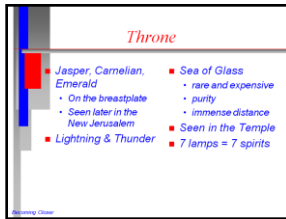


The Throne of God

Rev. 4:1-6 (NIV) After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." (1) At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. (2) And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. (3) Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. (4) From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. (5) Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

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Now begins one of the more difficult passages. We shall take the easy part first.

The stones listed here - jasper, carnelian and emerald, have some history. As we shall see at the end of Revelation, they have a more important duty as well.

- Jasper is found on the breastplate of the High Priest (Exodus). It is a green quartz (the word today actually means a red quartz; a change in meaning). It is also used as a description of the first foundation of the New Jerusalem, and one of the gates.
- Carnelian is found nowhere else in the Bible but in Revelation. It is used as a gate of the New Jerusalem. It is a dusty red quartz. Translated as “ruby” in the Hebrew, it is the first stone in the High Priest’s breastplate. Jasper is the last. Hence, these two stones are the “first and last” of the Tribes of Israel.
- Emerald (which is descriptive here, as are the others. It forms the fourth foundation of the New Jerusalem. The fourth son of Israel was Judah, from whom came Christ. Depending on how you order the stones on the breastplate, it could be the fourth stone there as well (it is listed seventh; but you can go left to right on the first row, drop down and go right to left and achieve this point. I’m not entirely convinced.)
- The thunder and lightning, the rumbles are known before (see Chapter 1); we are clearly in the presence of God the Father.

The sea of glass bears a little closer examination. The description here would be quite unusual for the time, for glass in the Roman period was rarely “clear.” The best that could be hoped for was a transparent glass, with color in it (i.e., a tint that was not opaque). Such glass was hard to get; clear glass was nearly impossible. Commentators see these possibilities”

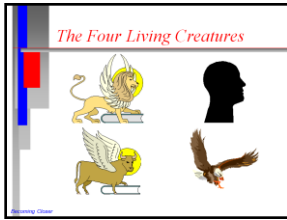
- The rareness of the glass -- along with the precious stones -- imply a vast wealth, one in which (later) asphalt paving is replaced with gold.
- The clearness of the glass implies purity.
- The use of the word “sea” implies a vast distance between mortal man and God. In light of what is coming up, this is a good figure.

Interestingly, we have a picture of this sea before Revelation. That picture was found in Solomon’s temple, in which there was a great bronze basin called the Sea. 2 Chronicles 4:6 tells us that this Sea was used by the priests for washing. Taking the concept of Hebrews 9 (that the tabernacle was a picture of heavenly things) to cover the Temple as well, we would see the bronze Sea of Solomon as the picture of the glass sea of God. Can we then extend the concept? In Revelation 15:2 we see what may be the same thing, mixed with fire -- a sign of purification. This, in my opinion, is sufficient to establish this as the equivalent.

The Four Creatures

Rev 4:6-8 NIV) Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. (7) The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. (8) Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

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This has caused a great deal of speculation. The interpretations have run all over the symbolic map, but generally we see these four creatures implying something like this:

- Then as now, the lion was a symbol of royalty.
- The ox (OK, so it's a cow in the illustration) was a symbol of strength.
- Man, of course, represents rational thought.
- The eagle swiftness.

From these (and other) symbolic identifications, a number of clever interpretations have been developed -- and by some very famous thinkers:

- Athanasius and Augustine thought them representative of the four Gospels (though not the same identification). Augustine's identification is the one most commonly found in stained glass:

Matthew, the lion (Christ as king)

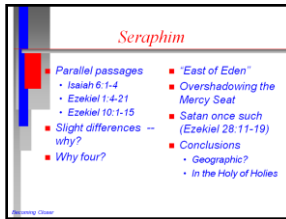
Mark, the man (Christ the Son of Man)

Luke, the ox (Christ, the sacrifice)

John, the eagle (Christ, all-seeing -- omniscient God)

- Irenaeus felt they represented four covenants -- Adam, Noah, Moses and Christ.
- Modern thinkers have used these symbols to represent the four writers of the Gospels, following Augustine. For this reason, you will often see these symbols in stained glass windows in liturgical churches.

However -- it is my opinion that these identifications are incorrect. It is my opinion that they are the seraphim (or cherubim, which seem to be similar if not the same).



