



THE GLORY OF CHRIST

Part 1, Revelation 4

July 2, 2017

The Throne in Heaven

1 After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." 2 At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. 3 And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. 4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. 5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings[a] and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, 6 and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: 7 the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. 8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!"

9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

11 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."

4:1-11 The throne in heaven

The scene of John's vision changes from earth to heaven and remains there until ch. 10, after which the point of view continually alternates. It is to be noted that the prophet alone, not the church, is called to go through *the door*; his elevation in vision is for the purpose of revelation, in order that he may communicate what he sees to those on earth.

2 The first object to catch John's eye is *a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it*. It is of first importance to know that the God who dwells in heaven possesses absolute authority over the universe. **3** No description is given of God; John simply tells of various colours emanating from precious stones flashing through a strange rainbow-cloud. There is some uncertainty about the names given to jewels in the ancient world: *jasper* was probably a diamond (*cf.* 21:11), *carnelian* was red, but we are unsure about the *emerald*. It may denote rock crystal, which acts as a prism, and in that case the rainbow after the flood is recalled, a reminder of God's covenant to restrain his wrath from humanity on earth (Gn. 9:13). Throne and rainbow, omnipotence and mercy, are significant symbols in a book whose overriding theme is the judgment and kingdom of God.

4 The *twenty-four elders* are reminiscent of Is. 24:23, where the 'elders' were viewed as Jewish leaders. These *elders* have often been interpreted as representatives of Israel and the church (twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles). In 1 Ch. 24:4, however, we read of twenty-four priestly orders, and in 1 Ch. 25:1 of twenty-four orders of Levites appointed to prophesy and praise with harps and cymbals. Since in 5:8 the elders present the prayers of God's people and in 4:6-11 are linked with the four living creatures, they are evidently to be understood as exalted angelic beings, worshipping and serving the Creator. **5** The *flashes of lightning* and *peals of thunder* recall the theophany at Sinai (Ex. 19:16) and portray the awesomeness of God. For *the seven spirits of God* see 5:6. **6** It is not said that the *sea of glass* was a literal sea, but that it *looked like* one. It is an adaptation of the conception of waters above the firmament (Gn. 1:7), but is here introduced apparently to emphasize the greatness of God.

Four living creatures stand around the throne. Their description is drawn from Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim (Ezk. 1:5-21) but considerably modified. The chief differences are that in Ezekiel the cherubim each have four faces, but here each has only one. The former possess 'wheels' with rims 'full of eyes all around' (they bear the throne of God), but here the creatures themselves possess the eyes. **7-8** Their ceaseless worship rendered to God may well represent the subjection of all creation to God. The Jews came to understand Ezekiel's vision in this way, regarding the *man* as chief representative of creatures, the *eagle* of birds, the *lion* of beasts, and the *ox* of cattle. The ancient symbolizing of the four chief constellations of the zodiac by these four figures, if known to John, would but serve to strengthen this view. The song of the cherubim implies that the future triumph of God is rooted in his very nature; the Lord, who is holy and almighty, *is to come*. **9-10** The renunciation by the twenty-four elders of their crowns would appear to be the expression

of adoration given on special occasions when God ‘comes’ and manifests his sovereign power to judge and to save (see 5:8, 14; 11:15–18; 19:4). **11** The elders recognize that one only is worthy to take pre-eminence in creation—the Creator. In their song that celebrates his worth read ‘on account of *your will they were created* (instead of *by*). This has a forward rather than backward look; God’s will is the ultimate power in the universe and that will shall be done. That is the supreme lesson of the visions of Revelation.¹

REVELATION 4:1–6a

In the Throne Room

¹After this I looked—and there was a door in heaven, standing open! The voice like a trumpet, which I had heard speaking with me at the beginning, spoke again. ‘Come up here’, it said, ‘and I will show you what must take place after these things.’

²At once I was in the spirit. There in heaven stood a throne, and someone was sitting on it. ³The seated figure had the appearance of a jasper stone or a carnelian, and there was a rainbow around the throne, looking like an emerald. ⁴Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and sitting on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white robes, and with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵Flashes of lightning, rumblings and thunderclaps were coming from the throne, and in front of the throne seven lampstands, which are the seven spirits of God, were burning with fire. ^{6a}In front of the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

We were walking into the cathedral as part of a great procession. My companion, a senior clergyman, was looking at the service paper we had been given.

‘Ah!’ he said. ‘I see we have Revelation chapter 4 as the second reading.’

He smiled. ‘One of the two most wonderful chapters in the Bible!’

Knowing I was setting myself up, I asked the obvious question.

‘What’s the other one, then?’

His smile grew even broader.

‘Revelation chapter 5, of course!’ he said, triumphantly.

¹ Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1994). Revelation. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., pp. 1433–1434). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

I have often thought of that exchange as I have studied, and preached on, these two chapters. The letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 are powerful enough, to be sure. The opening vision of Jesus in chapter 1 is enough to make the serious reader react like John himself, and fall down in awe and worship. But now we realize that even these three opening chapters have only been preparation. Chapter 4 is where the story really starts. This is where John is given the ‘revelation’ that gives the book its title. Everything from this point on is part of the vision which is granted to him as he stands there in the heavenly throne room.

This short opening passage tells us, with every line, a wealth of detail about where John has been taken, and what it all means. It’s worth going slowly through it, almost phrase by phrase.

What do you think of when you read about ‘a door in **heaven**’? For many years I imagined that John looked up to the sky and saw, far away, tiny but bright like a distant star, an open door, through which he was then invited to enter into the heavenly world. I now think of it quite differently.

‘Heaven’ and ‘earth’, as I have often said, are not, in biblical theology, separated by a great gulf, as they are in much popular imagination. ‘Heaven’, God’s sphere of reality, is right here, close beside us, intersecting with our ordinary reality. It is not so much like a door opening high up in the sky, far away. It is more like a door opening right in front of us where before we could only see this room, this field, this street. Suddenly, there is an opening leading into a different world—and an invitation to ‘come up’ and see what’s going on.

This is not, as some people have supposed, anything to do with God’s people being snatched away to heaven to avoid awful events that are about to take place on earth. It is about a prophet being taken into God’s throne room so that he can see ‘behind the scenes’ and understand both what is going to take place and how it all fits together and makes sense. These two wonderful chapters, Revelation 4 and 5, do not stand alone. At one level, they introduce the whole sequence of prophecies that will take us through the rest of the book. At another level, they introduce more particularly the first of the sequences of prophecies, the ‘seven seals’ which must be broken open if the ‘scroll’ of God’s purposes (5:1) is to be unrolled.

