two textual variants of Rev 5:9-10.

The third and final textual variant, as already noted, pertains to the tense of the verb βασιλεύω ("to reign") in verse 10. As the textual evidence provided above indicates, manuscripts are equally divided between the present βασιλεύουσιν ("they reign/are reigning") and the future βασιλεύσουσιν ("they shall reign"). As expected, the same division extends to the commentators. After making the correct observation that, "since both the future and the present tense of βασιλεύω ("reign") in Rev 5:10 are supported by good textual evidence, which is original must be decided on the basis of the context in ch. 5 and the whole Apocalypse," Beale, interestingly concludes that "the present should be preferred, since, in view of 20:4-6 and later scribes with millennial concerns, it is the more difficult reading."⁶¹ Thus, according to him, since this is the more difficult reading, it is *ipso facto* the correct reading. However, while, as Thomas points out, there is the possibility that a "copyist with the Millennium of chapter 20 in mind would naturally change the puzzling present tense to a future,"⁶² this is still not as closed case as proponents of this view would like to insist.

On the other hand, there are many who see the future as the preferable reading. Writing on behalf of the UBS translation committee, Metzger, for example, comments, "A majority of the committee, noting that in 20.6 codex Alexandrinus mistakenly reads βασιλεύουσιν for the future tense, preferred βασιλεύσουσιν here, as more suited to the meaning of the context."⁶³ Similarly, Thomas argues that, based on the context, "reference to a present reign, however, is highly improbable in this setting... and the reasoning about how a scribe would react in light of Rev. 20:6 misses the point that the verse may talk about the resurrected martyrs only."⁶⁴ In other words, "the case for the present tense is severely weakened by the fact that one of the two major MSS

Music in Jewish and Christian Experience, ed. Lawrence Hoffman and Janet Walton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

⁶⁰ Niemelä, 14. He concludes: "Revelation 5:9-10 is a wonderful demonstration that the rapture precedes Daniel's seventieth week. The twenty-four elders will be rewardable church-age believers, who will reign as kings and priests in the Millennium" (ibid). Patterson arrives at the same conclusion, writing: "Is it possible then that in the text is actually found in an antiphonal song in which the elders sing, 'You are worthy to take the scroll/and to open its seals, because you were slain,/and with your blood you purchased men for God/from every tribe, language, and people and nation.' The four living creatures answer, 'You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,/and they will reign on earth.' Such an explanation takes most seriously the text as it apparently was originally given by John and also all the evidences relating to the various groups that are presented in the passage" (Patterson, 173).

⁶¹ Beale, 362.

⁶² Thomas, 411.

⁶³ Metzger, 667.

⁶⁴ Thomas, 411.

supporting it also has a present tense of the verb in 20:6, where it is clearly a mistake.”⁶⁵ Mounce, as well, contends, based on the context:

It seems unlikely that John here is referring to a present spiritual reign of believers. The hymn of praise is not a cryptic reference to Christians as the true kings in spite of the apparent rule of the Caesars. The promise is that the church is to share in the eschatological [millennial and beyond] reign of Christ and all that it will involve (2:26–27; 20:4; 22:5).⁶⁶

As well, Osborne arrives at the same conclusion, arguing that “due to the superiority of A and the others in 5:9, I tentatively side with the futuristic present here.”⁶⁷ Finally, Aune also notes that the this “apocalyptic motif occurs in Rom 5:17, where it is said that Christians shall reign (βασιλεύουσιν; note the future tense) through the one Jesus Christ; i.e., those who receive grace shall reign.”⁶⁸ All of these commentators, in other words, see the future as either supported by the entire context of the Apocalypse or by the manuscript evidence.

The position of this paper is that the future is more attested here. This reading seems most consistent with immediate as well as the larger context of the Apocalypse. And, in any case, as Mounce correctly observes, “even if βασιλεύουσιν is read instead of βασιλεύουσι, the reference is probably future, the verb serving as a futuristic present and imparting a tone of assurance.”⁶⁹ This rule refers to the millennial rule in the future, the one that is promised to the saints in Rev 2:26–27. The future tense, therefore, is the most probable reading both from a textual and a contextual standpoint.⁷⁰

Conclusion and Dispensational Implications

This paper argues that the resolution of the three key textual variants in Rev 5:9–10 has major implications for Dispensationalism. Concerning the first variant, the paper maintains that there is strong evidence for the inclusion of ἡμᾶς in verse 9. Indeed, as some commentators have correctly indicated, the resolution of this goes a long way into dealing with the critical identification of the 24 elders first mentioned in 4:4 as well as resolving the issue of the third person plural (αὐτούς) of verse 10. As it has been argued, the context as well as the resolution of the textual variants points to the 24 elders as being part of the redeemed, raptured and rewarded saints rather than angels. However, the 4 living creatures are certainly angelic beings (cherubim). In this case, the singing of the new is of an antiphonal nature. Each of these groups either

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 136–37.

⁶⁷ Osborne, 268.

⁶⁸ Aune, 363.

⁶⁹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 136 n 36.

⁷⁰ As Garland points out, this refers to a *real, physical* land, which, according to him, will be the “taking back of man’s dominion over the earth which was lost by Adam (Gen. 1:26, 28), and the restoration of Israel to the Promised Land (Amos 9:13–15” (Garland, 316).

individually or communally sing the relevant parts of the new song (a tradition that is traceable to the singing of some psalms in the OT as well). Finally, concerning the tense of βασιλεύω (“reign”) in Rev 5:10, the paper maintains that the future is the reading best supported by the manuscript evidence as well as the immediate entire context of the Apocalypse.

In terms of their dispensational implications, the resolution of these variants give impetus to the dispensational doctrine of the pretribulation rapture of the church by providing an outline of the eschatological events highlighted here. As Niemelä explains, when these variants are resolved in the manner argued above, this eschatological sequence results: “1. Rapture: Revelation 4:1, 2. The Bema (after 4:1, but before the twenty-four are called elders: 4:4), 3. Singing about the declaration at the Bema that the elders will rule as kings (5:10), 4. Christ opens the first seal (6:1).”⁷¹ Additionally, these resolutions are the result of a literal grammatical approach to the text, an approach that both stresses the immediate and the entire context of the Apocalypse. As Patterson commends (especially on the antiphonal reading defended above), “this explanation follows the reading of the strongest texts *without introducing unnecessary speculation* about how variant readings might have developed (emphases added).”⁷² I concur and argue that the same is true of the other variants addressed in this paper.

⁷¹ Niemelä, 14.

⁷² Patterson, 173.

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