A long discussion may be held on the differences between the visions of John, Ezekiel and Isaiah. The point that is often missed is that each of these visions clearly describes a set of creatures which are so similar that it is hard to miss the point that these are the same creatures: the Seraphim (called cherubim in Isaiah). The differences may be attributed to:

- the problem of the eyewitness. It is clear from these accounts that there is a difference between “write what you hear” and the account in between. Unless you believe in the automatic writing theory of inspiration, there is the simple possibility that we have three eyewitness descriptions of the same thing.
- John may have taken it for granted that you would have recognized them -- and left out all the details.
- Some think that the description changes -- as befits a heavenly being -- depending upon either the observer or (more likely) the covenant.

What can we conclude from that? Look at the known *earthly* functions of these creatures:

- They guarded the Tree of Life, standing east of Eden, (Genesis 3:24) to prevent man from re-entering the Garden.
- They were pictured in the Tabernacle -- as covering the Mercy Seat, or the Atonement cover.
- They are extremely powerful, for Satan at one time was one of them (Ezekiel 28:11-19).

In this picture, they cry the holiness of God. I conclude, therefore, that these angelic beings are the guardians of the holiness of God! Consider:

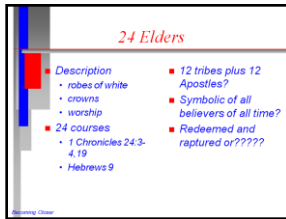
- They guarded the Tree of Life -- for if man could eat of it, then the curse would be removed, and God’s holiness compromised by letting sinful man avoid the penalty of death.
- They guarded (symbolically) the gifts of God -- Aaron’s rod that budded, the pot of manna, the tablets of the Law -- to make sure that none approached them except by *atonement*.

I conclude therefore that they are the guardians of the holiness (= separateness) of God, particularly in a geographic sense (e.g..., east of the Garden). This would explain “why four?” -- there are four cardinal directions on our planet.

24 Elders

(Rev. 4:9-11 NIV) Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, [10] the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: [11] "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

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Here we meet 24 people who have given commentators no end of trouble.

First note that they are clothed in white, the symbol of purity.

Next, note the crowns. We see them being “cast down” before the Lord God -- an act in that culture of submission and worship. A conquered king would do this before his conqueror as a gesture of submission.

Note that this is worship -- holy is the Lord.

The question then comes -- who are these persons?

We have two clues:

- The number 24 is extremely rare in the Bible. In fact, except for cases where the number turns out to be 24 for some other reason (i.e., somebody sacrificed 24 bulls, or something) there is only one other symbolic use of 24 in the entire Bible. So most commentators have concluded that this is not 24; it’s two times twelve. For twelve is a very common number, and two sets of twelve has an obvious significance: twelve tribes of Israel (the believers up to the time of Christ) and twelve Apostles (the believers of the church age). Hence, these can be considered to represent the believers of all time. This symbolism seems quite useful.
- But there is that other use -- it’s in 1 Chronicles 24:3-4 and 9. There are 24 courses of priests appointed by David to make sure that the worship of God is continuous. Now, we know from Hebrews 9 that the Tabernacle is a picture of things in heaven; can we make the same assumption for the Temple -- especially as the Temple is not yet built (Solomon, David’s son, built the Temple)? I think so. Perhaps we have a case of David (the king of Israel) “binding and loosing” in heaven! So those 24 courses of priests represent the 24 elders. The next question is, are these the redeemed, or not?

For that, we need to examine a verse in chapter 5



The futurists, reading the King James (the accepted Bible in English for over 300 years) said, without a doubt, these are the redeemed. Based on verse 9, chapter 5, they felt that these 24 elders are the raptured church and those believers resurrected from the pre-church ages. Indeed, if the translation were correct, the conclusion would be inescapable. Who else but the church and Israel could praise God for having redeemed “us?”

Unfortunately, the translation is not correct. This is not the fault of the King James translators; they did not have the manuscript resources now available to translators. As you can see from the modern translations, the elders are praising God for having redeemed *men*. This now makes the question indeterminate. The futurists may still be right; it’s just that this can no longer be considered as evidence for it.

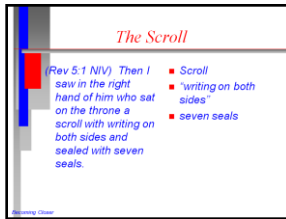
There is a harmony here, however. Remember in the first chapter how the churches were represented by seven lampstands and seven stars. Now, lampstands are earthly things (which give light) and stars are heavenly things (which give light). I submit we already have an example of something which is represented by two symbols: one for its earthly manifestation, and one for its counterpart in heaven. It is another case of binding and loosing, so to speak. Is it not most possible that these elders are the *heavenly* representation of Israel and the church?