It may help us to keep our balance in the rich mixture of imagery in the following chapters if we see the book like this, structured around its sequences of ‘sevens’. We have already had the seven letters to the churches. Now we are to be introduced to the seven seals, which are opened between 6:1 and 8:1. The seventh introduces a further sequence, the seven trumpets, which are blown one by one from 8:6 to 11:15. Then, at the centre of the book, we find visions which unveil the ultimate source of evil and its chief agents: the Dragon, the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land—and also a vision of those

who have somehow defeated these monsters (chapters 12–15). This then leads into the final sequence of seven: the seven bowls of God’s wrath, the final plagues which, like the plagues of Egypt (15:1), will be the means of judging the great tyrannical power and rescuing God’s people from its claws. These bowls of wrath are poured out in chapter 16, but their effect is described more fully in chapters 17 and 18, leading to the celebration of victory over the two Beasts in chapter 19. That only leaves the old Dragon himself, and the last twists of his fate are described in chapter 20. This then clears the stage for the final unveiling of God’s eventual plan: the New Jerusalem in which heaven and earth are joined fully and for ever.

What we are witnessing in chapters 4 and 5, then, is not the final stage in God’s purposes. This is not a vision of the ultimate ‘heaven’, seen as the final resting place of God’s people. It is, rather, the admission of John into ‘heaven’ *as it is at the moment*. The scene in the heavenly throne room is the present reality; the vision John is given while he is there is a multiple vision of ‘what must take place after these things’—not ‘the end of the world’ as such, but those terrible events which were going to engulf the world and cause all the suffering for God’s people about which the seven churches have just been so thoroughly warned.

John is summoned into the throne room because, like some of the ancient Israelite prophets, he is privileged to stand in God’s council chamber and hear what is going on in order then to report it to his people back on earth. Like Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22, he sees God himself sitting on his throne, with his hosts around him, and is privy to their discussions and plans. But this scene reminds us, too, of Ezekiel 1, where the prophet is given a vision of God’s throne-chariot, carried to and fro on whirling, fiery wheels. The rainbow (verse 3) reminds us of that, but also takes us back to the story of Noah in Genesis 9, where the great bow in the sky was God’s visible promise of mercy, never again to destroy the earth with a flood. A ‘rainbow looking like an emerald’ is a challenge to the imagination—not the only such challenge in these chapters, as we shall see!—but the effect is a rich and dense combination of mercy, awe and beauty.

As in some other ancient visions, so here John sees God’s council: twenty-four elders, sitting on separate thrones. They represent, almost certainly, the combination of the twelve tribes of Israel and the **twelve apostles**. They are, as it were, the embodied perfection of the people of God, sharing now in the rule of God over the world. Their white robes indicate purity and victory; their crowns reveal them as the representatives of the ‘royal priesthood’ (1:6; 5:10; 20:6). It is not (to say the least) a placid scene. Lightning, thunder and fire are sparkling and booming—something that happens at significant moments throughout the book (8:5; 11:19; 16:18). When God’s purposes are being disclosed, we are to expect things to be shaken up alarmingly.

The final detail of this opening description of the throne room is ‘something like a sea of glass’. This is deeply mysterious. Solomon’s **Temple** had a ‘sea’, a huge bronze bowl (1

Kings 7:23–26), and this may have been part of the point. But in 15:2 the ‘sea of glass’ has become more like the Red Sea, through which the children of Israel have passed to safety. The other ‘sea’ in Revelation is the one from which, as in Daniel 7, the great Beast emerges (13:1), while the Dragon stands beside the shore apparently presiding over the Beast’s appearing (12:18). Then, of course, in the New Jerusalem itself there is ‘no longer sea’ (21:1). All this seems to indicate that the ‘sea’ within the throne room is a kind of symbolic representation of the fact that, within God’s world as it currently is, evil is present, and dangerous. But it is contained within God’s sovereign purposes, and it will eventually be overthrown.

I have spoken of this scene so far in terms of God’s throne in heaven, and John’s appearing before it like an Old Testament prophet. But the idea of a throne room, with someone sitting on the throne surrounded by senior counsellors, would instantly remind John’s readers of a very different court: that of Caesar. We have already heard hints of the power struggle (the **kingdom of God** against the kingdoms of the world) in the opening three chapters. Now, by strong implication, we are being invited to see that the powers of the world are simply parodies, cheap imitation copies, of the one Power who really and truly rules in heaven and on earth. As John’s great vision unfolds, we will see how it is that these human kingdoms have acquired their wicked, cruel power, and how it is that God’s radically different sort of power will win the victory over them. This is the victory in which the seven letters were urging the churches to claim their share. We now discover how that victory comes about.

It begins with the unveiling of reality. Behind the complex and messy confusions of church life in ancient Turkey; behind the challenges of the fake synagogues and the threatening rulers; behind the ambiguous struggles and difficulties of ordinary Christians—there stands the heavenly throne room in which the world’s creator and lord remains sovereign. Only by stopping in our tracks and contemplating this vision can we begin to glimpse the reality which not only makes sense of our own realities but enables us, too, to win the victory.

REVELATION 4:6b–11

Praise to the Creator

^{6b}In the middle of the throne, and all around the throne, were four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind. ⁷The first creature was like a lion, the second creature was like an ox, the third creature had a human face, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. ⁸Each of the four creatures had six wings, and they were full of eyes all round and inside. Day and night they take no rest, as they say,

‘Holy, holy, holy,

Lord God Almighty,

Who Was and Who Is and Who Is to Come.’

⁹When the creatures give glory and honour and thanksgiving to the one who is sitting on the throne, the one who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall down in front of the one who is sitting on the throne, and worship the one who lives for ever and ever. They throw down their crowns in front of the throne, saying, ¹¹‘O Lord our God, you deserve to receive glory and honour and power, because you created all things; because of your will they existed and were created.’

Scientists and anthropologists have often asked themselves, ‘What is it that humans can do that computers can’t do?’ Computers, after all, can play chess better than most of us. They can work out answers to all kinds of questions that would take us a lot longer. Some people have boldly declared that, though at the moment computers can’t do quite everything that we can, they will one day overtake us.

The writer David Lodge wrote a powerful novel on this theme, entitled *Thinks ...* The heroine eventually discovers the answer: humans can weep; and humans can forgive. Those are two very powerful and central human activities. They take place in a quite different dimension from anything a computer can do. But without them, we would be less than human.

A similar question is often posed: ‘What can humans do that animals can’t do?’ Again, some scientists have tried to insist that we humans are simply ‘naked apes’, a more sophisticated version perhaps, but still within the same continuum. This is a trickier question than the one about computers, but to get straight to the point: in our present passage, the main difference is that humans can say the word ‘because’. In particular, they can say it about God himself.

