

The Facebook Commentary on Revelation

CHAPTER 4



Jon Paulien, PhD

Ministry4Thinking.com



The Facebook Commentary on Revelation

Jon Paulien

Revelation Chapter 4

Rev 4:1-8:1 (Introductory Overview)–

I now come to the portion of the book of Revelation that my Facebook readers have probably been waiting for. We are getting into the symbolic prophecies that offer interpreters more difficulty than any other part of the Apocalypse, namely the seals and the trumpets. Before we get into the details of chapter 4, it would be helpful to explore the larger picture of the seven seals vision as a whole. So I will briefly go chapter by chapter through Revelation 8:1, noting significant structural clues that have often been missed by interpreters. It will be helpful for readers to read the above passage at least once as we begin our exploration. After completing this introductory overview, we will go through chapter 4 verse by verse, as we have done in chapter 3. That will set the foundation for chapter 5, which is the crucial foundation for the seven seals of chapters 6 and 7.

In conducting this overview, we will pay attention to all the methods of study explored in my book [*The Deep Things of God*](#). We will do exegesis of crucial details, we will explore the structure, we will examine major Old Testament backgrounds and we will explore the

implications of the gospel for the seven seals vision. The result of such a careful approach opens the possibility of sound interpretation, interpretation that is not based on feelings, or a gut-sense of current events, but on what we actually find in the text. We want to find, as far as possible, the author's actual intention in writing these passages. When we determine his intention in the original setting, we will be on much safer ground in drawing out applications for our own time, and also get a deeper understanding of what historical application might be appropriate.

Rev 4 (Introduction)— A quick reading of chapter 4 demonstrates that the crucial word in this chapter is “throne” (Greek *thronos*). The word “throne” appears fourteen times in the eleven verses of the chapter. Everything that happens in chapter 4 happens in relation to the throne. It mentions “on” (Greek: *epi*) the throne (Rev 4:2, 4, 6, 9, 10), “all around” (Greek: *kuklothen, kuklô*) the throne (4:3, 4, 6), “out from” (Greek: *ek*) the throne (4:5), “before” or “in front of” (Greek: *enôpion*) the throne (4:5, 6, 10), and “in the midst of” (*en mesô*) the throne (4:6). If you count the above references, they number only thirteen. The fourteenth reference to the throne of God in the chapter comes without a preposition (4:2: “a throne was there in heaven”—Greek: *thronos ekeito en tô ouranô*). The word “throne” is clearly the central word in the chapter and it is central to everything that takes place in the chapter.

Since everything in chapter 4 centers around the throne of God in heaven, it is important to ask, *What is a throne and what does it represent?* The language of “throne” here is a metaphor for God’s rule of the universe drawn from the governmental language of the time. In particular, a throne represents the right to rule. The person who sits on a throne has the legal right to rule over a piece of territory, a nation, or a group of some form. This meaning is confirmed in Revelation 5 when the question is raised, “Who is worthy?” to open the book and break the seals. The Lamb who does so joins the one sitting on the throne, so He is deemed qualified to sit on the throne. Since ancient thrones could be couches as well as armchairs, the metaphor allows for multiple occupants on the throne of heaven. This language suggests to us that the central issue in chapters 4 and 5 is the right to rule and how that functions in heavenly places. The power to rule is assigned to the figures on the throne by the adoring multitude around the throne (Rev 5:11). Revelation 4 depicts the governing center of the universe, and the throne is the symbol of God’s authority. In chapter 4, that authority is grounded in creation (4:11).

When one considers the full imagery of this chapter, it is evident that readers with a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament would recognize the key background text. Behind the vision of Revelation 4 is the vision described in Ezekiel 1, which is part of one of the major prophets of the OT. With Revelation 4 in hand, notice the parallels in Ezekiel 1, NIV. I highlight some of the main parallel elements:

"I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like **four living creatures**. In appearance their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four **wings**. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their

four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings, and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.

"Their faces looked like this: ***Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle.***" Ezekiel 1:4-10, NIV.

"The appearance of ***the living creatures*** was like burning coals of ***fire*** or like ***torches***. Fire moved back and forth among ***the creatures***; it was bright, and ***lightning flashed*** out of it. "Ezekiel 1:13.

"Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were ***full of eyes all around.***" Ezekiel 1:18.

"Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a ***throne of sapphire***, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a ***rainbow*** in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

"This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking." Ezekiel 1:26-28.

A simple reading of Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4 shows a multitude of parallels between the two passages. I once gave to my doctoral students the assignment to compare Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4 word for word. They found that 33% of the words of Revelation 4 are found in Ezekiel 1. That leaves little question that Revelation 4 and Ezekiel 1 are structural parallels.

There are four other major Old Testament background texts behind Revelation 4 and 5. There are many echos of Daniel 7, which is also a vision of the heavenly throne room. In Isaiah 6 the prophet catches a vision of the heavenly sanctuary and hears the phrase repeated, "holy, holy, holy." Another major background text is Exodus 19, the glory of God on Mount Sinai. Finally there is 1 Kings 22, which is Micaiah's vision of the heavenly court in which God was speaking with his angels about events that were happening on earth. All five of these Old Testament texts are alluded to in Revelation 4 and 5. What they all have in common is a vision of God on the throne (metaphorically at Sinai).

Revelation 4 and 5 allude to five major Old Testament contexts, Ezekiel 1, Daniel 7, Isaiah 6, Exodus 19 and 1 Kings 22. What do all five of these passages have in common? Each of them centers on the throne of God. Four focus explicitly on His heavenly throne and court, but one is about His earthly throne on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19). When the people were gathered around Mount Sinai, God Himself came and resided on Mount Sinai. So the vision of Revelation 4 seems to draw together everything the Old Testament has to say about the throne of God, in order to make its point. The central theme of Revelation 4 is the throne. The passage concerns God's right to rule the universe. God is counted worthy to sit on the throne and govern the universe because He created all things.

So far we have determined that the central point of Revelation 4 is the throne of God. And the major allusions to the Old Testament all connect with the major throne scenes there. But that leads us to one further question. What kind of scene are we looking at in Revelation 4? Is it a general description of the throne room or a point in time? Several key markers in the text

suggest that this vision is not describing a point in time but rather a general description of heavenly worship.

The first evidence of this general description can be found in verse 2, NIV: "At once I was I the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it." John simply enters the scene and the throne is already there. In fact, the Greek word "was there" (*ekeito*) is a past continuous tense. The throne is there and has been there for some time. The throne is not something new, what is new is that John is observing the scene. This is in contrast with Daniel 7:9, where the throne was set in place for a specific occasion.

A further evidence that chapter 4 is not a specific point in time is found in 4:8. There the four living creatures are saying or singing "holy, holy, holy" day and night without a pause. This is the language of continuous action over a period of time rather than action at a specific moment. The vision of Revelation 4 is timeless.

A third evidence that the scene of Revelation 4 is a general description rather than a specific point in time can be found in verse 9. I quote verse 9-11 for context. "Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, 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: '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.'"

Revelation 4:9-11, NIV.

The Greek grammar that underlies "Whenever the living creatures give. . . then the twenty-four elders. . ." is a description of repetitive action. What we have in Revelation 4 is a general description of heavenly worship rather than a specific time or event in either earth or heaven.

Before we move to an introductory overview of Revelation 5, let me briefly talk about the importance of careful attention to the details of the text in Revelation, especially in the original language. Readers of the Bible can train themselves to be more and more observant of the Scriptures. And when one does, all kinds of things start popping up.

Exegesis of Revelation 4 reminds me of a photography class I once took. The first assignment was to photograph "trees"--single trees, multiple trees, a forest, branches, twigs, flowers on the trees. The photography teacher simply said, "Shoot a roll of trees in all types of places and circumstances." I started looking at my world in ways I had never looked at it before. I found driftwood on the beach, stands of pines, trees that were losing their leaves, trees with different color leaves, branches on the ground, etc. The point of the project was to teach me how to observe my environment more carefully than before and to notice things I had failed to see before.

By careful examination we have noticed three major structural cues in Revelation 4. First, we noticed that the key word of the chapter is throne. Everything in the chapter centers on the throne. Second, the major background in the Old Testament is the heavenly throne texts (Ezekiel 1, Daniel 7, Isaiah 6, 1 Kings 22, and, in an extended sense, Exodus 19). Third, chapter 4 is a general description of what worship in heaven is like, there is no specific time or event in view. All of this will prove significant as we develop our understanding of the seven seals.

Rev 5 (Intro)— Applying similar tools of observation to Revelation 5, we seek out the key words in the text, note the Old Testament backgrounds and ask whether we are dealing with a point in time or a general description like chapter 4. It doesn't take much exposure to chapter 5 to realize this is quite different from chapter 4. It is clearly a point in time. It is a specific scene, in fact it is a crisis scene. All the praise from chapter 4 suddenly stops and everyone looks toward the front with anticipation and silence, seeking to understand what is going on.

The crisis in the throne room of the universe is portrayed in terms of a book that no one can open. The solution to the problem is finding a person who is "worthy" to open the book. It is not clear at first glance why the book is so important but it is certainly clear that it *is* important that someone be found that can open the book. So we have a crisis event, who is worthy to open the book, and by implication, to sit with God on His throne.

In chapter 4 everything was centered on the throne. When you come to chapter 5, is throne still the key word of this chapter? The word certainly appears again, and it is still at the center of the description, but it is not as dominant as it was in the previous chapter. The reason is that there are additional key words in this passage. Along with "throne" one finds words of central importance such as "worthy," "book," and "Lamb."

The word "worthy" actually points back to Revelation 4:11, NIV. "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." "Worthy" in the original (Greek: *axios*) means to be deserving or qualified for a task or a position. In chapter 4 the one sitting on the throne is called "worthy" because He created all things. But in chapter 5 it becomes apparent that creation isn't grounds enough to open the book. The crisis in chapter 5 must be exceedingly great if even God Himself cannot break the seals to open the book.

This chapter, therefore, is clearly a point in time and not a general description, like the previous chapter. A question we will explore later on is what point in time this scene is referring to and exactly what event is in view. But before we can address that question, we need to do more careful exegesis of the chapter and its surrounding context.

In addition to "worthy" and "throne" there are two other key words in chapter 5, "Lamb" and "book." The word Lamb appears 29 times in the book of Revelation, 28 times with reference to Jesus Christ. That the Lamb refers to Jesus is clearly the case in chapter 5, where the Lamb is the one who was slain in order to purchase people from every corner of the earth with His blood (Rev 5:9). Revelation 5 contains the first references to Lamb in the book of Revelation. In the seven churches, Jesus is referred to by many other titles and descriptions (see Revelation 1:13-18, etc.).

But the unique focus of the singular event in Revelation 5 is the seven-sealed book and the issue of who is worthy to break the seals and open the book. We will take a more detailed look at the book in the comments on chapter 5, but for now suffice it to say that the contents of the book is somehow of vital importance to the universe. Were no one found to open the book the consequences would be severe.

What is the Old Testament background of Revelation 5? Ezekiel 1 is still in the background of this vision. There are even a number of further parallels. But the connection with

Ezekiel 1 is more assumed in this chapter than it is described in detail. Instead, the strongest structural parallel to Revelation 5 is probably in Daniel 7:9-14. I will quote relevant portions of the Daniel passage.

"As I looked, **thrones** were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. . . . His **throne was flaming with fire**, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; **ten thousand times ten thousands stood before him**. The court was seated, and the **books were opened**. . . . In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He **approached the Ancient of Days** and was led into his presence. **He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him**. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." Daniel 7:9-14, NIV.

A parallel reading of Revelation 5 and Daniel 7:9-14 reveals multiple parallels of wording and themes. So Daniel 7:9-14 is the crucial structural parallel to Revelation 5. In each of these passages, you have God on the throne and a reference to books. In each of these passages a second divine figure appears after the first one is introduced. In each of these passages dominion is bestowed on the second divine figure and all humanity and myriads of angels worship both divine figures.

Since Revelation 5 clearly represents the cross (Rev 5:5-6 and 5:9-10) and Daniel 7 is a judgment scene, how do the cross and the judgment relate to each other in the New Testament? Why are the two events placed together in this chapter? These are extremely important questions which we will address when we get more deeply into this chapter.

As we have noticed, a major element of the crisis scene in Revelation 5 is the need to find someone worthy to break the seals and open the seven-sealed book. Then the Lamb appears and is declared worthy to break the seals and open the book. But what is it that makes this Lamb worthy to open the book? How does He prove that he is worthy?

"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.**'" Revelation 5:5. The worthy person who will open the book is introduced as the Lion of the tribe of Judah. This lion has had some sort of "triumph" or "victory" in His past and that triumph is the thing that makes him worthy to open the book. But what exactly was that triumph? There is a strange answer to that question in the very next verse. "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 in to all the earth." Revelation 5:6.

One of the most interesting and helpful literary strategies in the book of Revelation is the way John interplays the concepts of hearing and seeing. See comments on Revelation 7:9. What John hears and what John then sees are often two totally different things, yet in their deeper meaning they are the same. John hears the sound of a trumpet behind him, but when he turns to look he sees Jesus among the candlesticks speaking to him (Rev 1:10, 12). John hears the number 144,000 but never sees them. They are counted from the twelve tribes of Judah (Rev 7:4-8). Yet when he looks for them he sees a great multitude from all the nations

that no one can number (Rev 7:9). John is told that the people of God are the bride of the lamb (Rev 19:7-8). But when he sees the bride it is the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9-10). In the apocalyptic vision the two opposites are blended into one. Hence the Lion of Revelation 5:5 is the Lamb of Revelation 5:6. John hears the one and sees the other, yet they represent the same person in reality.

So what is it that makes the Lamb worthy to break the seals and open the book? What is the "triumph" that Revelation 5:5 was talking about? Jesus Christ, the great Messiah of Judaism (Lion of the tribe of Judah) became human, was faithful unto death, and His death turned out to be of great significance. "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.'" Rev 5:9. The Lamb is worthy because He was slain. "In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and onor and glory and praise!'" Revelation 5:12. It is the death of the Lamb that makes Him worthy. "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!" Rev 5:13.