In this short verse we see the attributes of God praised by the elders. There is a concept in here which has been lost in our civilization in its rush to declare all men equal. We have lost the idea that something is “worthy” -- deserving -- simply by its intrinsic merits. Our ancestors would have looked at a great painting and praised it simply because it was worthy of praise. Now we must “evaluate it in its own time” because it is no longer intrinsically praiseworthy. Only the thought of man makes anything worthy -- now. It is interesting to note that ours is the first time to conceive of such a notion.

God is proclaimed worthy -- of what? Glory (a word which we use and know not), honor (perhaps esteem, or even awe today) and power (this is the only one we really understand). As if to answer modern man’s question -- “so what is it about God that makes Him so worthy?” - the elders tell us two things about God:

- He created all things. The wonder of creation viewed should make this sufficient. But, as if to anticipate the thought of the “wind up” universe, we also have
- He sustains all things. Have you ever wondered why gravity continued to work this morning when you got up? (Think of life if gravity stopped!) It does so because it is sustained by God -- the unchangeable.



We must remember in this passage that the scroll, with seals, was the common form of “book” in these days. It was made of papyrus; and when finished it was rolled up, the roll folded in thirds, and then a thread was used to bind the scroll together. The thread was kept on by a seal until such time as the document was opened. In Roman law, a will needed seven seals, and could not be opened until all seven of the witnesses who had put their seal on the will (or their representatives) were present.

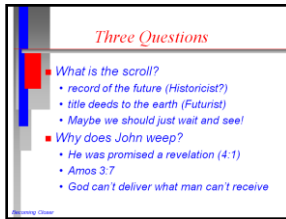
The seven seals no doubt represent (again) completeness. It implies that this is a complete revelation, and it is hard to imagine how to add to it (and indeed we are forbidden to add to it).

Scrolls were made of parchment (invented in Pergamum, by the way -- hence the name). To make parchment, you take bullrushes, cut the insides into fine strips, weave them together, soak and glue the result -- and then pound the stuff into parchment. Original parchment has a good side (recto) and a grainy side (verso). Normally, parchment was written on only on the recto side. To use both sides meant that you had a lot to say - and needed a lot of space to say it.

Who is worthy?

*(Rev 5:2-4 NIV) And I saw a mighty angel
proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to
break the seals and open the scroll?" (3) But
no one in heaven or on earth or under the
earth could open the scroll or even look
inside it. (4) I wept and wept because no one
was found who was worthy to open the scroll
or look inside.*

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The various theories now diverge even more. To the historicist, the scroll must represent the course of history starting at about the time of John. This would be in accord with their interpretation of Revelation 4:1.

The futurist theory is quite ingenious here. Recalling the ancient laws of Israel, the assumption here is that this scroll really represents the title deeds to the earth. Man, by sinning in the Garden, had sold himself (and thus this deed) to Satan. Now recall two concepts:

- the kinsman redeemer (see, for example, the book of Ruth), and
- the law of redemption.

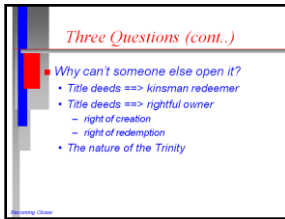
The theory is that Jesus acts as our kinsman redeemer. This person is entitled to redeem the land (in this instance, with his blood) on our behalf, since we are unable to do so. He is also able to redeem us, as we have been sold in the same way to Satan.

It really gets interesting when you consider the timing. Most futurists firmly believe in a literal six day creation. Adam was created in 4004 BC on (I think) October 23 at about 9:00 AM in the morning. Closer than that, it's a little hard to pin down. Now, accepting that one day equals 1000 years (2 Peter 3:8), we would find that six "days" of a 1000 years (millennia!!!!) are just about up! The kinsman redeemer must redeem within seven years according to one commentary (Exodus 21 says a Hebrew slave must go free in the seventh year; land is returned in the year of Jubilee, every 50th year - go figure). Thus, the theory goes, Jesus is due any year now.

The best of these theories: the poetic. Why don't we just wait and see? Why, then, does John weep? There are two primary reasons:

- He was promised a revelation (4:1) and now there is no one to unseal it.
- Amos 3:7 says that God does nothing without telling the prophets. So here is another frustration.

It does point up one thing. God cannot deliver a message to a man who isn't ready to receive it. I stand at the door -- and knock.