Consider the two songs of praise in this passage, the first in verse 8 and the second in verse 11. The first one is the song which the four living creatures sing round the clock, day and night. They praise God as the holy one; they praise him as the everlasting one. The four creatures deserve our attention for other reasons, too. They seem in some ways to resemble the seraphim who surround God in Isaiah’s vision in the **Temple** (Isaiah chapter 6), and they are also quite like the four creatures of Ezekiel’s vision (Ezekiel 1). They represent the animal creation, including humans but at this stage with the human-faced creature being simply one among the others, alongside the king of the wild beasts (the lion), the massive leader of tamed animals (the ox), and the undisputed king of the birds (the eagle). (In some early Christian traditions, these animals represent the four **gospel** writers, so that Matthew (the human face), Mark (the lion), Luke (the ox) and John (the eagle) are thought of as the living creatures who surround, and worship, the Jesus of whom they speak.) These remarkable creatures seem to be not merely surrounding God’s throne

but ready to do his bidding. Twice John tells us that they are ‘full of eyes’: unsleeping, keeping watch for God over his whole creation.

The song of these living creatures is simply an act of adoring praise. We are meant, reading this passage, to see with the Psalmist that all creation is dependent on God and worships him in its own way. That alone is worth pondering as a striking contrast to how most of us view the animal kingdom. But the contrast with the twenty-four elders is then made all the more striking. Creation as a whole simply worships God; the humans who represent God’s people *understand why they do so*. ‘You *deserve*’, they say, ‘to receive glory and honour and power, *because* you created all things.’ There it is: the ‘because’ that distinguishes humans from other animals, however noble those animals may be in their own way. Humans are given the capacity to reflect, to understand what’s going on. And, in particular, to express that understanding in worship.

Worship, after all, is the most central human activity. Certainly it’s the most central Christian activity. When I was a student, many of us busied ourselves with all kinds of Christian activities—teaching and learning, studying scripture, evangelism, prayer meetings and so on. We went to church quite a lot, but never (I think) reflected much on what we were doing there. There was, after all, a sermon to learn from, and the hymns were good teaching aids as well. It was a time of learning and **fellowship**. When a friend suggested at one point that worship was actually the centre of everything, the rest of us looked at him oddly. It seemed a bit of a cop-out.

Now, of course, I know he was right. Worship is what we were made for; worship with a *because* in it is what marks us out as genuine human beings. This scene remains the foundation for everything that follows in the rest of this powerful and disturbing book. All that is to come flows from the fact that the whole creation is called to worship the one true God as its creator. The profound problems within that creation mean that the creator must act decisively to put things right, not because creation is bad and he’s angry with it but because it’s good and he’s angry with the forces that have corrupted and defaced it, and which threaten to destroy it (11:18).

These short songs of praise are the beginning of one of the most remarkable features of the book. Revelation contains several passages which, like these ones only often considerably longer, offer praise and prayer to the creator God. They grow out of the worshipping life of ancient Israel, often echoing the psalms, the prophets, and other worship songs such as the song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15. Many have guessed, probably rightly, that these songs and prayers are similar to those which the earliest Christians used, though the logic of John’s vision is not that what he sees in the heavenly dimension is merely reflecting what is going on in the life of the church, but rather that what he sees in **heaven** is what *ought to be* going on here on earth. Heaven is in charge; heaven gives the lead. It isn’t simply ‘the spiritual dimension’ of what we happen to choose

to do.

There is much more to learn about heaven, and about worship, in the passages which follow at once. But perhaps we should pause here and reflect carefully. Do we, in our private prayers and worship, and in our public services and liturgies, give sufficient weight to praising God as the creator of all things? Do we allow ancient poems like the song of the three men in the fiery furnace (sometimes called the ‘Benedicite’) to inform and colour our praises, so that we consciously celebrate with all the different elements of creation? Do we then view creation itself as a theatre of praise, and live appropriately within such an awesome place?

In particular, are we conscious of our vocation to worship with a ‘because’? Do we (in other words) allow our thinking about God to inform our praise? Do we think through the fact that he *deserves* ‘glory, honour and power’ because of what he has done?

All this may seem rather obvious. But actually it’s anything but. The world has been full of movements, systems, philosophies and religions that have ignored creation as shabby, or irrelevant to ‘spiritual’ **life**, or that have vilified it as a nasty, dark and dangerous place, full of evil and death. Equally, the world has been full of movements which, instead of worshipping the God who made the world, have worshipped the world itself, or forces within it (money, sex, war, power—the usual lot). Revelation sets out the delicate but decisive balance. All creation worships God; we humans are called to worship him with mind as well as heart, recognizing that he is worthy of all praise as the creator of all things.²

God is glorified because He is sovereign judge and redeemer over creation at its inception and throughout history (4:1–11)

1 Just as Daniel 7 and Ezekiel 1 commence with introductory vision phraseology, so Revelation 4 begins: **After these things I looked, and behold.** The first use of the phrase **after these things** in this verse does not refer to the events of the visions from ch. 4 to the end of the book as coming after the events narrated in chs. 1–3, but indicates only that a new vision is coming after the previous one in chs. 1–3. This is the *sequential* order in which John saw the visions, but not necessarily the *historical* order of the events they depict. This is the way the phrase is used in subsequent sections of the book (7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1). As we saw above, it is more than coincidence that v. 1a has its closest and almost exact verbal analogy in Daniel 7:6a, 7a. John’s reference to the **first voice** he had heard, along with mention of the **sound of a trumpet** and the phrase **in the Spirit** (v. 2) all refer back to 1:10, where John was originally commissioned, which shows that he is

² Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 41–50). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.

continuing to obey Christ's call to proclaim His message (see 1:10–11).

The phrase **what must take place after these things** is a reference to the vision of Dan. 2:28ff., in which Daniel prophesies the latter-day coming of the kingdom of God, which John sees as beginning to be fulfilled in Christ (see also on 1:19, as well as on 1:5–6, 13–18). The second occurrence in this verse of the phrase **after these things**, therefore, does not refer to the distant future, as some argue, but to the events between the first and second comings of Christ, including the events unfolding at the very time John was writing. **I will show you what must come to pass after these things** is apparently used in the same way as in 1:1 and 1:19. We have already seen that the **after these things** allusion from Daniel in 1:19 and its equivalent “shortly/quickly” in 1:1 indicated that the fulfillment of the Daniel 2 prophecy concerning the establishment of God's kingdom has begun in Christ and the church. Rev. 4:1 introduces not only 4:1–5:14, but also the rest of the visions in the book (4:2–22:5). It becomes clear, therefore, that all the visions about to unfold concern events throughout the church age, past, present, and future. Some may have already unfolded, others await their fulfillment, and yet others have multiple fulfillments throughout the church age. In this connection, the NT is both consistent and clear in its view that the “last days” or “latter days” started already with the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:17–21, citing Joel 2:28–32 as fulfilled; 1 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 1:20; Heb. 1:2; Jas. 5:3; 1 John 2:18; Jude 18, etc.).