The Lamb (Jesus Christ) is worthy because He is human and He died, yet He is also divine. Only One individual in all history has met those unique qualifications. That's what makes the Lamb so special in the book of Revelation. But how do we know the Lamb we observe in the vision of Revelation 5 is divine? While that may seem self-evident when all creation bows down to worship him, there is even more powerful evidence in the series of hymns in Revelation 4-5. Various parts of the Heavenly entourage are constantly singing songs. There are five of these songs in Revelation 4 and 5:

- 1- Revelation 4:8 ("Holy, holy, holy")
- 2- Revelation 4:11 (Praising God as the Creator)
- 3- Revelation 5:9-10 (Lamb is praised because of His death on the cross)
- 4- Revelation 5:12 (Lamb is praised with various terms of acclamation)
- 5- Revelation 5:13 (The One on the throne and the Lamb are being praised together)

There are five hymns sung in Revelation 4 and 5. The first two (4:8, 11) are sung in honor of the one sitting on the throne. The next two songs (5:9-10, 12) are in praise of the Lamb. The very last of the five hymns (5:13) offers praise to both.

But there is a second dynamic to notice with the five hymns. There is a crescendo in the size of the groups singing each of these hymns in turn. The first is sung by the four living creatures. The second is sung by the twenty-four elders. For the singing of the third song, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders combine their voices. For the singing of the fourth hymn, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders are joined by ten-thousand times ten-thousand angels. And finally, the fifth hymn is sung by every creature in the entire universe. So the whole sequence of Revelation 4-5 moves forward to the great climax in which the Lamb is worshiped equally with the one sitting on the throne. In visionary language, this scene accords to Jesus Christ equal status with His Father. And this exaltation is grounded on Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. Theologically, a parallel passage would be Philippians 2:6-11, which is considered by scholars to be an early Christian hymn.

One could get the impression from hymns three (Rev 5:9-10) and four (Rev 5:12) that Jesus' exaltation to equality with the Father is a new development, the result of His sacrificial death. But this exalted status is one He clearly had long before His arrival on earth. In fact, in Revelation 1:17-18 Jesus is acclaimed as the Yahweh of the Old Testament (compare with Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12 and also see comments on Revelation 1:17-18). So Jesus' divinity was clear well before the cross. But after His death there is a new acclamation of the glory of Jesus Christ. Just as everything in chapter 4 centered on the throne, everything in chapter 5 centers on Who the Lamb is, what He is to do, and why He is accounted worthy. The crucial central point of Revelation 5 is the worthiness of the Lamb.

Rev 6 (Introduction)— We turn now to chapter six. It clearly builds on chapter five where there is a great crisis in the heavenly throne room; a crisis precipitated by a sealed book in the hand of the Father. Opening that book is crucial to everything in the universe, yet no one can open it. A worthy person needs to be found, and he is found in chapter five. The Lamb takes hold of the book and is then acclaimed by the whole creation. Chapter six follows on from that scene. Everything that happens in chapter six is in response to the Lamb's opening of the book's seals. But this transition raises a number of questions that will be answered in one form or another in chapter six.

The immediate question that confronts the reader of chapter six is, *Where are the events described in this chapter taking place?* Chapter five was clearly placed in the heavenly throne room. The Lamb who takes the book from the one sitting on the throne is in heaven and is worshiped by the heavenly hosts. So the breaking of the book's seals by the Lamb takes place in heaven. But as each seal is broken events take place. Are these events happening on earth or in heaven?

There are a couple of clues that point to the answer in chapter six itself. First, in the second seal, "Another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace **from the earth** and to make men slay each other (Rev 6:4)." A second clue can be found in the fourth seal. "I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over **a fourth of the earth** to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth." Revelation 6:8.

So the author of Revelation leaves us in no doubt. While the events of Revelation four and five take place in heaven, the events of chapter six take place on earth. The events are not taking place in heaven (as in Revelation 4-5) but now are on the earth. This conclusion is also supported by verses fourteen and fifteen. So the Lamb breaks the seals one by one in heaven and these acts result in events that take place on earth. Now that the Lamb is seated on the throne of heaven (see also Rev 3:21), He is in full control of earth's history.

Another question that is forced upon the reader of chapter six is the relationship between the events described in chapter six and the book of chapter five. The breaking of each of the book's seals results in events that occur on earth. Are the events of the seven seals the content of the book in chapter five? As the Lamb breaks each seal is He revealing one-seventh of the book's content or are the contents only beginning to be revealed when all seven seals are broken? This is crucial to how we are going to interpret this passage. There is decisive evidence

in chapter six, and what we know about books in the ancient world, to answer this question with confidence.

There were two types of books in the ancient world: the scroll and the codex. The scroll involved a long sheet of paper (made of papyrus reeds or animal skins) rolled up from both ends. People would read it by unrolling it to the place where they wanted to start or continue. The codex, on the other hand, involved many smaller sheets bound together on one side and people read it by leafing through the pages. The codex form is essentially a book as we know them today.

The scroll form was quite ancient already when the book of Revelation was written. The codex form was a relatively new invention, scholars are not sure just exactly when. What we do know is that the codex became common shortly after John's time and that no manuscript of the New Testament was written in scroll form. It is safe to assume that in speaking of a book (Greek: *biblion*) that is sealed, either a scroll or a codex could have been in John's mind.

When John talks about unsealing a book that is sealed with seven seals, is he talking about a rolled-up scroll that has seven seals wrapped around the outside? If that is the case, when you break the seals you still don't see the contents of the scroll. You would have to break all seven seals to unroll the scroll and see what is inside of it. If that is what is going on in Revelation, the breaking of the seals in chapter six would not reveal the contents of the scroll, it would simply reveal events associated with the process of breaking those seals.

On the other hand, when John refers to a book is he talking about a codex where you could seal up portions of the book by taping groups of pages together (or you could tape up the whole the same way). If the seven seals bind up the book into seven parts, the breaking of each of the seals would reveal a major portion of the content of the book. So if the book of Revelation five and six is a codex, the events of chapter six could be revealing the actual content of the book.

Fortunately, John does not leave us in any doubt, as we will discover in the next post.

Is the "book" (Greek: *biblios* or *biblion*) of Revelation 5 a scroll or a codex? The original Greek was not specific. But in Revelation 5 words that we would normally translate "book" are translated as "scroll" by the NIV. How did the translators of the NIV know that is what the author had in mind when he wrote the word "book?" How would we know if the book was a scroll or a codex?

I believe a clear answer is found in Revelation 6:14, NIV. "The sky receded like a scroll (Greek: *biblion*), rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place." The term "rolling up" (Greek: *elissomenon*) shows what John means by "book." A scroll is something you can roll up. You can't "roll up" a codex. That means that when the Lamb breaks the seals in chapter six, He is not revealing the content of the book. That is not seen until all seven seals are broken and the scroll is unrolled. So the events of chapter six are not the content of the book/scroll, they are events that precede the opening of the scroll.

The seven seals are primarily located in Revelation chapter six, which covers six of the seven seals. Chapter seven is like an interlude after the sixth seal, and the seventh seal can be found at the beginning of chapter eight (Rev 8:1). So the seven seals are not completed until the beginning of chapter eight.

The material in Revelation six can be divided into three parts. The first part is the four horsemen associated with the first four seals (Rev 6:1-8). The second part is the altar scene of the fifth seal (Rev 6:9-11). The third part of the chapter is the sixth seal (Rev 6:12-17), covering the second coming of Jesus and the events surrounding His coming. So the seven seals begin with the scene in chapter five and the sixth seal ends with the events surrounding the second coming of Jesus. So the crucial question is, *When did the scene of chapter five occur? When did the Lamb take the book and begin to break it's seals?* The answer to that question will require careful exegesis of chapter five, which will come later in this commentary.

What is the primary Old Testament background of chapter six? Is it the same as that which centered around the throne in Revelation 4-5? The heavenly throne room passages in the Old Testament are the primary background for Revelation 4-5, especially Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7. But the primary Old Testament background texts for Revelation 6 are not focused on the throne, instead they are grounded in the curses of the covenant (Lev 26; Deut 28; Ezek 14; Zech 1 and 6). In Old Testament times, God made a covenant with His people, inviting their obedient response to His mighty deliverance in the Exodus. If they were willing to respond to His gracious deliverance with obedience, many good things would follow. These are called the blessings of the covenant (). But if they rejected God and rebelled against Him, many negative consequences would follow. These are called the curses of the covenant. The vision of Revelation six is a structural parallel to the Old Testament covenant curses, particular those of Leviticus 26. We will cover these in great detail later on in the comments on chapter six.

The Old Testament background to Revelation six (particularly the four horsemen) is grounded in the curses of the covenant (Lev 26; Deut 28, etc.). I have a modern-day story that illustrates the covenant concepts of blessing and curse.

The village of Berrien Springs, Michigan, where my wife and I spent 28 years of our lives, grew up along the Saint Joseph River, which flows into Lake Michigan. Around the year 2000 a road inspector discover the road be of the bridge to be disintegrating. The bridge was closed immediately and within a few days the downtown began to die, as business traffic dropped more than 80% immediately. You see, the main street of town and the bridge were part of a much longer road that connected travelers other places. The closing of the bridge meant a 10-20 mile detour and the downtown was now at the end of a ten-mile dead end road. The survival of the town depended on a way to cross a river that was only a few meters wide. The town fathers flew into action.

Federal and state funds were obtained, designers and contractors were engaged and a date was set for the bridge to be completed, about nine months after the closing of the first bridge. To encourage a speedy completion, the contract (covenant) offered the construction company \$10,000 extra for every day the bridge was finished early. On the other hand, if the contractors finished the bridge late, \$10,000 would be reduced from the agreed upon price. These stipulations were what the Old Testament calls blessings and curses. These were the incentives that encouraged people meet the obligations stipulated in a covenant. In the case of the Berrien bridge, the contractors had a tremendous reason to finish the bridge as quickly as possible. Not surprisingly, the bridge was finished 26 days early. On the other hand, if they had finished the bridge late, they would have paid a heavy price. This is what blessings and curses

are all about. Revelation six recalls the Old Testament curses of the covenant; war famine and pestilence.

The four horsemen of Revelation 6:1-8 are modeled on the curses of the covenant in Leviticus 26. The seven seals involve seven-fold afflictions on the human race. The language of the passage reminds biblically literate reader of Leviticus 26:21-26, NIV.

"If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions **seven times over**, as your sins deserve. I will send **wild animals** against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted.

"If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction but continue to be hostile toward me, I myself will be hostile toward you and will afflict you for your sins **seven times over**. And I will bring the **sword** upon you **to avenge the breaking of the covenant**. When you withdraw into your cities, I will send a **plague** among you, and you will be given into enemy hands. When **I cut off your supply of bread**, ten women will be able to bake your bread in one oven, and they will dole out the bread by weight. **You will eat, but you will not be satisfied.**"

Leviticus 26 is the root text of the curses of the covenant in the Old Testament. Both Leviticus 26 and the four horsemen (Rev 6:1-8) are concerned with seven-fold plagues involving the sword, famine, pestilence, wild beasts, and even doling out bread by weight. The allusion is clear. This language is outlining the consequences of disobedience. We will explore later on the deep significance of this observation to the interpretation of Revelation 6.

Leviticus 26 describes the "curses" of the covenant and the four horses of Revelation six (Rev 6:1-8) are built on this concept. These curses outline the consequences of disobedience to the covenant. And they are directed at God's people (Lev 26:1-2). But when you read Leviticus 26 carefully you realize that these are preliminary consequences. They are the things that happen when an enemy comes to conquer a city. A siege is precipitated by the sword, then results in famine and finally rampant disease. But the ultimate consequence of Israel's disobedience is exile (Lev 26:33-35).

A parallel text to Leviticus 26 is Deuteronomy 32. Notice the similar language. "I will heap calamities upon them and spend my arrows against them. I will send wasting **famine** against them, consuming **pestilence** and deadly **plague**; I will send against them the fangs of **wild beasts**, and venom of vipers that glide in the dust. In the street the **sword** will make them childless; in the homes terror will reign. Young men and young women will perish, infants and gray-haired men (Deut 32:23-25, NIV)."

In both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 32 you see sword, famine, beasts, and pestilence as consequences of disobedience to the covenant. In both cases, those who experience these consequences are the people of God. So one possible implication for our reading of Revelation six would be the possibility that the four horsemen are concerned with followers of Jesus (the New Testament people of God) rather than non-Christians (people outside the covenant).

What is fascinating about Deuteronomy 32 is that the focus of the covenant curses shifts later on in the chapter. Notice Deuteronomy 32:41-43, NIV: "When I sharpen my flashing **sword** and my hand grasps it in judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, while my **sword** devours flesh: the

blood of the slain and the captives, the heads of the *enemy leaders*.' "Rejoice, O *nations*, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and *make atonement for his land and people*."

The focus here is no longer on the people of God but on the enemies of God's people who were the agents of the covenant curses in verses 23-25, but are now the object of those curses. There is a reversal of focus. Covenant curses are not limited to God's people, they can also fall on those who reject God and His people.

In the Old Testament the consequences of the covenant appear in two different settings, and this pattern is common. God makes a covenant with the nation He brought out of Egypt, and He offers certain stipulations as part of it. If they obey the covenant, they receive the blessings, and if they disobey, the consequences come in to focus. What typically happened in the Old Testament is that when God's people disobeyed the covenant God would use enemies of His people—nations like Egypt and Babylon—as agents of judgment. They would attack Israel and put Jerusalem under siege. If Israel continued to rebel against God, He would let them be taken into exile. So the enemies of Israel would be used as the instrument to execute the curses of the covenant against Israel. When God's people rebelled against Him they lost His protecting power. Other nations would then be the judges or discipliners of God's own people.

When enemy nations took on the role of agents of God's judgment in the Old Testament, they typically enjoyed the role a little too much. When God's people no longer wanted Him, they lost His protection and enemy nations would inflict the curses of the covenant upon them. But inevitably things would come to the place where God finally said, "You've gone too far, enough." Then God would intervene to deliver His people once more. But to do that He would have to carry out the curses of the covenant on the enemy nations instead.

With this background, we can see what is happening in Deuteronomy 32:23-25 and 41-43 and ultimately also in Revelation six. First of all, God is applying the curses of the covenant to His own people, but secondly, He is in judgment on those nations who over-did their service of judgment and now reap the curses of the covenant themselves. The "war-famine-pestilence" sequence became a stereo-typed image in Israel. If a prophet spoke about bad times ahead, they would say, "Uh, oh! War, famine, and pestilence are on the way."

