

Study 5: Revelation Chapter 4

Introduction

“...The Throne Scene, chapter 4. Theme: The Glory of the Father in Chapters 4 and 5 one point stands out and that is that God is ruling and not man. This is what the Christians needed to know because the physical picture didn't look that way...”

Body of the Study

Revelation Part 2 - Introduction

The Throne Scene

The Thrones around the Throne

The Four Living Creatures

The Second Hymn

Homework and preparation for next week:

Re-read chapter 4 and 5 together

Read the notes as a review of the study

How does the Throne-Room vision connect to the previous vision of Christ amongst the seven churches of Asia?

The scene in the Throne-Room is one where God is worshiped. How is the worship portrayed (ie what are they doing)? How does the worship portrayed here compare with our worship for God? What aspects of worship are emphasised in the vision?

Notes for study 5: Revelation Chapter 4

“...The Throne Scene, chapter 4. Theme: The Glory of the Father in Chapters 4 and 5 one point stands out and that is that God is ruling and not man. This is what the Christians needed to know because the physical picture didn't look that way¹...”

Revelation Part 2 - Introduction

Chapters 4 and 5 form an introduction into the visions that follow, and these two chapters form two parts of that introduction. John is transported to heaven where he is allowed to see what is happening. *“...After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven...”* (4:1 NKJV). He is given a guided tour with a “commentary” on what is happening – he is an observer rather than being a part of the proceedings. It is like when we have a *guided tour* of Parliament House, and are able to better understand how the proceedings work. We sit there in awe, but we are just *observers* and not part of the action! Like the first vision (Christ amongst the churches), John hears a voice (“the tour guide”) which invites him in *“...And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this’...”* (4:1 NKJV).

The scene appeared in a vision *“...Immediately I was in the Spirit...”* (4:2 NKJV) which is exactly the same manner as in the first vision (c/f 1:10). The vision then unfolds before him *“...behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne...”* (4:2 NKJV). The *One* on the throne is the Father – although this might not be perfectly clear at this point, it becomes clear in chapter 5.

The Throne Scene



The powerful scene is the Throne Room of God. The next few verses describe the scene for us. *“...And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne...”* (4:3 NIV). We should not get too hung up on the details (for example the characteristics of the precious stones) – we need to picture the image!

¹ Rogers p. 11

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The NIV Bible Commentary says:

The prophet ascends "in the Spirit" to see the source of all that will happen on earth (cf. 1:10). It will all be an expression of the throne's purpose; nothing happens in the past, present, or future apart from God's intention. Whatever authority is given to an angel or to a horseman is given by God. The throne symbolizes God's majesty and power. Yet his majestic transcendence is fully safeguarded--John does not attempt to describe the "someone sitting on" the throne (cf. 1Ki 22:19; 2Ch 18:18; Ps 47:8; Isa 6:1ff.; Eze 1:26-28).

The minerals "jasper" and "carnelian" portray the supernatural splendor of God while the "rainbow, resembling an emerald," conveys the impression of God's encircling brilliance (cf. Eze 1:27-28). But we need not find symbolism in each element of the vision; it is enough to allow the imagery to create the impression of transcendent glory. Whether John intends God's judgment to be part of the symbolism of the throne vision (cf. Ps 9:4, 7) is not clear. What is unmistakably clear is that all--whether elders, angels, lamps, sea of glass, or living creatures--centers on the throne and the one who sits on it, "who lives for ever and ever" (v. 9). (NIVBC)

God's majesty is reflected in the majestic image. Jasper is later described as being *as clear as crystal* (21:11), and carnelian is a stone that is red in colour – so, God is portrayed with an appearance of clarity and red-colour (a consuming fire – Heb 12:29). But the picture didn't end just with God on the throne "...and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald..." (4:3 NKJV). God set the rainbow in the sky after the flood, as a symbol of hope and as a reminder of His mercy (Gen 9:12-17). In the image of the throne room we have a reminder of God's mercy in the emerald coloured (green) rainbow.

The Thrones around the Throne

Next, John moves out from God to the picture surrounding Him "...Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads..." (4:4 NKJV). There are many possible interpretations about the meaning of this passage. The (sub) thrones convey the idea of authority, as do the crowns of gold on their heads, and their white robes indicate holiness. So, we have twenty-four "elders" in a position of subordinate authority to the Father. But why twenty-four? The number 7 has the idea of completeness, the number 12 is a symbol for organised religion – the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles. So, with 24 elders, we have the leaders of the organised religion from both sides of the cross. Hailey notes²:

The number twenty-four suggests a combination of the twelve patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, thus representing the redeemed of both covenants now united through Christ. Verily, those of the Old Covenant received the inheritance through Christ (Heb. 9:15) as do also Jews and Gentiles since Christ (Eph. 2:16), and "that apart from us [Christians] they [the faithful under the Old Covenant] should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:40). All are redeemed, made perfect, and receive the inheritance through Christ. This view seems to be further confirmed in the victorious throng who sing the song of Moses and the Lamb (15:3), thereby combining both groups into one and acknowledging their redemption as being from God.