In these verses, John is ushered into the timeless presence of God and His heavenly court. This places John firmly in the company of OT prophets such as Isaiah (6:1–13) and Micaiah (1 Kgs. 22:19–22), as well as Ezekiel and Daniel. Being ushered into the spiritual, timeless dimension of God's heavenly council means that the time of the events which he sees in vision may be difficult to determine precisely. All the visions from Rev. 6:1 to 22:5 flow out of the vision in chs. 4 and 5. They are all visions which come from the sealed book of 5:1ff. This means that all these visions probably have a mixture of past, present, and future elements.

2 John's vision progresses to the point where he is caught up **in the Spirit** to the heavenly realm. The introductory section of vv. 1–2a concludes with a reflection of the prophet Ezekiel's repeated rapture in the Spirit. This scene is a reproduction of the angelic council visions involving God's throne which other OT prophets in addition to Ezekiel had witnessed (note the following allusions to such scenes as Isa. 6:1–13 and 1 Kgs. 22:19ff. in 4:2b, 8a, 8b, 9a, 10a). Like other OT prophets, John is being commissioned and called as a prophet by being summoned into the secret heavenly council of the Lord (see on 1:10–20 for the initial commissioning vision). In his prophetic role, he should go back and communicate God's hidden purpose to His people and what part they are to have in carrying it out. He has been ushered into the timeless dimension where truth and reality can clearly be discerned. Thus, in vv. 1–2a, John identifies himself again with the prophetic authority of the OT (cf. 1:1, 10, 12, 19–20). Therefore, there is little basis for seeing the phrase “come up here” in 4:1 and John's spiritual rapture in v. 2 as symbolic of the church's

physical rapture before the tribulation as some commentators maintain.

The first mention of the **throne** in the Revelation 4–5 vision occurs here in v. 1. According to the similar order of images in Daniel 7 and Ezekiel 1, the image of a divine being sitting on a throne would be suited to either OT context, though further references are made to Ezekiel 1 in the following verses. The divine throne is mentioned seventeen times in chs. 4 and 5 (and a further twenty-one times in chs. 6–22), the purpose being to emphasize the sovereignty of God over all human history. All heavenly beings find their significance in their placement around the throne, and all the earth’s inhabitants are judged on the basis of their attitude to God’s claim to rule over them from this throne. Regardless of how rampantly evil seems to run and to cause God’s people to suffer, they can know that His hand superintends everything for their good and His glory. This is demonstrated by the observation that all the judgments of chs. 6–16 issue from His throne (e.g., 6:1–8 [cf. 5:7], 16; 8:2–6; 16:17). This is of special significance to churches facing persecution, suffering, and the temptation to compromise their faith.

3 Now there is elaboration on particular features associated with the one on the throne. The three precious stones mentioned in v. 3, **jasper**, **sardius**, and **emerald**, collectively represent God’s sovereign majesty and glory, as in 21:10–11, 18–23, and look forward to the fuller list of stones given in ch. 21, where God’s new creation and eternal city are described. The background is found in Ezek. 1:26, 28. Of particular significance is the mention of **jasper**, the only stone mentioned later in the book in explicit connection with the glory of God (21:11). It is at the head of the list of the twelve foundation stones of the end-time city’s wall in 21:19. The stones intensify the light around the throne by reflecting the unapproachable brightness, and hence glory, surrounding God himself (cf. 1 Tim. 6:16; Ps. 104:2). The **rainbow around the throne** speaks of God’s mercy, as in the days of Noah, and suggests that, even as God’s judgments unfold, He will be gracious to His true people. Above all else, the rainbow evokes thought of God’s glory, since Ezek. 1:28 metaphorically equates a “rainbow” with “the appearance of the surrounding radiance ... the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.” The precious stones, together with the rainbow, are an incipient hint not only that this vision will eventually issue into that of a new creation, but it already portrays the beginning of the new creation in heaven. The precious stones in 21:10–11, 18–23 are part of a depiction of the new creation, and the rainbow is the first revelatory sign of the new creation which emerged after the Noachic flood. That the new creation is inaugurated with Christ’s redemptive work is apparent from 3:14 (see the comments there) and from the use of “new” in 5:9 to describe that work (see “new heaven and earth” in 21:1).

4 The next thing John sees is **twenty-four thrones** upon which are sitting **twenty-four elders**. There have been a variety of identifications of these elders. The number **twenty-four** is significant. As the picture here is of the throne room in the heavenly temple, the elders may be based on David’s twenty-four orders of priests (1 Chron. 24:3–19), twenty-four Levitical gatekeepers (1 Chron. 26:17–19), and twenty-four Levitical worship

leaders (1 Chron. 25:6–31), in which case they represent the church at worship. In light of Rev. 21:12–14 (where the apostles and patriarchs are mentioned together in relation to the new Jerusalem), it likely also refers to the sum of the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles who, taken together, represent the church in its character as a universal priesthood of believers. The elders cannot be classified as actual redeemed saints, however, for they are clearly distinguished from the multitude of the saved in 7:9–17 (see on 7:13–14). And the fact that they present the prayers of the saints in 5:8 and sing of the redeemed in the third person also distinguishes them from believers.

Remembering that in the letters the angels were identified as representatives of the seven churches and that in Daniel 10–12 angels represent nations, the elders here are to be identified as angelic beings representing the church as a whole, including the saints of the OT. If the four living creatures are heavenly representatives of all animate life throughout creation (as most interpreters think), then the elders are probably heavenly representatives of God's people. The four living beings represent general creation and the elders the elect of God's special creation. Also suggesting an angelic identification of the elders is the fact that the angel who reveals the visions of the book to John is referred to as "a fellow-servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book," all of whom are to worship together (22:9).

Therefore, the reality being conveyed is that the church is represented in heaven by powerful heavenly beings who attend the throne of God, and who therefore hold great power (they have their own thrones and wear **golden crowns**), which they exercise on our behalf. The elders are angels who operate in a priestly capacity by presenting the prayers of the saints to God (compare 5:8 and 8:3) and by interpreting heavenly visions to people (compare 5:5; 7:13 and 10:4, 8; 19:9; 22:8). This further reflects their Levitical priestly identification noted above, especially since the throne room vision of chs. 4–5 is also to be understood as occurring in the heavenly temple (note that the visions of Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6, both alluded to throughout chs. 4–5, are set within the context of a heavenly temple).

In this light, v. 4 is a development of the ideas of the previous chapters concerning the saints' participation in a heavenly temple (1:13, 20; 2:12) and possession of crowns, white clothing, and dominion, which in their fullness will be granted them if they persevere (cf. 2:10, 26–27; 3:4–5, 11, 18, 21). As in chs. 1–3, the church is pictured in such angelic guise to remind its members that already a dimension of their existence is heavenly, that their real home is not with the unbelieving "earth-dwellers," and that they have heavenly help and protection in their struggle to obtain their reward and not be conformed to their pagan environment. One of the purposes of the church meeting on earth in its weekly gatherings (as in, e.g., 1:3) is to be reminded of its heavenly existence and identity, and this to occur in part apparently as it models its worship on the angels' and the heavenly church's worship of the exalted Lamb, as vividly portrayed in chs. 4–5.