The curses of the covenant are used repeatedly in the books of Ezekiel and Zechariah with reference to the exile. In Ezekiel 14:12-21, the word of the Lord threatens famine, then wild beasts, then the sword and finally plague. It is repeatedly declared that if Noah, Daniel and Job were in the land, it wouldn't make any difference. Their faithfulness to God would result only in their own salvation. The sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts are clearly directed against Jerusalem in the context of the exile to Babylon. So the curses of the covenant are expressed in the things that occurred when the Babylonian armies came and placed Jerusalem under siege.

So "War, famine, and pestilence" were repeated stereotypes that could be used in any order to describe the terrible consequences of disobedience to the covenant, first against the people of God and second against their oppressors. This is the background of what is happening in the four horsemen of Revelation 6.

In addition to the covenant curses, there are passages in Zechariah that speak about God's judgments in terms of four horses with riders, just like Revelation 6. These passages address the situation of Babylon and God's people at the end of the exile. The four horses signal that God has determined it is time to free His people. The first of these passages is in Zechariah 1:8-17, NIV:

"During the night I had a vision--and there before me was a man riding a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in a ravine. Behind him were red, brown, and white horses.

"I asked, 'What are these, my lord?'

"The angel who was talking with me answered, 'I will show you what they are.'

"Then the man standing among the myrtle trees explained, 'They are the ones the LORD has sent to go throughout the earth.'

"And they reported to the angel of the LORD, who was standing among the myrtle trees, 'We have gone throughout the earth and found the whole world at rest and in peace.'

Then the angel of the LORD said, 'LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?' So the LORD spoke kind and comforting words to the angel who talked with me.

"Then the angel who was speaking to me said, 'Proclaim this word: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion, but ***I am angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little angry, but they added to the calamity.***"

"Therefore, this is what the LORD says, 'I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt. And the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem," declares the LORD Almighty.

"Proclaim further: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "My towns will again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem."""

Zechariah 1:8-17, a major passage behind the four horsemen of Revelation 6, describes God's people toward the end of their exile in Babylon, when God considers judgment on the nations that have dealt out the covenant curse to His people. God realizes that His people have suffered enough at the hands of Babylon. God will deal with Babylon so His people can return to Jerusalem.

So when one speaks of covenant curses, it is very important to note that there are two phases to these curses: first they fall on the people of God at the hands of their political and religious enemies, and secondly on the enemies themselves. So there is a basic theme in these covenant curses of disobedience and its consequences. The language of Revelation six and seven builds on this theme. In Revelation 6, the curses fall on God's people, and in Revelation seven, they fall on the whole world. The "double jeopardy" concept of the curses in the Old Testament seem also to apply to Revelation 6-7.

What is Revelation six all about? Does it have anything to do with the Christian era, from the time when Jesus was on earth until the Second Coming? One helpful line of evidence is to compare it with the synoptic apocalypse (the sermon of Jesus on the Mount of Olives recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) where Jesus gives a message about the end of the world and the events that would lead to it. No section of Revelation draws more on the synoptic

apocalypse than Revelation six. If the rider on the white horse represents the preaching of the gospel, Revelation six has many things in common with the Synoptic Apocalypse. In both places you have preaching of the gospel, war, famine, pestilence, persecution and heavenly signs. So the major parallel text in the New Testament is the three versions of the Synoptic Apocalypse, which addresses the Christian age, the period between the first and second advents of Jesus. We will give quite a bit of attention to this parallel when we come to the detailed study of Revelation six and seven.

If Revelation six is intentionally parallel to the Synoptic Apocalypse, we will want to explore what relationship the symbolism in the chapter has with the history and experience of the followers of Jesus from the First Century through the End. And that whole history will be seen through the lens of the Lamb opening the book. The events of the Christian era are under the control of the One opening the book in the heavenly courts.

Rev 7 (Introduction)– What is the setting of Revelation seven? How does the chapter relate to the material that has come before? The best answer to that question can be found in the last verse of Revelation six: "For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand (Rev 6:17, NIV)? Or from the King James Version, "Who will be able to stand?"

The purpose of Revelation seven seems to be to provide the answer to that question. And the answer is a two-fold one: the 144,000 (v. 1-8) and a great multitude (v. 9-17). These two groups are found "standing" before God in the context of chapter six. The question of whether these are two different groups or two different ways of representing a single group will be addressed in the verse by verse study of chapter seven when we get there.

What is the key Old Testament background text to chapter seven? The sobering answer is Ezekiel 9:1-7, NIV.

"Then I heard him call out in a loud voice, 'Bring the guards of the city here, each with a weapon in his hand.' And I saw six men coming from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with a deadly weapon in his hand. With them was a man clothed in linen who had a writing kit at this side. They came in and stood beside the bronze altar.

"Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, 'Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and **put a mark on the foreheads** of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.'

"As I listened, he said to the others, 'Follow him through the city and **kill, without showing pity or compassion**. Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but **do not touch anyone who has the mark**. Begin at my sanctuary.' So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple.

"Then he said to them, 'Defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain. Go!' So they went out and began killing through the city."

The scene described in Ezekiel 9:1-7 is one of the most frightening, sobering texts in all the Bible and a symbolic description of the events that would take place in the 586 B.C. destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Jerusalem would be taken captive and in the

process, many would be killed. But the text shows God acting to protect those who sigh and cry over the abominations that are the root cause of this destruction). The scene of Revelation 7, then, builds on Ezekiel 9 to provide a glimpse of the final events of earth's history. They will include judgment, marks on the forehead, and God rescuing His people. In mercy the angels hold back the winds of strife so that God's people don't get swept up by the calamities that come upon the earth at the End.

Rev 4:1-8:1 (Introductory Overview)– It is time for a review of what we have noticed in our introductory survey of Revelation 4:1 - 8:1. Revelation four provides a general description of the heavenly throne room with no particular date in view. Revelation five, on the other hand, portrays a decisive point in time, the decisive event of the Lamb taking the scroll. This is the beginning point of the seven seals, the Lamb taking the scroll. The decisive event in heaven is followed in chapter six by a series of events on earth, each triggered by the breaking of one of the seven seals, climaxing with the second coming. Chapter seven describes events that take place between the sixth seal and the seventh. The starting point of all these events is the lamb taking the book. So the crucial point in understanding the seven seals is to know its starting point. When did the Lamb take the book? Can we know just when that occurred?

The Time of Revelation Five– It is clear that Revelation 5 speaks of a specific decisive event in the history of the universe--a crisis so great that not even the one sitting on the throne can solve it. Only the Lamb can solve this crisis. But when did the Lamb take the book? When did He begin to break the seals? Can we put a date on the point in history that these events began? I believe we can.

The key to answering the question is the principle of duodirectionality. At decisive points in the book of Revelation there is material that points both forward and backward. At the climax of a whole series of events in the book is embedded the introduction to the vision that follows. In other words, John embeds the introduction to the next portion of Revelation in the climax of the preceding section. The duodirectional introduction to the seven seals is found in the climax of the seven churches. "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne." Revelation 3:21, NIV.

When we see how Revelation 3:21 relates to Revelation 4-7, we will begin to have a picture of the point in time when the Lamb took the book. There are four elements listed in Revelation 3:21 (the first two parallel to the last two). (1) The one who overcomes (2) will sit with Jesus on His throne, just as (3) Jesus overcame and (4) sat down with His Father on His throne. In the original language the first "overcomes" is in the present continuous tense. That means that any believer who reads this text during the Christian era is in the process of overcoming. Overcoming is the primary task for the followers of Jesus, beginning with John's day and reaching to the second coming.

If overcoming is the primary and ongoing task that all readers of Revelation are expected to engage in, how does Revelation indicate that Christians are to overcome? The answer to this question come in Revelation 12:11, NIV: "They overcame him by the blood of the

Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." Revelation 12:11. According to this text, there are three things involved in overcoming. The first is the "blood of the Lamb." It is the atonement at the cross that is the decisive element in overcoming. Second is "the word of their testimony." Confession of faith activates the process by which Christians overcome. Third, "they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." Some believers, living in especially difficult times, are called to seal their confession of faith with their lives. Overcoming-type faith is being settled in the truth, and in one's relationship to God, to the point one cannot be moved, no matter the incentives or pressure brought to bear. See further comments on Revelation 12:11.

The second clause in Revelation 3:21 asserts that those who overcome (present continuous tense) will be granted to sit with Jesus on His throne. The verb here is in the future tense. When will the people of God receive a portion of Jesus' throne? From this verse we know only that it will be sometime in the future for readers of Revelation. After God's people overcome in the present, they will receive a reward in the future. The present reality leads to a future reality: "I will give the right to sit with me on my throne."

This promise finds its fulfillment in Revelation 7:15-17. After the second coming, when the time of overcoming is past, the people of God will serve the Lamb day and night in His temple, presumably the heavenly temple in view in chapters four and five. To sit with Jesus on His throne makes one eligible to receive all the promises He makes to all seven churches. See notes on Revelation 3:21.

The two main verbs in the second half of Rev 3:21 are in the aorist indicative, which represents a point in past time. At some point in the past, Jesus overcame and sat down with His Father on the Father's throne. When did Jesus overcome and when did He join the Father on His throne? It would have to be before the publication of the book of Revelation, which was probably around 95 AD. A Christian in the First Century could give only one possible answer to these questions: Jesus overcame at the cross and sat down on His Father's throne at His ascension to heaven after the resurrection.

Time and again in the New Testament, these two events are listed as decisive ones (Acts 2:22-36; 5:30-32; Heb 10:12-15; 12:2). On the one hand, the cross is seen as the center point of all Christian faith (1 Cor 1:17-18; Gal 6:14; Eph 2:16; Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:20). On the other hand, there is a strong emphasis of Jesus sitting down at the right hand of His Father (Matt 26:64; Acts 7:55-56; Rom 8:34; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3, 13; 1 Pet 3:22). The latter is the reason that Jesus is in control of human history and God's people can survive in the world today. It is a major New Testament theme.

Revelation 3:21 speaks of a time in John's past when Jesus "overcame." When was that time, when did Jesus overcome? Revelation 5:5-6 (NIV) picks up on that theme: "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. 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.'"

This text comes just at the point when the Lamb is taking the book. The word "triumphed" in verse 5 (Greek: *enikesa*) is the same "as I overcame" (Greek: *enikesen*) in Revelation 3:21. The crucial root in the Greek word is *nik*. The prefix and suffix determines things like tense, person and number. So the two forms of conquer here are essentially identical, except that in 3:21 Jesus speaks in first person and in 5:5 Jesus is described in third person. The two words are the same and the event they are describing is the same. It is the "overcoming" of Jesus in the past that makes Him worthy to take the book and break its seals.

When and how did Jesus overcome? That becomes clear in verse six. "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne. . ." Revelation 5:6, NIV. The Lamb is a symbol of Jesus, who was slain at the cross. It is the one who died on the cross who is now at the center of the throne ready to take hold of the book. The moment when Jesus overcame was the moment He died on the cross. So Revelation five, in the context of Revelation 3:21, lifts up the cross as the decisive event of human history. That is the event that makes possible the unrolling of the scroll (see also Revelation 5:9-10, 12). That is the event that resolves the crisis at the throne room of the universe. So the time of Revelation five is the time just after Jesus died on the cross. That is the fundamental event that unleashes everything that follows. If you want to put a date on it, the most popular date for the cross among Seventh-day Adventists is AD 31, based on the calculations Adventist make with regard to the 70 weeks of Daniel 9. Scholars outside the Adventist church tend to date the cross in AD 30 or 33, based on astronomical calculations. For our purposes in Revelation five, any of those dates is close enough.

Rev 3:21 and the Seven Seals— Let's summarize the impact of the discovery that Revelation 3:21 holds the key to the meaning of the seven seals of Revelation. Revelation 3:21 is the climax of the overcomer promises given to the seven churches. But it also contains the essence of Revelation 4-7 in advance: the Father's throne is at the center of Revelation four; in chapter five, Jesus Christ (the Lamb) overcomes (Rev 5:5); and He joins His Father on the throne (Rev 5:13— the praise to the one on the throne is now also directed to the Lamb.) So the last two parts of Revelation 3:21 are fulfilled in Revelation 4-5. Jesus overcomes at the cross and then sits down with His Father on the throne (Rev 5:5-13).

Where do the overcomers join Jesus on His throne? In chapter seven. They are the retinue before the throne that follow Him day and night wherever He goes (Rev 7:9-17, particularly the last three verses). The part of Revelation 3:21 that is not accounted for is the present-tense overcoming that is part of every message to the seven churches. This corresponds to chapter six, which concerns the process of overcoming that the people of God experience from the time Jesus' enthronement in heaven (Rev 5) to the second coming itself (Rev 6:17).

What is Revelation 4-7 all about, then? The principle of duodirectionality (that crucial parts of Revelation like 3:21 point both backward and forward) helps us to see that the seven seals are all about the overcoming of the Lamb (Revelation 4), the Lamb joining His Father on the throne (Revelation 5), the people of God struggling to overcome in this world (Revelation 6), and the people of God joining Jesus on His throne in eternity (Revelation 7).

So in Revelation 3:21, John summarizes the seven seals in advance, giving the key to their meaning. The seals vision (particularly Revelation 6) is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible, but with the help of Revelation 3:21 we know that chapter six is about the people of God struggling to overcome and all the trials and difficulties that they face in the course of Christian history. Having established this point, we are well on the way to understanding the seven seals as a whole.

The best estimate of the date on earth when the Lamb took the book (Revelation 5) is 31 A.D, the year when Jesus died on the cross and also ascended to His heavenly throne. The death of Jesus is the reason that Jesus can break the seals and open the book. He is worthy to do so because He overcame on the cross. So the scene in Revelation 5 is clearly about Jesus in A.D. 31, when He died, rose, ascended to heaven. This is expressly stated in Revelation 5:9-13, NIV.

"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. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on earth.'

"Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousands times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 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!'

"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!"