Next, John describes the action – this is not a static picture, but a dynamic one in which God is active "...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..." (4:5 NIV). The scene depicts power and might, reminiscent of when Moses climbed Mt Sinai (Ex 19:16), or the visions of Ezekiel (Eze 1:13), and is intensely awesome to the observer.

² Hailey, p. 168

The word translated “lamp” is more properly translated “torch” and has the idea of portability rather than a lamp which is fixed. The seven torches are the seven spirits of God. The seven spirits were referred to in 1:4, where the number 7 has the idea of completeness. The Holy Spirit is at the Throne with God, is complete, and is “portable” – able to go wherever God sends Him. Hailey notes³:

...in contrast to the terror generated by the thunder and lightning of judgement, the Spirit instructs, illuminates, and comforts (cf. Acts 9:31); thus comfort is mingled with terror.

The scene around the throne is further described “...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...” (4:6 NIV). The sea of glass is *in front of the throne*, rather than the throne “floating” in the sea. The sea reflects and enhances the power and splendour of the overall scene, but also separates God from those around Him, and at this point in the vision, He is separated from His people.

The living creatures are further described in the next verse, but *they were covered with eyes in the front and the back*. The idea is that they saw everything, and nothing was hidden from them.

The Four Living Creatures

“...The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle...” (4:7 NKJV).

The “four living creatures” (cf. 5:6, 8, 14; 6:1ff.; 7:11; 14:3; 15:7; 19:4) should be linked with Isaiah’s seraphim and Ezekiel’s cherubim (cf. Isa 6:3; Eze 1:5-25; 10:1-22). They, like the elders and angels, are heavenly creatures of the highest order involved with the worship and government of God ... Each of the creatures mentioned is the chief of its species. Together they embody the reflection of God’s nature as the fullness of life and power. Their six wings (cf. Isa 6:2) give the impression of unlimited mobility in fulfilling God’s commands. Their position “in the center, around the throne” suggests that one might be before and one behind the throne with one on either side. (NIVBC)

Hailey adds⁴:

As they share in His holiness so they share in His judgement against sin. Being “full of eyes round about and within,” the four see not only all that is external but also all that is within themselves. Man and earthly creatures must have rest to survive, but these “have no rest day and night.” They maintain constant vigil over all God’s creation. Their song is one of praise to the eternal Father, whose attributes are absolute.

The six wings suggest that they are able to travel everywhere quickly. “...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.”...” (4:8 NIV). Their message of praise is directed to Almighty God, who transcends time. This first hymn in Revelation comes from the four creatures. As the visions progress, we will see the number singing praise increasing. With eyes everywhere, they see everything that is going on.

In Hebrew, the double repetition of a word adds emphasis, while the rare threefold repetition designates the superlative and calls attention to the infinite holiness of God--the quality of God felt by creatures in his presence as awesomeness or fearfulness (Ps 111:9). The living creatures celebrate God’s holiness and power as manifested in his past, present, and future activity. Such holiness cannot tolerate the presence of evil (21:27). (NIVBC)

³ Hailey, p. 169

⁴ Hailey, p. 171

The Second Hymn

The four creatures who offer a hymn of worship to God are accompanied in their “24/7” praises by the 24 elders. (I use the term “24/7” flippantly, because time in heaven will be no more – but it conveys the idea of 1:8, and is consistent with the example that John used of *not resting day or night*. Of course, not only will there be no time there, there will be no night, for God is light, and His light quenches the darkness c/f 22:5). “...Whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne...” (4:10 NKJV). The casting down of their crowns suggests surrender of their authority to the Almighty, and their submission to Him. Harkrider notes⁵:

It was not by their might, but by God’s grace that He gave them the victory over sin and death and the powers of hell. These victorious ones understand the full meaning of such favour and love which has enabled man to overcome Satan and his angels.

The hymn of praise to God is a song of creation in praise to the One who created everything:

“...You are worthy, O Lord,
To receive glory and honour and power,
For You created all things,
And by Your will they exist and were created ...” (4:11 NKJV)

Paul described God in a similar way when he spoke to the Athenians (Acts 17:28) – *in Him we live, and move, and have our being*. The key message from the Throne room scene (and will be continued in the next chapter), is that God is in Control. It is God Almighty who is to be worshipped – not Caesar! Caesar might appear to be all-powerful, but he doesn’t even rate a mention when we look into heaven!

The Throne-Room scene is only partly revealed in chapter 4, and further parts of the image are revealed in the next chapter.

Alternate Views of the Text

There is little difference in the views of the text expressed by Wallace in the first few chapters (chapters 2-5), except for his view of the reference to *those who overcome in Philadelphia* (3:12) being *made a pillar in the temple of God*. He notes: “This is undoubtedly a reference to the demolition of the old temple. But the reward promised the Philadelphians for their faithfulness was a residence in the new temple, the spiritual temple, which could never be destroyed; out of which they would never be compelled to go, as in the case of the Jews in the destruction of the old temple of Jerusalem” (p.103)

Apart from the *timing* of the letter, there are no significant differences in the *interpretation* of these chapters.

⁵ Harkrider, p. 68