5 John witnesses next **flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder** coming from the throne—the same as Moses beheld in Exod. 19:16. This phrase is repeated in 8:5; 11:19; and 16:18, all of which have to do with God’s judgments. This becomes significant in light of the way many of the plagues of Revelation are clearly modeled (as we shall see) on those of Exodus. This then may serve as assurance to suffering Christians that their God is sovereign and has not forgotten them, because He has not forgotten their persecutors, whom He will surely judge by fire (e.g., 19:20; 20:9–10; 21:8).

The structural order of Dan. 7:9ff. and Ezek. 1:26ff. lies in the background, since both use fire metaphors following the mention of a throne and its occupant. The **seven lamps of fire** is the vision seen by Zechariah, where there is a vision of seven lamps in a temple, followed by its interpretation (Zech. 4:2–3, 10; so Rev. 1:12, 20) and associated with the Spirit of Yahweh (Zech. 4:6). The significance of the seven temple lamps in relation to the work of the Spirit is developed in 5:6 (see the comments there).

6–8a The vision continues to unfold. The **sea of glass like crystal** may be the heavenly equivalent of the massive “bronze sea” in the courtyard of Solomon’s temple (2 Kgs. 25:13; Jer. 52:17, 20), since chs. 4–5, as we have seen, portray a vision of the temple in heaven. More prominently in view, however, is that this **sea** is the heavenly version of the Red Sea, for we find the same “sea of glass” mentioned in 15:2, where the victorious saints are standing on it singing the song of Moses. The two passages are also linked by the application of the notion of “overcoming” to heavenly beings or to people who “stand” either on or by the sea. Perhaps the most prominent background for the image of the sea is that of Ezek. 1:22 (which is confirmed by the wording there, “something like an expanse, like the awesome gleam of crystal,” and by the preceding Ezekiel 1 allusions already observed). The Red Sea represents the obstacle to freedom, and the OT presents it as the dwelling place of the dragon or sea monster (Isa. 51:9–11; Ps. 74:12–15; Ezek. 32:2). The concept of “sea” in Revelation represents the reality of evil (13:1; 15:2; 16:3; 21:1, on which see; as well as in the concept of the “abyss” in 11:7). This thought receives support from the model for these chapters in Daniel 7, since the sea as a picture of the beast’s origin is a significant feature there. The beast comes out of the sea (Rev. 13:1), which is equated with the “abyss” in 11:7. 4:6 gives a picture of the stilling of the hellish waters *from the heavenly perspective*, though the devil wreaks his wrath even more furiously on earth because he has been decisively defeated in heaven (see further on 5:6b; 12:12; 13:3). This is the calming of cosmic “D-Day,” wherein the saints’ redemption from the devil is accomplished; the devil’s final, complete defeat awaits “mopping-up” operations by the saints and Christ’s final coming in judgment at the end of history, the final “V-Day.” The Lamb’s overcoming has also paved the way for the saints’ overcoming of the beast at the same sea, as pictured in 15:2–4. In the new Jerusalem, there is no longer any sea (21:1). God has now stilled these demonic waters and established His throne over them. In contrast to the sea, stilled *like crystal*, the river of life, clear *as crystal*, now flows freely from His throne (22:1).

Before the throne John sees **four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind**,

each one of them having six wings. There are both similarities and differences between John's vision and the related visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah. Ezekiel saw similar creatures (cherubim); each had four faces with many eyes but only four wings, which formed part of the base of the throne (Ezek. 1:1–28; 10:1–22). Isaiah saw six-winged creatures called seraphim which stood above the throne (Isa. 6:1–7). The living beings here are said to be **in the center and around the throne** or **in the midst of the throne**, which probably means that they stood near it. This is elucidated further by noticing that later in the book the living beings fall down in worship *before* the throne (5:8; 19:4). The cherubim/seraphim-like angels and the creatures here would seem to represent a similar high order of angelic beings.

Some have interpreted the four figures as symbolizing the fullness of life and power inherent in the divine nature, since each of the animals listed is the head of its species. It is likely that the four figures are designed to be representative of the whole created order of animate life. The multitude of eyes in the living beings signifies divine omniscience, signifying that they are God's agents. In the light of 5:6 and 5:8ff., the living beings must also be seen as servants of the Lamb. They are mentioned in ch. 4 not only because they form part of the eternal royal entourage around the heavenly throne, but also because they inaugurate the judgments upon mankind and continue to mediate those judgments until the final consummation (cf. 6:1–8; 15:7). Their knowing eyes search the earth, and they execute punishments only upon those who truly deserve them. For the discerning reader, these **living creatures** are an encouragement to keep persevering under persecution, knowing that God is acutely aware of their plight and is already in the process of taking action in their favor and against their persecutors (as chs. 6ff. reveal).

The **four living creatures** may be symbolic rather than literal descriptions of heavenly creatures, a supposition suggested by the various differences between the visions of John, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. If the "book," "seals," "lion," "lamb," "horns," and "seven eyes" are all symbolic, so likely also are the other features of the vision in chs. 4–5. The same symbolic assessment is probably true with respect to the **twenty-four elders**. This does not mean what John was seeing is unreflective of the heavenly reality, merely that the pictorial representation should not be taken literally.

8b The hymns of vv. 8b–11 interpret the preceding vision (vv. 2–8a). The vision of God on the throne surrounded by heavenly beings, fire, and a sea is interpreted to mean that He is holy (v. 8b) and sovereign over creation (vv. 8b, 11b), which demonstrates His "worthiness" (v. 11a) to be praised, worshiped, and glorified (vv. 9–11). *The hymns make explicit the main point of the vision and of the whole chapter: God is to be glorified because of His holiness and sovereignty.* Also in this section is found the reason that the four living beings represent the whole of animate life. They are performing the function which all of creation is meant to fulfill. That is, all things were created to praise God for His holiness and glorify Him for His work of creation. The twenty-four elders specifically represent redeemed humanity's purpose to praise and glorify God, which is actually carried out, not

only by them in heaven, *but also by the true community of faith on earth.*

Like Isaiah's seraphim (Isa. 6:2–3), the elders speak out praises to the Lord God Almighty, never ceasing to say **Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.** Isaiah 6 was drawn into the vision in vv. 8–9 because its scene of a theophany in the heavenly temple has such striking likenesses to that of Daniel 7 and Ezekiel 1. The threefold name for God, **the Lord God, the Almighty**, is based on its recurrent use in the LXX (Amos 3:13; 4:13; 5:14–16; 9:5–6, 15; Hos. 12:5; Nah. 3:5; Zech. 10:3; cf. Mal. 2:16). The second name for God, the One **who was and is and is to come**, expresses an idea of divine infinity and sovereignty over history. In the light of 11:17, the last clause of the formula, the One **who is to come**, expresses a future, once-occurring eschatological coming of God (see also on 1:4 for discussion of this threefold name). The point of this threefold temporal phrase is to inspire confidence in God's control of all the details of history and to instill courage to stand strong in the face of whatever particular difficulties test our faith.