Revelation 3:21, then, is crucial to understanding the event in Revelation 5. Jesus does not overcome and join His Father on the throne at some future time in history. The cross and the event in Revelation 5 are events in John's past, AD 31, and they are the foundation of everything in Revelation that will take place in John's future. The most natural reading of Revelation 5 is to associate the Lamb's appearance on the throne and His taking of the book with the ascension of Jesus to heaven in 31 A.D.

The reader of Revelation must never forget that this is the revelation of Jesus Christ. It is the capstone of the New Testament. It's message, therefore, will not be fundamentally different from the theology of the rest of the New Testament. The decisive events at the foundation of the New Testament church are the death, resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Jesus Christ. This can easily be seen as one reads through the New Testament.

There are some 30 parallel texts to the scene of Revelation 5 in the New Testament. As a sample, let me share Hebrews 8:1-2 (others we could look at would include Acts 2:31-36; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20-22; Col 3:1; Heb 1:1-3; 1 Pet 3:21-22).

"The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man" (Heb 8:1-2, NIV).

In this text we find a high priest who "sat down" (Greek: *ekathisen*) at the right hand of the throne. The same word, in the same tense, refers to the same event as in Revelation 3:21 (Greek: *ekathisa*). Jesus ascended to Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God assuming the authority of a king. Along with His kingship is service in the heavenly sanctuary. The throne room and the heavenly sanctuary are the same place. The cross and the enthronement of Christ make everything else possible— Christ's intercession, the judgment scenes that follow, and Christ's entire ministry to His people. The earthly counterpart of Jesus' enthronement was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). That was the day when Christ took His seat and began to reign as king and high priest for His people throughout the Christian era.

The Role of the Seals in the Structure of Revelation— The event where Jesus overcomes is the cross (Rev 5:5-6; 3:21) and that enables Him to take the book and begin to break its seals (in order to open it). The date of the decisive moment in Revelation 5 is when Jesus died, rose, and ascended to heaven (roughly 31 A.D.). More specifically, it is the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit (represented by the "seven spirits" in Revelation) was poured out onto the earth (Acts 2; Rev 5:6). So the throne room event in Revelation 5 describes the time when Jesus entered heaven after His ascension and inaugurated the heavenly sanctuary. The Holy Spirit was poured out onto the earth as a consequence of Jesus taking charge in the heavenly throne room.

In posts that follow we will take a look at more evidence that would support that. We don't want to assume that with only one line of evidence (the connection between Revelation 5 and 3:21).

A second level of evidence that the scene of Revelation 5 points to the ascension of Jesus as its position in history can be found in the structure of the book of Revelation itself. The book of Revelation is structured as a chiasm. In other words, the first chapters are parallel to the last chapters and in stair-step or pyramid fashion these parallels move toward the center of the book. Dr. Kenneth Strand, who first developed that idea for Revelation, noted that the first half of the book (which parallels the second half) focuses on the realities of the whole Christian age, while the material in the second half (which parallels the first half) focuses on the events associated with the end of history.

Since the seven seals are in the first half of the book of Revelation, they focus on the whole Christian age. It is natural, therefore, that the beginning point of the seals turn out to be the ascension and enthronement of Christ at the beginning of the Christian age. It also fits that the end point of the seals is located at the Second Coming (Rev 6:15-17). In posts that follow, we will look at further evidence in support of this point.

Further evidence that Revelation 5 concerns the beginning of the Christian era is found by comparing the worship scenes of Revelation 4-5 with Revelation 19. Revelation 19 is the chiastic counterpart of the throne room scene. Therefore, both passages are very similar. Both

passages contain the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, the throne, praise and worship. In Revelation 19, God is praised for destroying Babylon (an end-time passage). In Revelation 4-5, God is praised for creation (4:11) and for redemption (5:9, 10, 12, 13)--events that are in the past, from John's perspective. But the seals progress to Revelation 7, where God's people are portrayed as coming out of the great tribulation and praising God for their deliverance. This is the same point in history as Revelation 19, but it comes well after the events of Revelation 5.

The second half of Revelation focuses almost entirely on the final events of earth's history. By contrast, visions in the first half of the book start at the beginning of the first century and go all the way to the end. So, the chiasm of Revelation would support that the event of Revelation 5 is at the beginning and not the end of the Christian era.

Another evidence that Revelation 5 concerns the beginning of the Christian era is the parallel between the white horse of Revelation 6 and the white horse of Revelation 19. See comments on Revelation 6:2 for more detail. Both riders wear crowns. But the Greek word for "crown" is different in the two passages. The rider on the white horse of Revelation 6:2 wears a victory crown (Greek: *stephanos*-- something like an Olympic gold medal). The rider on the white horse in Revelation 19, on the other hand, wears many royal crowns of rulership (Greek: *diadēmata*-- Rev 19:12). The victory crown is appropriate to the beginning of the Christian era. Jesus overcame at the cross. But his full and complete reign over the earth only comes at the Second coming (Rev 11:15-17). Then he will wear many crowns of rulership. The location of this parallel also supports the chiasm that stretches from beginning to end in the Book of Revelation.

Another evidence that Revelation 5 concerns the beginning of the Christian era is the fact that the end-time judgment begins only with the fifth seal (Rev 6:9-11), well into the sequence that starts with the opening of the scroll (Rev 6:1). "They cried out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you **judge** the inhabitants of the earth and **avenge** our blood?'" Revelation 6:10, NIV.

Is God judging or avenging at this point? No. The text is somewhat of a complaint. "How long. . .until. . .?" To put it in other words, "How long will You be **not** judging (Greek: *krineis*) and **not** avenging?" Greek words for judgment (*krisis*, *krima*, *krinō*) do not occur in Revelation 5 and do not occur before verse 10 in chapter six.

Compare this with the chiastic counterpart toward the end of the book. Revelation 6 speaks of a time when judgment has not begun, while Revelation 19 speaks of a time when judgment is in past. "After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting. . . . "He has condemned ("judged"-- Greek: *ekrinen*) the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants." Revelation 19:1-2, NIV. Revelation 19 is clearly set at the very end of history, a time when judgment and vengeance is already past. The fifth seal, on the other hand, is at a point when the events of the first four seals are past, but the end-time judgment is still in the future. This makes clear that the scene of Revelation 5 is not describing the judgment at the end.

Further evidence that the seals cover the entire Christian age while chapter 19 addresses the end-time can be found in the comparison between the sixth seal and chapter 19. By the sixth seal you are nearing the end of history.

"Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" Revelation 6:15-17. This brings us to the end-time--the climax of the Christian era. Note the following parallel.

"And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, 'Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.'" Revelation 19:17-18.

The many parallels between Revelation 6:15-17 (moving toward the end-time) and Revelation 19:17-18 (end-time) show that they are referring to the same event. The beginning of the seals is the Lamb taking the book at the beginning of the Christian era but seals progress to the context of the end-time. The early part of Revelation (Rev 1-11), including the seals, covers the entire Christian age, from beginning to end. The events in the latter part of the book (Rev 12-22) focus on the final days in particular. Thus, the events of Revelation 5 must have been at the beginning of the Christian era.

Another line of evidence that the opening of the scroll begins with the ascension of Jesus can be found in the sanctuary background of Revelation (see my introductory book, *The Deep Things of God*, pages 124-132 for more detail). The first half of the book of Revelation is based on the "*tamid*"-- the daily service in the temple. This service involved trimming the lamps, opening the doors, slaying a lamb, pouring out the blood, burning incense, a period of silence, and seven trumpets. All of these activities are alluded to in the first half of Revelation.

The daily service of the Hebrew sanctuary is associated with intercession. The incense represented the imputed righteousness of Christ over the tabernacle and it represents the same in relation to the church throughout the whole Christian era. The intercession of Jesus does not end at a particular point in history but continues all the way through to the End. Since the first half of the book of Revelation is based on the *tamid* service, it naturally covers the whole Christian era. That fact would support putting the decisive event of Revelation 5 at the beginning of the Christian era.

The book of Revelation also seems to be based on the feasts of the Jewish liturgical year (see my introductory book, *The Deep Things of God*, pages 124-132 for more detail). The spring feasts (Passover, Pentecost) are particularly associated with the first part of Revelation. They find their fulfillment in events that occurred in the first century. The Passover was fulfilled at the cross and Pentecost was fulfilled at Jesus' enthronement. Having mentioned that, the annual feast which most accurately fits the material in Revelation 4-5 is Pentecost. I am suggesting that the very day that Jesus was enthroned was the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover.

"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." Revelation 5:6. What took place when Jesus joined His Father on the throne? The Holy Spirit was sent out in to all the earth. We continue to call that day Pentecost. That further supports the date when Jesus took the book in the heavenly throne room as A.D. 31, fifty days after the crucifixion.

I believe that Revelation 5 describes the inauguration of the heavenly sanctuary. The inauguration was one of two occasions in the sanctuary that involved the entire temple complex. The whole building and every item in it was set up and consecrated on that occasion (Exod 40:1-9, 17-35; Lev 8:10-12; Num 7). In Revelation 5 you have lamps, the laver (sea of glass), the lamb, incense, horns, a calf, cherubim, and stones that were found on the High Priest's breastplate.

The inauguration of the heavenly sanctuary is described in the book of Hebrews (Heb 8:1-2, 9:16-24; 10:1-20). When the book of Hebrews was written, the heavenly sanctuary was already in operation. But it is clear from Hebrews that as a result of Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection, He ascends to heaven and enters within the veil, establishes Himself at the right hand of the throne of God, and becomes a minister in the heavenly sanctuary at the point of His ascension. The book of Hebrews would date that even in A.D. 31, on the Day of Pentecost. That is what Revelation 5 is also about.

In the Hebrew sanctuary service there were two great events in which every part of the sanctuary was included: the Inauguration and the Day of Atonement. At one time I thought the scene in Revelation 4-5 depicted a Day of Atonement scene. But after I did my deep dive into the Greek of Revelation 4-5 I no longer saw Day of Atonement there. Why? There are a number of reasons.

First, the ark of the covenant is not seen there. The ark played a central role on the Day of Atonement. John certainly knows about the ark because he mentions it in Revelation 11:19. But it is not mentioned in chapters 4-5. The Day of Atonement in the Old Testament is also associated with judgment. John knows about judgment and uses the language of judgment (Greek: *krisis*, *krima*, *krinô*) more than twelve times in the book of Revelation. But, there is no judgment language in Revelation 4-5 that language is reserved for parts of the book that are clearly located in end-time settings. In fact, the only time a word for judgment appears in the first half of the book of Revelation is in the fifth seal (Rev 6:9-10), and in that passage it is clear that judgment has not yet begun. The question asked in the fifth seal is "How long will You be NOT judging?" Rev 6:10. So the absence of the ark of the covenant or of judgment language suggests that Revelation 4 and 5 is NOT a Day of Atonement scene.

We would expect the language of the Most Holy Place (Greek: *naos*) to be used if Revelation four and five were representing the Day of Atonement. John often (about a dozen times) uses this term in reference to the heavenly temple, particularly the inner-sanctuary with its ark of the covenant (Rev 11:19). That word is only found in the second half of the book and is totally absent from Revelation 4-5.

We would also expect a male goat (LXX Greek: *chimaros*) instead of a Lamb if this were the Day of Atonement. The word "Lamb" (Rev 5:6– Greek: *arnion*) is appropriate to the

Inauguration and the daily service of the Old Testament sanctuary, but is not central to the unique features of the Day of Atonement. It seems clear that the scene of Revelation five is the Inauguration of the Heavenly Sanctuary which took place at the beginning of the Christian era (roughly AD 31). This connects very well with the overall theology of the New Testament.

How would a person approach Revelation 5 if he or she was living in the First Century? It would have to make sense as a reality already present in the first century! To say this does not mean that the book of Revelation cannot talk about the end-time. When the author wants to communicate information related to the future or the end-time, he has no difficulty doing so (Revelation 6:12-17; 7; 11:15-18; 21-22). *God meets people where they are*, so all the information that God gave John is framed in his own time, place, and circumstances. John's present and future are both framed in the language of the New Testament era. And in that context, the vision of Revelation 5 does not point to the end-time, rather it makes sense as an event in John's recent past that sets the foundation for John's future, as outlined in chapters six and seven.

The key theological concepts in Revelation 5 are those that apply to the first century in the New Testament. For example, the cross of Christ is the towering reality of the New Testament and is mentioned in nearly every book. Christ's exaltation to the throne is a past event at the time the New Testament was written. Our inauguration as kings and priests had already taken place when John wrote the book and the kingship and priesthood was a present reality (1 Peter 2:9-10). Incense representing the prayers of the saints is certainly appropriate in a First Century context. Nothing in Revelation 5 is inappropriate to the first century or requires us to think that the Lamb's taking of the book happened long after the first century. We should not, therefore, place this text elsewhere.

The parallel with the Synoptic Apocalypse (Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) is a final line of evidence for placing Revelation 5 where we have placed it (First Century). That would mean that Revelation five and six cover the broad sweep of history from the ascension of Jesus to the Second Coming itself.

We have already noticed how there are a number of parallels between the gospels and Revelation six. In Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 Jesus speaks about the time between His day and the End in terms of three great eras: the Christian era as a whole, a time of great persecution at some point in Jesus' future, and then a direct focus on events surrounding the coming of Jesus himself. This three-fold outline corresponds very well to the four horsemen, the fifth seal, and the sixth seal respectively. I will detail this a bit more in tomorrow's post.

Jesus offers a three-part overview of the Christian age in the Synoptic Apocalypse (Matt 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). First of all, He describes the general realities of the whole Christian age (preaching the gospel, wars, rumors of wars, insurrections and rebellions, famines, pestilence, earthquakes). Jesus is explicit to say that they are not signs of the end but will continue to the end. So it would be more accurate to call them signs of the whole age (Matthew 24:6-8).

Secondly, Jesus talks about a special time of tribulation when God's people suffer a great deal. During these times Jerusalem is to be "trodden underfoot" (Luke 21:24). In Matthew and Mark this period is blended in to the realities of the whole age, only in Luke is there a clear distinction and progression.

Thirdly, Jesus moves to the end-time (heavenly signs and events associated with the final days of earth's history). Again, in Matthew and Mark these tend to be blended together, but in Luke the distinction between the three eras is clear.