So why can't someone else open it>

If you follow "title deeds" theory, you must have the "kinsman redeemer" do it. This means Jesus Christ, because only he

- is worthy (in the sense that he is not under sin as we are), and
- is a near kinsman (being human as well as divine).

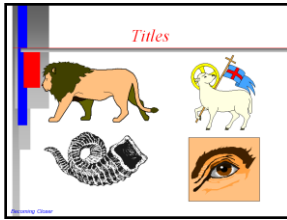
One may also argue that he is the "rightful owner" -- rightful by right of creation as well as redemption.

On the more classical side, the argument about redemption still applies. Still, one may ask why God the Father does not open it. I think the answer is that the scroll is indeed the future history of the earth, not the title deeds. That means that, of the Trinity, the one concerned with earthly, natural things (see Dorothy Sayer's theory on the Trinity for a fuller explanation) *must* be the one. Of the three, "it's his job."

The Titles of Christ

(Rev 5:5-7 NIV) Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." (6) Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (7) He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.

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Five titles are given for Christ:

“Lion of the Tribe of Judah” -- a reference to the Messianic prophecy in Genesis 49:8-10, it is also a reference to Christ the King.

Root of David -- a reference to Isaiah 11:1 and 10, in which it is prophesied that David’s line would produce the Messiah. Recall that one of the favorite titles of Christ (his own favorite) was “Son of David”

“Lamb that was slain” - this takes a bit more elaboration. The title is used once outside Revelation -- by John, in John 1:29, quoting John the Baptist. It is fitting that a *prophet* would utter these words, for all the Old Testament points to the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins.

Next, we have two “sevens”. Recall that seven implies completeness. Seven horns, therefore, means complete what? A horn is used in three ways:

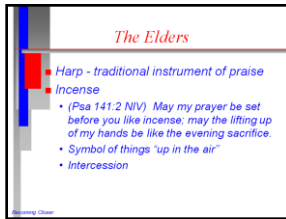
- Prophetically (see the horns on the animals in Daniel) it means a king.
- In the Old Testament, it may be a symbol for power.\
- It may also be a symbol for honor (see Psalm 89:17)

Finally, there are the seven eyes. Again, eyes would relate to seeing, seven to completeness, hence this would imply the omniscience of God. There is nothing so strange to happen that God does not know it. See, for example, Zechariah 4:10.

Worship the Lamb

Rev. 5:8-14 (NIV) And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were singing psalms full of new songs, which are the songs of the saints. (2) And they sang a new song: "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 and language and people and nation." (3) You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." (4) Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. (5) In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (6) Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (7) The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshipped.

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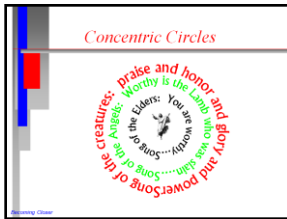
The elders begin the new song; this is poetry of high order.

The harp is the traditional instrument in Hebrew culture of praise. It is associated with good times, not bad :

(Psa 137:1-4 NIV) By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. {2} There on the poplars we hung our harps, {3} for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" {4} How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

Incense, here, is a very potent picture:

- (Psa 141:2 NIV) May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.
- Here, it may be the beginning of a symbolic significance: things that are "in the air" in Revelation are "in the mind" in fact.
- We are presented with a visual picture of intercession. The 24 elders, ever before the throne of God, are interceding for us by presenting our prayers to God. (What a picture of a friend in high places!)



It is a common thought in the Psalms that we should sing a “new song” to the Lord. Here we see one in three part harmony. There are some basic ideas:

- Christ is worthy because of his death
- All of creation praises him:
 - the elders around the throne, with the four creatures
 - the angels around them
 - then the creation , which includes
 - those in heaven (historicist: the dead and redeemed, see later)
 - those on the earth (the living)
 - those under the earth (a new thought! But see 1 Peter 3:18-20, where Christ preached to the spirits in prison.

This brings an interesting question to all points of view. By the futurist point of view, most of the action has yet to take place; the world is a terrible place without the church -- and yet we have this song! By the historicist view, the trouble is about to start -- and we have this song. Score one for the poetic????

I think not. The futurist acts as a literalist -- when it suits him. The historicist is quite willing to take scenes like this out of order -- when it suits him. The technique of flashback was not invented in Hollywood. So, when reading this, remember the real point: who is praised by every created thing? Ultimately, it is Jesus Christ. The question still is: do you know him?