9 The fact of God's sovereignty is expressed once more by the statement that the living creatures, again like Isaiah's seraphim (see Isa. 6:1), give their praise **to Him who sits on the throne.** This declaration of God's power is made in the heavenly court of the temple throne room, but this authority, which is far more than an abstract idea, will be rigorously enforced on earth. Thus suffering saints throughout history can be comforted by this heavenly vision.

10 This worship of the living creatures sets off a further round of worship by the elders. Both the creatures and the elders are said to worship **Him who lives forever and ever**, the same term ("Him who lives forever") by which both Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:34) and the linen-clad angel (Dan. 12:7) refer to God. This expression of God's eternity further emphasizes the divine attribute mentioned in v. 8 in the threefold title "who was and who is and who is to come." In both Dan. 4:34 and 12:7, "Him who lives forever" is intended as a contrast with the temporary reigns of evil kings, whose rule is taken away because they have arrogated to themselves claims of deity (Dan. 4:30–33; 11:36–37) and have persecuted God's people (11:30–35; 12:7). Both passages in Daniel contrast this everlasting God with evil kings who rebel against God and persecute His people, but are eventually brought low (Dan. 4:33; 11:36), the same situation of persecution faced by suffering saints both in the seven churches and ever since. This is a warning to compromisers not to worship pagan gods or kings who take for themselves titles which belong only to the true God. Christians are now trampled underfoot by such evil powers, but eventually will be vindicated by God and so are now encouraged to persevere in the midst of adversity, even though they are presently no match for their oppressors.

11 That such a contrast between God's eternal kingship and that of temporal rulers is meant in v. 10 is apparent from the striking similarity of the divine title **our Lord and our God** to the title *dominus et deus noster*, which became a way of addressing the emperor

Domitian, in whose reign John received his vision. This verse commences the elders' praise of God, which is closely parallel to 5:12–13. The basis for the exclamation in v. 11a is given in v. 11b, where God is said to be worthy of the **glory and honor and power** ascribed to Him because He is the Creator of all things. The basis of the praise is twofold: God's creation is based solely on His will and proceeds from it, and God's power is revealed through creation, as demonstrated by the praising recognition of His created beings. The elders' praise is concluded with the phrase **because of Thy will they existed [were] and were created**. It is best to view the first verb as referring to God's ongoing preservation of the created order and the second to the overall act of creating all things at the beginning of history: "they continually exist and have come into being."

The fact that the elders refer to God's ongoing preservation of the universe before His original creation of it is meant to remind believers pastorally that everything that happens to them throughout history is part of God's created purposes. God has not retired from His throne. He initiated history and is still very much in charge of it, in spite of what appearances sometimes suggest. His people must trust in this fact so that, even when they experience suffering, they can rest assured that it has a redemptive purpose and is according to His will. But how does God carry out His plan on behalf of His people? Ch. 5 explains how: through Christ's death and resurrection and ongoing rule over all things, and through the Spirit whom He gives to his followers. The chapter builds to a crescendo in the giving of glory to God, which is the main point of the chapter and the central focus of heaven and should thus become the central focus also of the church on earth. God's people should remember that God is orchestrating history not to make them great but to make His name great and glorified.

SUGGESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 4:1–11

On the significance of the throne of God. In this vision John is ushered into God's throne room. One of the ways Revelation emphasizes the sovereignty of God is through its frequent use of the word "throne." The great majority of NT references to the throne of God occur in Revelation. The entire universe is pictured as having its center in God's throne, with angelic and human creatures subject to the One who sits on it. All the judgments of the subsequent chapters issue from the throne. How do we express our understanding of God's sovereignty in our day-to-day lives? Does it do justice to the vision John saw? Do we in practice live with a weak view of God's sovereignty? Revelation also depicts the activities of the enemy and his agents. How do we distinguish between what God has decreed and what the enemy is doing? What is the nature of their "interrelationship"? (we shall address this explicitly in our comments on 6:1–8). How can a strong theology of God's sovereignty bring both comfort and biblical perspective to those who are suffering? How can a weak view lead us into confusion and despair?

On the reality of heavenly beings. John witnesses a scene of worship involving the elders and

the living creatures. Although his depiction is symbolic rather than literal, it is nonetheless real, in that real beings are portrayed with real functions. As subsequent chapters reveal, in addition to their role in heavenly worship, the elders present our prayers and interpret heavenly visions to believers, while the living creatures administer judgment throughout the earth. How often have we taken seriously the existence of these beings? Have we relegated them to the realm of biblical allegory? What have we lost because of that? How does a western worldview affect our ability to understand and receive biblical truth of this nature?

On the nature of heavenly worship. The primary function of the heavenly beings is to worship God. Indeed, it seems that worship is one of the main activities of heaven. Why did God reveal this scene of worship to John (and hence to us)? If the elders represent the OT worship leaders, a strong connection is established between earthly and heavenly worship. How does the focus of heavenly worship as revealed here—the glorification of God—set a standard for our worship? Can we use what we see of heavenly worship here to help us in our understanding of what earthly worship should be? How does it affect the substance of what we say, pray, or sing? How do we work out the differences between outward forms of worship, which may be relative (styles or types of music, for instance), and the inward heart of worship (its focus on Christ and on God), which must never change? Do we argue in our church over outward forms of worship while missing its true nature and intent? And is it possible, if we sought to model our own worship, whether individual or corporate, on what is portrayed here, that, as we declared the same truths about God as the heavenly beings do, the same Holy Spirit who is pictured as being before the throne would deepen and transform our understanding of God and His glory in a way that touches our whole being, in its spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and even physical components?³

The Seven Seals (4:1–8:1)

Prelude in Heaven (4:1–5:14)

The prelude to Part II consists of a double vision which discloses the control center on which all reality is dependent and from which all actions of judgment and salvation emanate. The vision of the **throne** and the heavenly court around it (4:1–11) is followed by the vision of the sealed **scroll** and **the Lamb** who is worthy to open the scroll (5:1–14). The opening of the seals is interrupted by an *interlude* (7:1–17) between the sixth and the seventh seal. This interlude shifts our attention from the catastrophes that befall the world through seals one to six, to the preservation and salvation of the saints. The interludes also forestall the translation of the sequence of his visions into a chronological sequence. From

³ Beale, G. K., & Campbell, D. H. (2015). *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (pp. 98–108). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

the opening of the seventh seal, a new cycle evolves—the trumpet septet (8:2–11:19). An interlude (10:1–11:13) between the sixth and the seventh trumpet connects the first section (A) with the second (B) (12:1–16:21).