The pattern of the Synoptic Apocalypse is also the pattern of Revelation six. 1) The first four seals (Rev 6:1-8) cover the general realities of the Christian age (preaching of the gospel, war, famine, pestilence, wild beasts, etc). 2) Then in the fifth seal (6:9-11) there is a focus on persecution (the souls under the altar crying out "How long?") 3) Finally, in the sixth seal there is a focus on events directly associated with the end (the heavenly signs of 6:12-17).

The language of Revelation 6 parallels the Synoptic Apocalypse, covering the whole Christian age from Jesus' time to the Second Coming. The event of Revelation 5 precedes chapter six since the heavenly scroll is sealed in chapter five and the seals are broken one by one in chapter six. The event of Revelation 5 must, therefore, be an event right at the beginning of the Christian era, and the ascension and enthronement of Christ qualify as that.

The foundational event of the seven seals, then, took place in the first century, in the same year in which Jesus died and rose again (A.D. 31). We have demonstrated this in previous posts series evidences, which are summarized below.

1- Immediate context. Revelation 3:21 sets the death and resurrection of Jesus in the past. Revelation 5:5-6 connect directly with that context.

2- Chiastic context. The first half of Revelation addresses the whole Christian age, rather than just end-time events.

3- Sanctuary background. Revelation four and five correlate best with the inauguration of the heavenly sanctuary at the beginning of the Christian era and also with the feast of Pentecost.

4- Contemporary setting. Everything that happened in Revelation 5 is appropriate to the context of the New Testament in the First Century.

5- New Testament background. The themes of the Synoptic Apocalypse (Matt 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) track with the themes of Revelation 6, and these cover the whole Christian age, beginning with the time of Jesus and the apostles.

The Bible says that two or three witnesses will establish something with certainty. Our five lines of evidence all point to the Lamb taking the book and joining His Father on the throne in the heavenly sanctuary on the Day of Pentecost (A.D. 31). That supports the understanding that the breaking of the seals in Revelation 6 describes events related to the overcoming of God's earthly people from the time of Jesus until He comes again.

The seals are one of the most difficult passages in the book of Revelation. But when we look carefully at them in light of the structure of Revelation and its Old and New Testament backgrounds, the meaning of the passage can be established with reasonable certainty. Readers of Revelation are wise to apply appropriate method to examine the book's relationship to the entire Bible before picking up commentaries, which may or may not have pursued appropriate method.

Rev 4 (Chapter Introduction)– The fourth chapter of Revelation describes a scene in the heavenly throne room. It is not a specific scene or a specific event, rather it is a general

description of what worship is like there. Everything is centered on the throne and God is worshiped in response to His prior acts as creator. The letters to the seven churches described the “things which are” of Revelation 1:19. Chapter four begins to describe the things that would happen “after these things” (Rev 1:19, cf. 4:1). Chapter four also sets the stage for chapter five, where we have a specific point in time, a crisis in the heavenly throne room. The two chapters together form the introduction to the rest of Revelation in general and the seven seals in particular.

Rev 4:1– “**After these things** I saw, and behold a door was standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I heard, like a trumpet, said to me, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.’” The chapter opens with the words “after these things I saw.” In the Greek this is an independent clause, distinct from what comes before or after. A short form of this clause is simply “and I saw” (Greek: *kai eidon*, as in Rev 13:1, 11).

“After these things” (Greek: *meta tauta eidon*) is a phrase that often introduces a new vision (as in Rev 7:1, 9), John is moving on from the letters to the seven churches (chapters two and three). Here it also recalls Revelation 1:19 (see comments on that verse). In both verses “these things” is plural (Greek: *tauta*), though often translated into an English singular. This parallel signals that in chapter four the book is moving from the “things which are” (Rev 1:19–the seven churches) to “the things which must happen after these things.” So while the material from Revelation 4 on may make reference to the past (the cross and ascension of Jesus, the primeval war in heaven), the primary focus of these visions is what will happen in John’s future, the time beyond the vision of Revelation. The connection with chapter three (“after **these things**”) indicates that this is not the far future, but that which lies ahead after the messages to the seven churches.

“After these things I saw, and **behold a door was standing open in heaven**, and the first voice which I heard, like a trumpet, said to me, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.’” Doors in biblical times were usually made of wood and enclosed by a stone threshold. Opening a door enabled people to pass through either way or to see in or out.

The use of “door” here is metaphorical for an opening in the sky that enabled John to look into the heavenly throne room. He is no longer on Patmos, but at the gates of heaven looking in. Genesis 7:11 speaks of the “windows of heaven” being opened. In other parts of Scripture it simply speaks about the “heavens being opened” (Ezek 1:1; Matt 3:16; Luke 3:21; Acts 7:56; 10:11; Rev 19:11). Two times later in Revelation the door into the heavenly temple “was opened” (Greek: *ênoigê*, aorist passive indicative in both cases– Rev 11:19; 15:5). In most of these passages the heavens were opened so that something or someone could pass down to earth. In Acts 7:56 and the three Revelation passages the opening enables the heavenly throne room to be seen.

The Greek verb for “open” (*êneôgmenê*) is a perfect passive participle, which means that the door to heaven was “standing open” already at the time John saw it. In other words, the door was opened earlier and continued to be open up to the time John saw that it was open.

“After these things I saw, and behold a door was standing open in heaven, and **the first voice which I heard, like a trumpet**, said to me, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.’” This is a clear reference back to Revelation 1:10. There John heard a loud voice, like a trumpet, behind him. When he turns to see who the voice was coming from, he sees a vision of the son of man among the seven candlesticks (Rev 1:12-18). That encounter with Jesus was clearly earthly. Jesus was seen “behind” (Greek: *opisô*) John, not above him. The candlesticks represent the seven churches rather than purely heavenly realities. And it is only here, in Revelation 4:1, that John is called up into heavenly places. So in chapter four the scene changes from earthly things (Patmos) to heavenly things.

The voice is not a trumpet, but only sounds “like” (Greek: *hôs*) a trumpet. This is one of many verbal acknowledgments in Revelation that the imagery is symbolic. Trumpets, of course, play an important symbolic role later on in the book and will be dealt with in detail then (see Rev 8:2-6-- Excursus on Trumpets and Trumpeting). The fact that the voice of Christ in Revelation 1:15 sounds like many waters, does not mean that the voice like a trumpet in 1:10 is a different character. The voice of Christ no doubt can make many sounds. Human descriptions of that voice would require a variety of human analogies. That this voice is ultimately the voice of Jesus tells us that though Jesus is absent from chapter four of Revelation, this vision will introduce something very important about Him, which comes clear in chapter five.

“After these things I saw, and behold a door was standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I heard, like a trumpet, said to me, ‘**Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.**’” The latter third of this verse gives the content of the voice, calling John to come up (Greek: *anaba*) through the door and view what is taking place in heaven. Some commentators connect this call to come up with Theodotion’s translation of Daniel 2:28-29. There Nebuchadnezzar is called to “ascend” (Greek: *anebêsan*) and receive the revelation of the future in his dream.

Once again there is reference to the “after these things” in Revelation 1:19. From this verse on in the book John will be viewing visions of events that are largely in his future. While we have already determined that the cross and ascension of Jesus are the key point of reference in Revelation 5, these past events are a necessary foundation for what God is doing in the whole Christian age. As mentioned earlier, unlike other biblical passages, where heaven is opened so something or someone can come down, here heaven is opened so John can go up. The word “show” (Greek: *deixô*) recalls Revelation 1:1, where Jesus is the one who “shows” John that which will soon take place. What follows this verse will be at the heart of what Jesus intended to “show” John back in the first verse of the book.

Note that John does not enter the door until he is called. Revelation comes at the time of God’s choosing, not because someone goes seeking for it. While human effort is needed to understand God, true knowledge of God is not the result of scientific method or human striving, it is because God allows Himself to be known in a given situation.

Rev 4:2– “Immediately I became in the Spirit, and behold a throne was there in heaven, and there was One sitting on the throne.” As soon as John hears the voice of Jesus, He is caught up in the Spirit. So his entry into heaven is not a physical ascension, but he is carried in vision by

the Spirit into the heavenly places. John becomes “in the Spirit” four times in the book of Revelation. The first is in Revelation 1:10, where he has his initial encounter with the glorified Jesus. The second is here. The third and fourth are in Revelation 17:3 and 21:10. Of the four “in the Spirit” references, this is the only one that calls John into heaven. All the others call him to a different vantage point on earth where something special happens. Some commentators consider this phrase so important that they use these four passages as guides to the structure of the book. I believe, on the other hand, that this is probably over-reading the intent of the phrase. The seven-fold structure for the book of Revelation that I adopt seems more intentional (see *The Deep Things of God*, chapter six).

John must have already been “in the Spirit” in verse one in order to experience the voice of Jesus, thus the Spirit he received in 1:10 has continued to operate, but now he receives an extended gift of the Spirit which allows him to not only view heavenly things that are experienced on earth (the presence of Jesus) but heavenly things themselves. Similar waves of inspiration occur in the book of Ezekiel (Ezek 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 5, 24; 37:1; 43:5).

“Immediately I became in the Spirit, and behold **a throne was there in heaven**, and there was One sitting on the throne.” This is the first of fourteen references to the throne in this chapter. The throne is the clear center point of the vision. Everything in this chapter happens in relation to the throne. Things happen in the midst of the throne, before the throne, all around the throne, above the throne, and out from the throne. The throne in this vision represents God’s right to rule over the universe. And that right to rule is not only inherent in the very character of God, it is freely granted by the beings before the throne because God created all things (Rev 4:11). Further grounds for God’s right to rule come to light in chapter five.

“Immediately I became in the Spirit, and behold **a throne was there in heaven**, and there was One sitting on the throne.” The vision of this chapter is strongly grounded in the Old Testament background. There are four major throne scenes in the Old Testament, five if you count Israel’s experience on Sinai, where the mountaintop became the throne of God for an extended period (Exod 19:12-20; 24:15-18; 34:1-7). Revelation 4 clearly alludes to the throne scene of Ezekiel 1. Fully a third of the Greek words in Revelation 4 are found also in Ezekiel 1. There is probably no clearer structural parallel to the Old Testament in Revelation than the references to Ezekiel 1 in Revelation 4. The description of the four living creatures (Rev 4:6-7) and the “holy, holy, holy” of Revelation 4:8 are clear references to Isaiah 6. There are also clear references to Daniel 7, especially in Revelation 5. The fourth throne vision in the Old Testament is in the prophecy of Micaiah, referenced in 1 Kings 22:19-23 and 2 Chronicles 18:18-22. So one could say that the major structural parallels to the Old Testament in Revelation 4 and 5 are the five great throne passages in the OT.

It is important to note that the throne “was there” (Greek: *ekeito*) in heaven. This is a Greek imperfect tense, which means that the throne was not newly placed, as in Daniel 7:9 (Greek: *etethesan*), where the aorist tense points to the throne being set up for the special scene Daniel is viewing. The throne in Revelation 4 “was there” for a long time before John was invited to view it. While Revelation 4 and 5 allude to Daniel 7, John is not viewing the same scene as the one in Daniel 7.

When Seventh-day Adventists approach Revelation 4 and 5 they tend to assume that if a New Testament writer is quoting Daniel 7 it must be describing the judgment that begins in 1844. But the New Testament often places Daniel 7 references at the cross (Mark 2:10; Matt 9:6, cf. Dan 7:13-14) and/or the Second Coming (Matt 26:64; Rev 1:7, cf. Dan 7:13-14. On the other hand, Revelation 13:2 uses Daniel 7 closer to the original meaning.) This does not mean that in the original vision, Daniel was viewing the cross or the Second Coming. Daniel must be allowed to tell his vision in his own way. But later inspired writers have the freedom to apply an earlier prophecy in a new way without cancelling out the meaning of the original vision. This is what I call an inspired application. As we have seen, Revelation 5 points to the cross and the ascension of Jesus (Rev 3:21; 5:5-6). Revelation 4:2 supports this by contrasting the throne of Revelation 4-5 (already there) with the throne of Daniel 7 (set up for that occasion). These visions have similarities, but also significant differences.

The last part of this verse speaks of “one sitting on the throne.” Although the enthroned one is not named, from a New Testament perspective this is clearly God the Father, since the Holy Spirit (Rev 4:5; 5:6) and Jesus Christ (Rev 5:5-6) are introduced in this vision in distinction to the one sitting on the throne (see also Rev 5:7, 9, 13). Compare also Revelation 4:8 with 1:4. There is an intentional vagueness in the description of the one sitting on the throne that follows in verse three. The focus is not so much on what God looks like, but on what God does. In 1 Kings 22:19 Micaiah sees Yahweh sitting on a throne, but there is no description except that Yahweh engages in human-like dialogue with the heavenly court.

It is also interesting to compare this verse with the description of the one sitting on the throne in Ezekiel 1:26-27. There the divine figure has a human appearance (see also Daniel 7:9). From the waist up the figure looks like glowing metal and from the waist down like fire. Also quite vague. As we have noted, the references to Ezekiel 1 in this chapter are multiple and intentional. If the Greek of Revelation 5:1 is a reference to God’s “right hand,” Revelation also describes the divine in human terms. But see comments on Revelation 5:1 for another perspective on the Greek there. In any case, none of these visionary descriptions of God are clear enough that an artist could create a picture of the divine. This is in harmony with the strictures of the second commandment (Exod 20:4-6).

Rev 4:3— “The One sitting there was **like in appearance as a jasper and sardius stone**. A rainbow, like an emerald in appearance, was all around the throne.” The one sitting on the throne is compared in appearance with a jasper (Greek: *iaspidi*) and a sardius (Greek: *sardiô*) stone. The jasper was a variety of quartz found in various colors, often striped or spotted, and was sometimes called chalcedony. Although translucent and not normally sparkling, in Revelation 21:11, the glory of God is likened to a clear-as-crystal jasper stone. Revelation 21:18-19 tell us that the walls of the New Jerusalem were made of jasper and that it was the first of the twelve foundation stones of the New Jerusalem. In Exodus 28:18, where the sixth stone of the High Priest’s breastplate is thought by many translators (ESV, KJV, NASB, RSV) to be a diamond (Hebrew: *yâhalôm*), the Greek translation has jasper (*iaspis*), so there is uncertainty as to exactly what the ancients meant by jasper.