The messages to the seven churches evaluated their conditions from the point of view of Christ, who appeared to John on the island of Patmos, on earth. The prelude of 4:1–5:14 focuses our attention on heaven, where the central symbols are the **throne** of God and the **Lamb**. John used images from many traditions and integrated them into a new magnificent picture. Parallels to his report (which should not be confused with sources) reflect the complex social setting in which oriental astral mythology and Hellenistic and Greco-Roman traditions were operative alongside Old Testament and apocalyptic traditions. David Aune detected some influence of the ceremonial of the imperial court on John's description of the throne room. The acclamations and hymns, the acts of prostration, the surrender of crowns, the claim to represent cosmic order, and the cosmic symbolism of numbers were as much a part of the imperial ceremonial as were the officials surrounding the emperor who saw to it that appropriate honors and accolades were offered to him. By using some features of the imperial court ceremonial, John was able to reveal that the pomp and circumstance surrounding the emperor and his worship are but a demonic parody of worship in heaven.

1–4—John connected the throne room vision (4:1–11) with the “inaugural” audition (1:9–11) through the **voice** of the revealer angel which sounded **like a trumpet** (1:10; 4:1). **And lo, in heaven an open door!** We have already heard that Jesus stands at the *door* seeking entrance and that he holds “the key of David” and opens the door to the new Jerusalem (3:7, 12). Thus the images of the throne and the door link this vision to the message septet. Now John is permitted to look through an “open door” into heaven (cf. Acts 7:56) so that he can write to his people about the future. The angel promises to show him **what must take place after this**. This promise refers back to 1:1 because his new visions will be mediated by an angel. And the promise refers back to John's commission (1:19) to “write ... what is to take place hereafter.” **After this** (4:2) does not imply that the remainder of the book will deal *only* with the future (12:1–6 refers to the past). **After this** points to further visions and auditions after the commission to write the seven messages has been completed. But more, what *must* take place **after this** is the future judgment and the future salvation promised in the seven messages and envisioned in chaps. 6–22. Revelation 1:19 as well as 4:1 is dependent on Dan. 2:28, 45. Revelation 1:19 introduces the seven messages; 4:1 introduces Part II, which will focus specifically on the future manifestation of God, who is to come (1:8; cf. 21:5–8), and of Christ, who is to come (1:7; cf. 19:11–16; 20:4–6). In so doing, John extended the realized eschatology which he shares with his audience (cf. 1:5–6) into the future, for it is out of the future that God and Christ will come in judgment and salvation.

A heavenly voice bids John to **come up hither**, to heaven. **In the Spirit**, that is, in a state of ecstasy, John was translated into heaven. Strange as this may sound to us, such heavenly

journeys were part of the apocalyptic tradition that was at John's disposal (cf. 17:3; 21:10; 2 Cor. 12:2; *1 Enoch* 70:1–71:3; 81:5). Generally an apocalyptic seer would receive insight into God's secret plans for the future. Yet what John sees and what he discloses in this book is not an apocalyptic schedule of events, but **lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne!** He is the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is and who was and who is to come (1:8). In distinction from the detailed description of Christ in the inaugural vision, there is no parallel description of God here. The awe-inspiring sight is the **throne**, symbol of God's majesty and omnipotence. While John's narration of his vision made use of Ezek. 1:26–28, unlike Ezekiel he did not draw God's contours in terms of "a likeness, as it were, of a human form." Only the impression of brilliant awe-inspiring splendor is conveyed. Heaven is not pictured as a temple or a synagogue but as the throne room of a great king. Dazzling light of brilliant colors radiates from him, translucent **like jasper and glowing red like carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow** with the soft green colors **that looked like an emerald**. God dwells in light unapproachable to humans (1 Tim. 6:16). But, surprise! God remains silent throughout the vision. No friendly consolation is uttered, such as: The future won't be as bad as you think; every cloud has a silver lining and the sun shines again after a hurricane. No inane comments, only total majestic silence.

In concentric circles around the throne, John saw a brilliant rainbow and around it a circle of **twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders**. Are they the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles whose names are found on the gates and the foundation of the new Jerusalem (21:12–14)? Perhaps. But these **elders** are not human beings who have been exalted to heaven. John clearly distinguished between the elders seated on the thrones and the believers who stand before the throne (7:9, 13–14). Hence it would appear that the elders are angelic beings (cf. Isa. 24:23; 1 Kings 22:19; Ps. 89:8; *1 Enoch* 39–40;). They may be the heavenly angelic counterparts of patriarchs and apostles, representing the true people of God. As such, they would be quite different from the seven angels of the seven churches who were subject to censure. The 24 angelic representatives of faithful Israel and of the victorious church are part of the heavenly council that surrounds the throne of God. Their **white garments** symbolize their holiness, even as white garments symbolize "the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8). Their **thrones** and **golden crowns** indicate their *royal* functions. In 5:8 we hear of their *priestly* task of bringing "the prayers of the saints" before the throne. Moreover, they glorify God and the Lamb in heavenly worship (4:11; 5:9–10, 14). Finally, they also interpret some visions to John (5:5; 7:13–14).

5–8—The space between God's throne and the elders is filled with **flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder** issuing from the throne. These are traditional signs of theophanies, of appearances of God in the Old Testament (cf. Exod. 19:16–18; Ezek. 1:13). These manifestations emanate from the throne at the end of each judgment cycle in which God's glory made its appearance (8:5; 11:19; 16:18). **Before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God** (1:4). This symbol of the Holy Spirit in

his sevenfold activity can also be found in Christ's possession (3:1), or be depicted as the "eyes" of the Lamb (5:6). Here the **torches of fire** should probably be envisioned as seven burning stars. (For fire as metaphor of the Spirit, see Matt. 3:11; Acts 2:3.) Farther out in front of the throne and the torches there is a **sea of glass, like crystal** (cf. 15:2; 22:1). An old idea of water above the firmament (Gen. 1:7) is used in a new way. Unlike, John does not say that there is a great lake in heaven. What is in front of the throne looked to him **as it were** like a sea of glass, like crystal, symbolizing the transcendent purity of God's realm which constitutes a threat to all that is impure. Hence in 15:2–4 we hear that the sea of glass is "mingled with fire," a symbol of threat and judgment.