The sardius is a variety of what is called carnelian today, a reddish, semi-transparent, precious stone. In Revelation 21:20 it is the sixth of the twelve foundation stones of the New Jerusalem. Some think it might be in the ruby family of precious stones. The sardius was the first and the jasper the last, stone of the High Priest's breastplate (Exod 28:17-21), so reference to these stones are part of a larger sanctuary motif in chapters four and five (see Rev 1:12–Excursus on the Sanctuary in Revelation).

“The One sitting there was like in appearance as a jasper and sardius stone. **A rainbow, like an emerald in appearance, was all around the throne.**” A rainbow (Greek: *iris*) was “all around” the throne (Greek: *kuklothen tou thronou*). While “all around” (Greek: *kuklothen*) normally means completely circling something at a horizontal level, the rainbow is normally a half-circle arched over the earth. So some commentators think of the rainbow in this text as a horizontal circle or halo around the throne or above the throne, others prefer to see this as a description of a rainbow-shaped arch over the throne. But the Greek combination of words is rather ambiguous. While a rainbow normally exhibits multiple colors from purple to red, the primary color of this rainbow is the green color of an ancient stone that almost certainly is the one we call an emerald (Greek: *smaragdinô*). In other words, the rainbow in John's vision produced the same effect on the eye as an emerald, brilliant, but not dazzling like a diamond.

“The One sitting there was like in appearance as a jasper and sardius stone. **A rainbow, like an emerald in appearance, was all around the throne.**” In the flood story of Genesis, the rainbow was a symbol of God's covenant with Noah (Gen 9:12-17), an assurance that He is faithful in keeping his promises. It offered hope in the context of the world's ruin. Throughout the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament), however, the word for “rainbow” is the same as for the instrument that shoots arrows in hunting and war (Greek: *toxon*— Gen 9:13, 14, 16; Sirach 43:11; 50:17, cf. Rev 6:2), unlike our text here. In the rabbinic writings, the rainbow was considered to symbolize the glory of God. A “rainbow” also appears on the head of the mighty angel in Revelation 10:1. In the words of Barnes, “The rainbow has always. . . been an emblem of peace. It appears on the cloud as the storm passes away.”

Rev 4:4—“And **all around the throne were twenty-four thrones** and on the thrones twenty-four elders were sitting, dressed in white garments with golden victory crowns on their heads.” This verse interrupts the description of the central throne of God found in verses three and five to describe an additional feature of the throne room. It does so by repeating a phrase from the previous verse, “all around the throne” (Greek: *kuklothen tou thronou*). In the previous verse, the fact that it is a rainbow all around the throne leaves it ambiguous as to whether the rainbow circles the throne horizontally or arches over it vertically. But in this verse “all around” should certainly be taken in a horizontal sense, rather than implying some sort of arch formation over the throne.

“And **all around the throne were twenty-four thrones** and on the thrones twenty-four elders were sitting, dressed in white garments with golden victory crowns on their heads.” The natural meaning of “all around the throne” suggests that the twenty-four thrones encircle the throne, rather than being clustered in front of the throne. Gill, on the other hand, argues from the model of the Sanhedrin, in which the leader of the Sanhedrin sits in the front of the

meeting room and the rest sit in three semi-circles of roughly twenty-four each (seventy-two in total) before the leader. The so-called lesser Sanhedrin included the leader and twenty-three others, which approximates the situation in this text. Gill also notes that the idea of a semi-circle could also be drawn from the mention of rainbow in verse three. This is certainly possible, but absent John's own explanation, I usually prefer not to assume outside examples, but take the most natural reading of the text itself, which would be circular. If the rainbow of verse three is like a halo over the throne area, the twenty-four elders could be understood as sitting under it.

Some have noted that the number twenty-four here could reflect the fact that there are twenty-four books in the Hebrew Old Testament. This an unlikely reference in Revelation for two reasons. 1) That number was not used to refer to the Old Testament in the New, it must be determined by counting. 2) The Hebrew canon was not generally settled by the time Revelation was written, hence this would be an anachronism, interpreting an ancient text on the basis of things taken for granted later on.

"And **all around the throne were twenty-four thrones** and on the thrones twenty-four elders were sitting, dressed in white garments with golden victory crowns on their heads." The word for throne here (Greek: *thronous*) is the same one used throughout the chapter for the central throne upon which God sits. So the twenty-four elders, whoever they are, are in some way assisting God in ruling the universe. We explore the identity of the elders in an Excursis below.

Along with most Bible versions, I have added "were" and "was" to the translation here and in verse three although there is no verb in the Greek. These verses assume and carry forward the imperfect tense (Greek: *ekeito*) of verse two. This is a general description of a continuous reality, the ongoing worship of God in the heavenly throne room. As mentioned earlier, chapter four is not a point in time, it is a general description of the kinds of things that go on in the heavenly realm. We come to a specific point in time only with chapter five.

"And all around the throne were twenty-four thrones and **on the thrones twenty-four elders** were sitting, dressed in white garments with golden victory crowns on their heads." Because commentators tend to focus on the number twenty-four, a possible background text for the elders in Revelation four is often overlooked; Isaiah 24:23. There the end-time is portrayed as God reigning on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, manifesting His glory before His "elders" (Hebrew: *zâqênayin*, LXX: *presbuterôn*). So the presence of "elders" in the heavenly throne room would not be a surprise to anyone familiar with the Hebrew prophets. Elders also played a strong leadership role within Early Judaism, which is compatible with their role in this vision.

Since both the throne and the elders are twenty-four in number, it is natural to assume that each throne is present to accommodate one of the elders. As mentioned earlier, the number twenty-four could be drawn from the Lesser Sanhedrin (something like an executive committee of a larger board). More likely in Revelation, the number is drawn from the fact that the priests were organized into twenty-four courses or divisions, each of which served consecutively in the temple for a week at a time (1 Chr 24:1-19).

The twenty-four elders are called priests in the traditional Greek text of Revelation 5:10 (witnessed in the KJV), but in the more reliable scholarly text of 5:10 (witnessed in NIV, ESV, NRSV) the elders themselves are not actually called priests (see Rev 4:4 [Excursus on the 24 elders] for more detail). On the other hand, they function as priests in Revelation 5:8, where they minister incense before the throne. So associating the number of the elders with the twenty-four divisions of the Israelite priesthood under David is certainly possible, if not probable.

“And all around the throne were twenty-four thrones and **on the thrones twenty-four elders** were sitting, dressed in white garments with golden victory crowns on their heads.” Even more likely than the Sanhedrin or the divisions of the Israelite priesthood is that the number twenty-four arises from a doubling of the number twelve. In the book of Revelation numbers often have a symbolic role. The number three is associated with the godhead (Rev 1:4; 4:8), the number four with the earth (Rev 7:1) and the number seven with completeness (seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls). The number seven is the sum of three and four, and the number twelve is the product of three times four. So the number twelve is often associated with the people of God (who arise from the work of God on the earth). The root number for the elders, therefore, is the number twelve, one of the crucial root numbers in Revelation. Twenty four is the product of twelve plus twelve. In Revelation 21 the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem are each named after one of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 21:12-13). The twelve foundations are associated with the twelve apostles of the Lamb (21:14). Together these number twenty-four and they represent the totality of Israel in both its Old Testament and New Testament forms. The book of Revelation also exhibits another permutation of twelve, the 144,000 in chapter seven (7:4-8) and the height of the city wall of the New Jerusalem, 144 cubits (21:17). Both numbers are the result of multiplying twelve times twelve. All of this evidence suggests that the twenty-four elders in some way represent the people of God in both Old and New Testament eras.

“And all around the throne were twenty-four thrones and on the thrones twenty-four elders were sitting, **dressed in white garments with golden victory crowns on their heads.**” The twenty-four elders are dressed in white garments (Greek: *himatiois leukois*). White is often associated with priestly vestments in the ancient world, both Jewish and pagan. But more important for our purposes are similar references in Revelation. White garments are a reward to the overcomers in Sardis (Rev 3:4-5). Laodicea does not yet have them, but is invited to “buy” them (Rev 3:18). The martyrs of the fifth seal are given white “robes” (Greek: *stolê*). These are also the garments of the great multitude (7:9, 13-14). A parallel expression could be translated the same, but is actually “clean linen” (Greek: *linon katharon*) in Revelation 15:6 and “fine linen clean and bright” (19:8– Greek: *bussinon lampron katharon*). In the latter passage this fine linen is metaphorically defined as the righteous actions of the saints (Greek: *ta dikaiômata tôn hagiôn*). These parallels will have important implications for the identity of the twenty-four elders.

“And all around the throne were twenty-four thrones and on the thrones twenty-four elders were sitting, **dressed in white garments with golden victory crowns on their heads.**” The twenty-four elders have golden victory crowns (Greek: *stephanois*) on their heads. The

stephanos was not an emblem of royal authority, it was a symbol of victory or high status. It was often a wreath made of foliage and is best known today in terms of its connection with the ancient Olympic games. The name comes from the Greek *stephō* which means to encircle. This wreath encircled the head. It served as a reward for exceptional conduct, such as winning a contest in the Olympic games. In the context of religion the term was used for the headgear of priests in the course of their liturgical duties. It also could have a role in political life, thus diminishing somewhat the difference between it and the royal crown, the *diadēma*. See more detailed discussion on *stephanos* and its royal counterpart the *diadēma* in the notes to Rev 6:2.

“And all around the throne were twenty-four thrones and on the thrones twenty-four elders were sitting, **dressed in white garments with golden victory crowns on their heads.**” In the context of Revelation 4 this victory crown would be a sign of divine honor in response to exceptional conduct. But in Revelation 6:2 it is associated with conquest, the crown that goes to the winning general in a battle (perhaps like war medals). This is no doubt similar to the way *stephanos* is used in Revelation 2:10, where it is the reward for the overcomer. The overcomers in Smyrna would receive a “crown of life.” On the other hand, the locusts of Revelation 9:7 also wear golden victory crowns, so the symbol in Revelation is not limited to positive spiritual action. The wearing of victory crowns also has important implications for the identity of the twenty-four elders (see Rev 4:4 [Excursis on the 24 Elders]–, which follows).

Rev 4:4 (Excursis on the 24 Elders)– One of the major topics of interest in the book of Revelation is: *Who are the twenty-four elders, and why do they play a role in Revelation 4-5 and beyond in the book?* The twenty-four elders are all around the throne and each of them is sitting on one of the thrones. They seem to be heavenly beings of some kind, but the book of Revelation never actually tells us WHO they are. So we have to examine the evidence available and make the most appropriate judgment we can on the issue.

We have already noticed that the number twenty-four is derived from twelve plus twelve and may anticipate the New Jerusalem, with its twelve gates and twelve foundations. It may also be related to the 144,000 in chapter seven and the height of the walls in the New Jerusalem (144 angelic/human cubits– see Rev 21:17). We also noticed that there were twenty-four divisions of priests in the Old Testament temple. Any or all of these connections may be important for understanding the twenty-four elders.

In this verse the twenty-four elders sit on thrones next to God's throne. This reminds the reader of the foundational verse for chapters four through seven, Revelation 3:21, NIV. "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne." We have noticed how John tends to embed the key to the following vision of Revelation in the climax of the previous vision. Revelation 3:21 is the climax of the messages to the seven churches. At the same time, it is the key to what follows. You have the Father's throne (Rev 4), Jesus joining the Father on His throne (Rev 5) and overcomers joining Jesus on His throne (Rev 7). Revelation 3:21 anticipates that one day those who overcome in the Christian walk will have a part in the throne room of the universe (cf. Rev 7:15-17). The twenty-four elders have a similar role already in chapters four and five. This connection with Revelation 3:21 also has implications for the identity of the twenty-four elders.

Revelation 5:9-10 is sometimes seen as a “slam dunk” proof that the twenty-four elders are some form of redeemed humanity. In some manuscripts (reflected in the KJV), the elders are described as singing (along with the four living creatures) to the Lamb, “Thou. . . hast redeemed US to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation. . . and WE shall reign on the earth” (Rev 5:9-10, KJV). At first glance, this seems to suggest that the twenty-four elders are representatives of redeemed humanity from every part of the earth. But this reading is problematic. It is not just the elders who sing this, it is also the four living creatures (Rev 5:8). Are these angelic creatures also redeemed from the earth by the blood of the Lamb?

The best and earliest manuscripts read differently. As reflected in the NIV, these manuscripts read, “With your blood you purchased MEN for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. . . and THEY will reign on the earth.” (Rev 5:9-10, NIV). In this reading it is not the elders who are purchased from every tribe and nation and will reign on the earth, but “people” (ESV). This third person reference indicates that Revelation 5:9-10 offers no evidence at all as to the identity of the twenty-four elders. Since the majority of manuscripts exhibit confusion (adding US in verse nine but reading THEY in verse ten) Revelation 5:9-10, at best, does not settle the issue of who the twenty-four elders are.

We noticed previously that the twenty-four elders are dressed in white robes. In the book of Revelation, white robes fairly consistently relate to the people of God on earth during the Christian era or at its close. White robes were offered to members of the churches in Sardis (Rev 3:5) and Laodicea (3:18). They are also given to the souls under the altar (6:11) and worn by the great multitude (7:9). Parallel expressions are applied to angels in the heavenly temple (Rev 15:6) and the saints who are getting ready for the wedding supper of the Lamb (19:8).

We also noticed that the twenty-four elders wear golden victory crowns (Greek: *stephanous*) and not royal crowns (Greek: *diadēma*). The elders are not depicted as rulers over territory, at this point, but they have clearly gained a victory in some sense. Victory crowns were offered as rewards to the overcomers in Smyrna (Rev 2:10) and Philadelphia (3:11). The woman of Revelation twelve wears a victory crown (12:1) and the word is also used, perhaps ironically, for the crown of thorns that Jesus wore on the cross (Matt 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2 and 5). In Second Timothy, Paul is described as anticipating a *stephanos* crown on the day when Jesus returns (2 Tim 4:8). In that verse it seems to represent eternal life. So in the New Testament more broadly, the "*stephanos*" crown is a reward of the righteous and is also associated with Jesus' overcoming on the cross.

There are two major views of the twenty-four elders in New Testament scholarship. Both views recognize that the twenty-four elders are heavenly beings, depicted before the throne of God. The first view sees them as a class of angels, much like the four living creatures. The other view sees them as a form of redeemed humanity. The evidence we have examined previously points to the twenty-four elders being some kind of redeemed humanity. The white robes, the victory crowns and the connection with Revelation 3:21 all point to that conclusion. But before we settle on this interpretation, we need to look briefly at the opposing view.

It is not surprising that some scholars would see the twenty-four elders as a class of angels. They are clearly heavenly beings and they are located in close association with the four

living creatures, who seems to be archangels of some sort (see notes on Rev 4:6 and 7). But there are a number of problems with the angelic view of the twenty-four elders. The elders are described in ways that never apply to angels anywhere in the Bible or in the writings of early Judaism outside the Bible. For example, nowhere in the relevant ancient sources are angels ever called elders. Neither are they ever depicted as sitting on thrones. Nowhere do they wear crowns of any kind, particularly not *stephanos* crowns. These terms are all widely associated with the people of God. So the symbolism is consistent in this case, strong evidence that the twenty-four elders are some sort of redeemed humanity.

We have already noticed a strong association between the twenty-four elders and the twelve apostles of the Lamb. So just as the symbol of the 144,000 represents the totality of Israel, both Old and New Testaments (see Rev 7:4-8 [Excursis on the 144,000]), the twenty-four elders could be heavenly representatives of the people of God in both the time of Old Testament Israel and the era of the church. In support of this is Jesus' comment to His disciples in Matthew 19:28 and parallel: "In the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt 19:28, ESV, see also Luke 22:30). Here the twelve disciples are clearly associated with both heavenly thrones and the twelve tribes. They are the counterparts to the twelve tribal heads (patriarchs) of Old Testament Israel. And they are also depicted to have a role in the final judgment.

The best explanation of the twenty-four elders seems to be that they are symbolic representations of the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles, just as can be seen in the depiction of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. A similar parallel can also be seen in the Song of Moses and of the Lamb in Revelation 15:3, where the key figures of the Old and New Testament people of God are combined into one song. The elders in this vision seem to represent all of redeemed humanity, in both its Old and New Testament forms. In other words, the twenty-four elders are symbolic of all God's believers throughout history. Their inclusion in this heavenly vision indicates that humanity is well represented before God. God is using the twenty-four elders to help minister to, and eventually judge, His people on earth. They are not the tribal leaders or the apostles in person, they are representative figures.

If the twenty-four elders represent redeemed humanity, at what point did they enter into heavenly places? Can they be associated with any specific biblical people or events? Evidence in the New Testament suggests that the elders can be associated with events that occurred at the time of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people" (Matt 27:51-53, NIV). Many people have missed that detail when reading the New Testament. There were saints of the past who were raised from the dead when Jesus died on the cross. And their existence was noticed as they wandered through Jerusalem's streets after His resurrection.

Did the saints resurrected at the crucifixion (Matt 27:51-53) remain alive on earth for many years? This is unlikely, because their witness would have been a powerful one and widely

noticed. Did they die again or did they ascend to heaven? Paul gives us a small clue. "This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men'" (Eph 4:8, NIV). At His ascension Jesus was accompanied by "captives," possibly those who were raised from the dead at the time of the crucifixion.

It is possible, however, that attempting to specifically identify the twenty-four elders with those raised at Jesus' crucifixion is being too precise. Revelation is a symbolic book (see comments on Rev 1:1) and the vision may simply highlight that humanity is not being overlooked on this momentous occasion. They could simply be designated representatives for the earthly people of God in the heavenly council.

There is one final challenge in this interpretation of the twenty-four elders. If the twenty-four elders include people raised at the crucifixion and who ascended with Jesus, why are they seen in the heavenly throne room before Jesus Himself appears there? While the Bible itself does not address that issue, it is not as big a problem as it might seem at first. The ascension was on the 40th day after the crucifixion and the enthronement in heaven occurred on the day of Pentecost (50th day after). So there is a ten-day period between to allow for preparations for the great event. As the preparations were made for the inaugural ceremony, these representatives of humanity would be ushered in to the throne room well before it began in order to be a part of the coronation ceremony. By this means there would be representatives of the whole universe, including the human race, on hand to participate in the acclamation of the Lamb that we see in the latter part of chapter five.

Full certainty about who these twenty-four elders are is not possible because John himself leaves that open and ambiguous. That they were redeemed humanity who were in some way transported to heaven to represent humanity before God makes the most sense in the light of the available evidence.

In the *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* James L. Blevins asserts that the role of the twenty-four elders in Revelation recalls the chorus in Greek tragic drama. At the beginning of the Greek drama a chorus of twelve or twenty-four entered the stage and stood around the throne of Dionysius (Dionysius was the god of wine and also of theater, his throne was located at the far right of the stage). The earliest such tragedies had no actors, but just a chorus. By the time of Revelation actors were common, but the chorus continued to be the medium for interpreting the drama.

In Revelation, similarly, the elders sing and interpret the drama of the vision. They accompany John in heaven and introduce many of the visions. On the surface, this would seem to be a very compelling reason that the vision of Revelation had twenty-four elders and not some other number, but scholars of Revelation have not flocked to Blevins' interpretation. I need to do a little more research on this possibility. In the meantime, I am sticking with the more standard view of the elders as the sum of the tribes and the apostles, representatives of humanity in the heavenly court.

There is one final thing to say about the twenty-four elders. They are portrayed as what Laodicea was called to be. In a real sense the description of the elders is in direct contrast with Laodicea, they are Laodicea's opposites. The elders are in a worship relationship with God and the heavenly host (Rev 4:9-10), Laodicea has left Jesus outside the door (Rev 3:20). The elders

wear the white garments (4:4) that Laodicea is called to buy (3:18), while Laodicea itself is naked (3:17). The elders wear crowns of gold (4:4) while Laodicea is lacking in true gold (3:18). The elders have joined God's throne (4:4) while Laodicea is called to it (3:21). The elders are God-focused (5:8-10) while Laodicea is self-satisfied (3:17). The elders are inside the open door with God and Jesus (4:1), while Laodicea is inside a shut door without Jesus (3:20). This portrayal of the twenty-four elders includes a call to Laodiceans to open the door and get into a relationship with Jesus.

Rev 4:5— “And out from the throne came lightnings and noises and thunders, and seven lamps of fire, which are the seven spirits before the throne, were burning before the throne.” Everything in chapter four centers on the throne. In verse two the throne was simply there and had been for some time (based on the Greek imperfect verb *ekeito*). Since the verbs in verses three and four are not stated, the continuous, imperfect force should be applied there also. In verse three a rainbow is seen “all around” the throne. In verse four the elders and their thrones are seen “all around” the throne, but as we have noted earlier, the rainbow is probably “all around” like an arch over the throne while the elders are “all around” in a horizontal circle. In this verse the description is “out from” (Greek: *ek*) the throne.

“And out from the throne **came** lightnings and noises and thunders, and seven lamps of fire, which are the seven spirits before the throne, were burning before the throne.” English translations are divided as to whether the manifestation of God in this text should be in the present (“proceed”—NASB, “issue”—RSV, “coming. . . are”—NRSV) or past (“came”—NIV, ESV, “proceeded”—KJV) tense. The Greek word in question (*ekporeuontai*) is a present participle, so the present tense of some English versions seems justified at first glance. But the Greek participle does not set the time of a sentence, it expresses relative time in relation to the main verb. In other words, a present participle occurs at the same time as the main verb. In this case the main verb is understood in verses three to five and you have to go all the way back to verse two in order to find it (Rev 4:2: the throne “was there” in my translation, “was standing” in NASB—Greek: *ekeito*). So translating the participle as “came” or “proceeded” (past tense) is accurate to the grammar of Revelation 4 even though the participle itself is in the present tense.

“And out from the throne came **lightnings and noises and thunders**, and seven lamps of fire, which are the seven spirits before the throne, were burning before the throne.” The throne is the source of lightnings, noises and thunders. This is the language of a thunderstorm. When lightning and thunder echo, in a canyon for instance, the echoing and re-echoing sound is like a multitude of voices that can be heard on every side. The language here builds on Old Testament “theophanies” (an English word based on the Greek words for “appearance of God”), which are often described similarly. This can particularly be seen in the original “theophany,” the appearance of God on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16-20). These words are expressions of the awesome power of God and also His righteousness and judgment (Psalm 97:2). The appearance of God in the first chapter of Ezekiel included lightning and loud noises (Ezek 1:13, 24). The word for “noises” (Greek: *phonai*) can mean sounds in general or it can mean voices, as in Revelation 10:3 (see also Psalm 18:13. This series of words is repeated three more times in

Revelation (8:5; 11:19; 16:18). Revelation 8:5 and 16:18 add “earthquake” to the list and 11:19 adds “earthquake” and “great hail.” In 4:5 the thunderstorm is part of a chorus of praise to God, in 8:5 and 16:18 its role in the judgment side of God is in view. In 11:19, these manifestations are associated with the throne, but without further specification.

“And out from the throne came lightnings and noises and thunders, and **seven lamps of fire**, which are the seven spirits before the throne, were burning before the throne.” Seven lamps of fire are also introduced with a present participle (Greek: *kaiomenai*) which is associated with the past tense of Revelation 4:2 (Greek imperfect: *ekeito*) and should, therefore, be translated in the continuous past tense (“were burning”). A different word for “lamps” is used here (Greek: *lampades*) in contrast to Revelation 1:12, 13, 20 (Greek: *luchnias*, *luchniôn*), hence the translation as “lamps” rather than “lampstands.” This word is sometimes translated as “torches.” Abraham passed between lamps or torches of fire (LXX: *lampades puros*) in Genesis 15:17-18 (the Hebrew here is singular, but the Greek translation is plural). Whereas the seven lampstands in chapter one represented the seven churches (Rev 1:20), the seven lamps here represent the seven spirits of God (following phrase in 4:5). The association of fire with the throne recalls Revelation 1:14, where the son of man has eyes like a flame of fire. While the Greek word for “lamp” is different here, the concept of “seven lamps of fire” still recalls the Hebrew sanctuary, in which seven lamps of fire were constantly burning (Exod 25:37). These were the only source of artificial light in the sanctuary (Exod 27:20).

“And out from the throne came lightnings and noises and thunders, and **seven lamps of fire**, which are the seven spirits before the throne, were burning before the throne.” If the seven lamps (spirits) represent the Holy Spirit, the Spirit is here located before the throne of God. So when the Lamb appears in chapter five, there is the completion of the divine triad, commonly called the Trinity, or Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The association of the Spirit with a lampstand and seven lamps is made also in Zechariah 4:2-6. In the Old Testament, the Persians kings were associated with seven councilors (Ezra 7:14; Esther 1:14). In relation to that reference, the Expositor’s Greek New Testament suggests that in the Zoroastrian religion of the Persians, these councilors were associated with fire. On the concept of seven spirits in the book of Revelation, see notes on Revelation 1:4.

Rev 4:6– “And before the throne was, as it were, a sea of glass clear as crystal. In the midst of the throne and all around the throne were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.” This verse concurs with the previous three (3-5) in assuming a visionary description in the continuous past tense (Greek imperfect) established in verse two. In the first part of this verse the description moves “in front of” or “before” (Greek: *enôpion*) the throne. John alerts the reader once more that the descriptions in the heavenly vision are approximate rather than exact (Greek: *hôs*– “as it were”– this is frequent in Revelation, occurring also in verses one, six and seven of this chapter). John is doing his best to describe the heavenly things he is seeing in the language of this earth.

“And before the throne was, as it were, **a sea of glass clear as crystal.** In the midst of the throne and all around the throne were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.” What John sees in front of the throne looks like a sea made of glass (Greek: *hualinê*) with an

appearance like (Greek: *homoia*) crystal (Greek: *krustallô*). God's activity in the Bible is often described in relation to the sea (Exod 15:1-18; Psa 36:6; 77:19; Rev 15:2). Glass and glass-blowing were known to the ancients and the Egyptians were even able to color glass. In classical Greek, the word "crystal" was often used for ice. Since ancient glass was often coarse and semi-opaque, the reference to crystal would emphasize the transparent clarity of this sea of glass. The water of life in Revelation 22:1 is also clear as crystal. That water comes "out from" the throne just like the fire does in Revelation 4:5. The stability of crystal is also in contrast to the more turbulent waters on which the prostitute sits later on in the book (Rev 17:1, 15). The sea of glass may be the floor or foundation upon which the throne is placed, it would then be visible only from the viewpoint of the visionary, in front of the throne. From an early Christian perspective, the sea of glass would first of all represent the purity of God's character and government, which was represented on earth in the person of Jesus Christ.

"And before the throne was, as it were, **a sea of glass clear as crystal**. In the midst of the throne and all around the throne were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back." The combination of fire (Greek: *puros*— Rev 4:5) and crystal (4:6) recalls both the Sinai theophany (Exod 24:9-10, 17) and the vision of Ezekiel 1 (verses 22 and 27). A similar combination can be found in 1 Enoch, chapter fourteen. "Sea of glass" appears again in Revelation 15:2, there the glass itself is mingled with fire (Greek: *hualinên memigmenên puri*), like a diamond perhaps. This calm, glass-like sea is in startling contrast with the language of the thunderstorm in verse five. When God is manifest in the world, there is often a tension between the experience of a thunderstorm and a "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-13).

"And before the throne was, as it were, **a sea of glass clear as crystal**. In the midst of the throne and all around the throne were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back." Given the strong prevalence of sanctuary/temple language in Revelation four and five, it is very likely that John intended the "sea of glass" to recall the bronze laver or "sea" in the Hebrew tabernacle and Solomon's temple (Exod 30:19; 1 Kings 7:23; 2 Chr 4:9-10). The laver was positioned in front of the temple/tabernacle, just as the sea of glass is positioned before the throne. The laver was the place where the priests could wash their hands and feet (Exod 30:19), and likely also the sacrifices. The rabbis often compared the floor of the temple to crystal. So heaven in this vision is portrayed as a glorified temple (see Rev 1:12 [Excursus on the Sanctuary in Revelation]).

Some further ancient references may be of interest. In *The Testament of Levi* 2 there is a body of water within the "second heaven," and in the ancient Egyptian concept of paradise there is a "great lake in the fields of peace," where the gods live. From a Christian perspective, the laver represents baptism, the act of cleansing that is required before entering the spiritual temple of the church (Acts 2:41-42).