On each side of the throne are four living creatures, the symbols of creation, as it ought to be. They are God's pets within the heavenly court. Just as the number twelve symbolizes the people of God, so the number four is a cosmic number (e.g., the four corners of the earth, 7:1), and here it is a symbol of the new creation. Again John modified a traditional image. Ezekiel's cherubim are "four living creatures," who carry the throne-chariot of God. Each of them has multiple faces—of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. For John, each of the living creatures has its own distinct features (lion, ox, man, and eagle). Creatures with human and animal faces surround the throne in harmony, attentive and ready to serve. For creation is God's pet project and hence these four creatures are nearest to his throne. They do not carry the throne, as in Ezekiel, but they encircle it. John's vision also omitted the "wheels" of Ezekiel's throne, the rims of which, we are told, were "full of eyes round about" (Ezek. 1:18). This distinctive trait is transferred to the four creatures themselves who now are **full of eyes in front and behind**. If we tried to picture them, they would look rather bizarre. John's images are meant to be heard rather than imagined as pictures. John mentioned their eyes twice, "in front and behind" (v. 6) and, with a slight variation, **all round and within** (v. 8). The hearer would understand that nothing is hidden from these all-seeing omniscient creatures, whose attention is focused on God, their Master. Moreover, John endowed each of these four creatures with the **six wings** of Isaiah's seraphim (Isa. 6:2), to be ready for service at once. Like the seraphim, the living creatures lead the liturgy in heaven and that distinguishes them most from Ezekiel's cherubim. Since the time of Irenaeus these four creatures have come to symbolize the four Gospels (Matthew, the man; Mark, the lion; Luke, the ox; and John, the eagle; *Adv. Haer.* 3.11.8), but that was not John's meaning.

Readers of this commentary should not be upset that I speak of God's pets. They should remember their own faithful dogs and cats whose joy it is to live in their presence, to please them and adore them. Worship ought to be just that—not a dreary hour on Sunday morning with a boring sermon, not another responsibility to be fulfilled. But worship should and *shall be* as natural as exhaling and inhaling, comprising the sum total of our work, time, and existence—the adoration of God, whose presence is life, joy, and peace. God's pets in John's vision are the symbol of harmony and worship yet to come, when God shall dwell among his people (21:1–22:5).

And day and night they never cease to sing, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (cf. Isa. 6:3). The four living creatures not only demonstrate the future harmony of animals and humans, they also serve as leaders in the liturgy and the obeisance of the heavenly court. God’s pets fulfill the highest task of creation, worship. Their thrice holy acclamation, called the trisagion, is the high point of the first part of the throne vision. The three times most Holy One is set apart as the Wholly Other from everyone else in heaven and on earth, in the present and the future. In Isaiah’s trisagion the seraphim proclaim: “The whole earth is full of his [God’s] glory” (Isa. 6:3). Not so in John’s Apocalypse where the earth is full of abominations. God is the **Almighty** One, the Pantocrator, John’s favorite title. He is the sovereign Lord of past, present, and future, the One who **is to come**. The Lord of history is one who not only exists in the beginning (Gen. 1:1) but whose glorious all-transforming presence shall be revealed in the end in harmonious new paradisiacal creation (21:1–22:5). His coming in judgment and salvation is the theme of the rest of John’s book.

9–11—The focus of the throne vision shifts to the future, from the unceasing praise and worship day and night to one particular future event. Unfortunately, the RSV misses the point by failing to translate the verbs with future tense. The Greek conjunction (*hotan*), with future tense, does not denote a continuous process in the present. The 24 elders do not perpetually cast down their crowns before the throne, but they *shall* surrender them when God has come to establish his power on earth. When the events of 6:1–22:5 happen, then the eschatological praise and **thanks** (Greek, *eucharistia*; cf. 11:17–18) shall be offered by the four creatures and the eschatological homage and worship by the elders will take place, and they shall lay down their **crowns before the throne** of the Almighty King, prostrating themselves before him. The surrender of their crowns not only illustrates that their rule is subordinate to and derived from God, as is every other legitimate rule and authority, but also indicates that in the end there will be no need for subordinate authorities of angelic or earthly princes; for God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28), and all earthly servants shall be a democracy of kings and priests unto God. Rome’s imperial ceremonial which requires rulers to surrender their crowns before Caesar is but a sham parody of heaven (cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.29).

The acclamation **Worthy art thou** was not derived from the biblical tradition. It probably was shouted by the populace of the provinces at the triumphal entry of emperors or their representatives into cities. The acclamation “Worthy art thou” expresses a value judgment that includes the consensus of the governed subjects regarding the moral excellence of their ruler. The ideal king should reign and sit in judgment not just by right of legitimate succession but by his superior virtue. God’s moral excellence finds an echo in the consensus of his entourage in heaven who acclaim him with, “Worthy art thou.” The 24 angelic rulers pay homage to him who alone is **Lord and God** in opposition to the pretensions of Roman emperors who assumed divine status in the eastern part of the empire and appropriated unto themselves titles and powers that belong to God. He shall

come in judgment and salvation, and he alone is worthy **to receive glory and honor and power**. His eschatological deeds are grounded in his work as creator; **for thou didst create all things**, and whatever exists owes its being to his **will**. This acclamation of the future reign of God forms a transition to the second part of the double vision which initiates the apocalyptic events at the end time.

Two concluding comments: one, this introductory vision deals with worship, rather than with consolation, because worship will be the issue John's churches will have to face in the future (Revelation 12–13); two, the liturgy of John's churches in Asia is not projected into heaven, as some interpreters have thought. The hymns and acclamations in this book are creations by John, appropriate for their literary context. Yet their literary function is to connect the worship of the churches on earth with the liturgy in heaven. It is the same God who is worshiped on earth as well as in heaven, and many individual words and phrases, like the trisagion, the Amen and Hallelujah, are the same on earth as in heaven.

The second part of the double vision brings new movement into the picture of the heavenly worship by introducing the decisive event, the transfer of the scroll to the Lamb. The vision of the **scroll** in God's **right hand** is interrupted by John's weeping (v. 4) and the reply of one of the elders (v. 5). Verses 6 and 7 describe the acceptance of the scroll by the Lamb. Verses 8–14 bring antiphonal acclamations of the Lamb by the heavenly court, followed by the doxology of all of creation concluded with the Amen of the four creatures and the worship of the elders. While chap. 4 was influenced primarily by Ezekiel 1, this chapter is dependent on Dan. 7:10–18, 27; 12:4, 9.

Some interpreters thought that John made use of an oriental enthronement ritual, in which a person is adopted (by a god), enthroned, and acclaimed by the court and the people. If John had such a ritual in mind, he changed it drastically. The exaltation and enthronement of Christ are presupposed not only here but already in chaps. 1–3 (cf. 3:21). There is no real enthronement, except that Christ takes the scroll from God (v. 7). John did not even narrate that the Lamb, after taking the scroll, sat down on his throne. The emphasis in this vision does not lie on the Lamb's enthronement but on his authority to open the scroll and initiate the end-time events. Yet the acclamation and the homage of the heavenly court (vv. 8–14) disclose that a new stage in the eschatological drama has been reached, a drama that began with Christ's death and resurrection. In short, John modified individual features of the enthronement ritual.⁴

⁴ Krodel, G. A. (1989). *Revelation* (pp. 152–160). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.