In the middle of the verse is a pair of expressions that is strange when used together. "In the midst (Greek: *en mesô*) of the throne and all around (Greek: *kuklô*) the throne. . ." Normally a location would be expressed one or the other of these expressions. But how does one visualize the combination of the two? Some commentators have conjectured that the text intended to say "in the midst of the elders," which would make logical sense, but for which there is no evidence in the manuscript tradition. Benson makes the interesting suggestion that

“in the midst” refers to the height of the throne (located halfway between bottom and top) and “all around” to the breadth of the throne, in other words, at the four corners. Another possibility is, if the throne is square or parallelogram in shape, that the four living creatures were located in the middle of each of the four sides of the throne. If you take these terms spatially, the four living creatures are not occupying the throne itself, but are first seen as part of the throne structure. Each is stationed proportionately at a different corner of the throne. In a sense they are like ornaments on the four corners of the throne, but living ornaments that can speak and sometimes even move independently (Rev 15:7).

“In the midst (Greek: *en mesô*) of the throne and all around (Greek: *kuklô*) the throne. . .” The vision here is similar to the relation of the four living creatures to the throne in Ezekiel 1, except that there the four living creatures are clearly under the throne (Ezek 1:26) and are the means by which the throne moves and changes direction (Ezek 1:15-21). It is very possible that the expression “in the midst” is not used in Revelation 4:6 as a location but in recollection of how the four living creatures of Ezekiel 1 appeared from the midst of the thunderstorm in that vision (Ezek 1:4-5: Greek LXX: *en tô mesô*). So the curious pair of expressions in this verse could primarily signal an allusion to Ezekiel 1 rather than urging us to visualize the four living creatures as both in the middle of the throne and around it at the same time. What seems evident is that the four living creatures of Revelation four are immediately around the center of the throne, which would place them inside the circle of elders.

“And before the throne was, as it were, a sea of glass clear as crystal. In the midst of the throne and all around the throne were **four living creatures** full of eyes in front and in back.” The author of Revelation does not define who the four living creatures are. But in Revelation they are always found in proximity to the throne (Rev 4:6; 5:6; 7:11; 14:3) and usually in an attitude of worship to God (Rev 4:8-9; 5:8-9, 14; 7:11-12; 19:4).

In 1 Enoch (Ethiopic Enoch) 40:2 (a Jewish book known in New Testament times), the number of archangels is four (named Michael [to God’s right], Gabriel [to God’s left], Uriel [in front of the throne] and Raphael [behind]), so the four living creatures may represent the leaders of the angelic hosts in heaven. In that case the throne in the vision is surrounded by the representatives of the angel hosts and the representatives of the human race (24 elders).

In Zechariah 6:5, the four horses are called the four “winds” or “spirits” of heaven, which are sent out from God to accomplish His will on the earth. It is interesting in this light to note the close association of the four living creatures with the four horses of Revelation 6:1-8 and possibly also with the four angels and winds of Revelation 7:1-3. In Enoch the four archangels are not stationary, but move about the cosmos in the pursuit of their various errands (1 Enoch 71:9; 88:2,3). While the four living creatures are stationary in chapter four of Revelation, they are seen as speaking and acting individually in Revelation 6:1-8 and 15:7.

The four living creatures are not “beasts” (Greek: *therion*) as in the King James Version, instead, like Ezekiel they are four “living creatures” (Greek: *zôa*). The word for beast represents the animal kingdom, particularly wild animals, and is reserved for the forces of evil in Revelation (Rev 6:7; 11:7; 13:1, 11, etc.). “Living creature,” on the other hand, is a broader term that can represent also angels, birds and humans. These clearly represent God’s side of the cosmic conflict. In Ezekiel 1 each of the four living creatures has four faces, portraying the lion,

the ox, the man and the eagle. Revelation 4 is a little different. According to verse seven, the four living creatures themselves (not just their faces) include the lion (wild animal), the ox (domesticated animal), the man (human) and the eagle (“king of birds”) respectively. For a more detailed analysis of the identity and characteristics of the four living creatures see the Excursus on the Identity of the Four Living Creatures after the comments on verse six.

“And before the throne was, as it were, a sea of glass clear as crystal. In the midst of the throne and all around the throne were four living creatures **full of eyes in front and in back.**” At the end of verse six, the four living creatures are described as being full of eyes in front and in back. The mention of in front and in back strongly confirms the allusion of this vision to Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 1:15-18 each of the four living creatures was next to a wheel and the rims of the wheels were full of eyes rather than the four living creatures themselves. On the other hand, in Ezekiel 10:12, the second visionary description of God’s movable throne, the bodies of the four living creatures were full of eyes in front and back. Clearly, this is not to be taken literally, but signifies something about both the wheels and the living creatures. Since eyes are the windows of the body, a primary source of information to the mind, they probably represented the omniscience of God, who knows everything that can be known.

The multiple parallels between Revelation and Ezekiel indicate that the four living creatures of Revelation are the heavenly beings called *cherubim* in the Old Testament (see Ezekiel 10:20).

Rev 4:6 (The Identity of the Four Living Creatures)– To understand the role and identity of the four living creatures, it is helpful to begin with the ancient background. For this I referenced the excellent dissertation of Laurentiu Mot, entitled *Angels and Beasts* in an upcoming publication from Wipf and Stock Press in Eugene, Oregon. Another good source is the article on *cherubim* in the Anchor Bible Dictionary (I wrote 14 articles in that series, including the one on Armageddon). The term *cherubim* occurs over 90 times in the Hebrew Bible but only one time in the New Testament (Greek: *cherubin*– Heb 9:5), where they are located “above” (Greek: *huperanô*) the ark of the covenant (Heb 9:4-5). *Cherubim* are not described in detail in the Bible, they are only known to have faces and wings. They were sometimes two-dimensional figures (Exod 26:1, 31; 36:8, 35; 1 Kings 6:29; 2 Chr 3:7; Ezek 41:18-20) and sometimes three-dimensional (Exod 25:18-22; 37:7-9; 1 Kings 6:23-28; 8:6-7). If John’s readers were aware of the ancient equivalents outside the Bible, it would have helped them make sense of the biblical vision.

In Assyrian the *kirubu* was a winged ox-god and the *kurubu* was the vulture or eagle that guarded the treasure house of the gods. These ancient *cherubim* were analogous to griffins and sphinxes. The griffin had the body of a lion and the face of an eagle. Sphinxes were lions with human faces and outspread wings touching at the back. In Assyria especially, they also took the form of winged bulls, standing at the entrance of palaces and temples. In some representations, the deity or the king is depicted as sitting on a throne that is supported by two *cherubim*. These *cherubim* fulfilled two main roles in the ancient context of Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece and Egypt. One, they were intermediaries between God and human beings. Two, they were guardians of the temple and of the king. Both roles can be seen in the book of Revelation. In

Revelation four, the four living creatures were attached to the throne as if they were the guardians of God. But in the first four seals (Rev 6:1-8) they play an intermediary role between the Lamb and the riders on the four horses. So the ancient context is helpful, but the most complete understanding comes from an understanding of the Old Testament background texts.

As noted earlier, the strongest and most complete allusion to the Old Testament in Revelation 4 can be found in Ezekiel 1 and to a lesser extent Ezekiel 10. Both Revelation 4 and Ezekiel 1 have four “living creatures” (Ezek 1:5 LXX– *zôôn*; Rev 4:6– *zôa*) with faces like a lion, ox, man and eagle/vulture (Ezek 1:10; Rev 4:7). Both include the divine spirit (Ezek 1:12, 10 LXX– *to pneuma*; Rev 4:5– *hepta pneumata*), lamps and fire (Ezek 1:13 LXX– *lampadôn, puros*; Rev 4:5– *lampades puros*). Both contexts contain references to lightning (Ezek 1:13 LXX– *astrapê*; Rev 4:5– *astrapai*) and “full of eyes” (Ezek 1:18; Rev 4:6). In both texts there is reference to something above or below the living creatures and the throne (Ezek 1:23-26; Rev 4:6). In each case the throne is surrounded by a rainbow, although different Greek words are used (Ezek 1:28 LXX– *toxou*; Rev 4:3– *iris*). There are multiple verbal and thematic parallels between the descriptions of the four living creatures in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4. These together form an impressive structural parallel as well. There is no question that John had Ezekiel 1 in mind when writing out the vision or Revelation 4.

The book of Ezekiel was originally given to encourage the Jews at a time when their country lay in ruins and the best of their people had been taken captive to Babylon. To these Israelites it would have seemed that God had lost control of history and they were now on their own. To them the visions of Ezekiel 1 and 10 would have been a powerful message of how God had an overarching purpose that was at work in all these chaotic events. God had not lost control of history.

The vision of Revelation 4 came to John at a similar point in history. For more than a century Palestine had been occupied by the Romans and the Jewish people had felt God’s purpose for Israel (Exod 19:5-6; 1 Kings 4:29-34) slipping away. Christians even more so, both Jew and Gentile, found themselves at the margins of Roman society. So Revelation has its own Babylon and its own captivity (Rev 14:8; 18:1-4). At a time when the power of Rome seemed overwhelming, the vision of the four living creatures recalled an earlier vision that reassured God’s people that He is in control even when things seem totally out of control. Scholars such as Jeffrey Vogelgesang and Beate Kowalski have noticed that Revelation follows Ezekiel chapter by chapter in a giant structural parallel. This giant parallel comes into sharpest focus in Revelation 4.

There are also some interesting differences between Revelation 4 and Ezekiel 1 that show John is not just repeating the vision of Ezekiel 1 but adapting it for his own purposes. For example, in the Hebrew of Ezekiel 1 there are the four living creatures (Ezek 1:5 Hebrew: *arba chayoth*). But in the follow up vision of Ezekiel 10, these same creatures are also defined as *cherubim* (Ezek 10:20). That Hebrew term or its Greek equivalent is not used anywhere in Revelation.

In Ezekiel 1 each of the four living creatures has four faces, one each of man, lion, ox and eagle (1:10). In Revelation 4, each living creature has only one of the four (4:7). In Ezekiel, each of the four living creatures has four wings (1:11), but in Revelation each has six (4:8). In

Ezekiel, it is the wheels that are full of eyes all around (1:16-18), while in Revelation 4 it is the living creatures themselves that are covered with eyes front and back (4:6). In Ezekiel the throne is moving and the four living creatures, along with the Spirit, are the engines of that movement (1:12, 18-21), in Revelation the throne is stationary (4:2).

In Ezekiel, the four living creatures are especially close to God and are the bearers of God's throne chariot. There were also *cherubim* on the ark of the covenant, which served as a divine throne in the tabernacle and temple. God was there "enthroned between (KJV, NIV, or "above," NASB; the Hebrew simply says that they "sit or dwell there": *yôshêv ha-cherubim*) the *cherubim*" (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; Psa 80:1; 99:1; Isa 37:16). In 1 Chronicles 28:18, the ark is said to carry the "chariot" (Hebrew: *merkavah*) of the *cherubim*. So the representation of God's throne in Ezekiel 1 is modeled on the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place of the Old Testament sanctuary. The throne of God is not stationary, but movable and the *cherubim*, along with the Spirit, were the engines of that movement.

The fact that the four living creatures of Revelation have six wings points to a second certain allusion. The four living creatures of Revelation 4:8 are clearly described in the language of Isaiah 6, where the two angels are called *seraphim* (that term is also used for the fiery serpents of Numbers 21:6). The four living creatures of Revelation have six wings, like the *seraphim* of Isaiah 6:2 and they are constantly saying "holy, holy, holy" (as in Isaiah 6:3). So the description of the four living creatures in Revelation four is one of the strongest direct allusions to the Old Testament in Revelation. The two *seraphim* of Isaiah 6 seem to correspond to the giant *cherubim* of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:23-28). So Revelation 4 contains features drawn from both Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6. John's living creatures are composites of the figures in Ezekiel and Isaiah. They are neither *cherubim* nor *seraphim*, they are a mixture of both categories. A further look at Old Testament references to *cherubim* will be helpful at this point.

In the Old Testament *cherubim* guarded the gates of the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve were expelled from it (Gen 3:24). Yahweh communed with Moses and gave him instructions for Israel from between or above the *cherubim* on the ark of the covenant (Exod 25:22). The giant angels that were placed alongside the ark in the Most Holy Place of Solomon's temple are called *cherubim* (1 Kings 6:23-28; 2 Chr 3:11-12). These were three-dimensional figures. *Cherubim*, however, were also carved into the walls of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:29). These were two-dimensional figures. Yahweh flew through the sky on a *cherub* in a song of David (2 Sam 22:11; Psalm 18:10). According to Psalm 80:1 Yahweh dwells between or above the *cherubim*. In addition to the movable chariot of Ezekiel 1, *cherubim* also appear as decorations upon Ezekiel's temple (Ezek 41:18). In addition, Ezekiel 28:14, 16 speak of the King of Tyre as the "guardian cherub," no doubt a reference both to Lucifer in Isaiah 14 and the covering angels on the ark of the covenant. In the Old Testament, the *cherubim* and *seraphim* are always pictured as attendants of God. So are the four living creatures of Revelation. Together, they represent God's purpose for the whole creation. They wait upon God, fulfill His will, and exhibit His glory.

In the course of Christian history a number of interpretations have been given to the four living creatures. One of the earliest church fathers, Irenaeus, equated them with the four gospels. For him, John was the eagle, Luke the ox, Matthew the man and Mark the lion. These

represented Christ's royalty and deity, His sacrifice, His humanity, and His giving the Spirit of prophecy. If one takes this kind of analogy seriously, it might be more convincing to see Matthew as the lion, since a major theme of Matthew is the kingship of Jesus in the line of David, the lion of Judah (see also Rev 5:5 and comments). Mark's strong emphasis on the sufferings of Christ, through quotations of Isaiah 53 and the centrality of the cross in the gospel story, would support an association with the ox. Luke, on the other hand, opens his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus and portrays His humanness and compassion for the outcast, women and Gentiles. John could be compared with the eagle, as his theology soars above the others to touch on the character of God Himself. That these comparisons come in canonical order would likely be a coincidence at the time when Revelation itself was written.

In the centuries after Revelation was written, commentators noted that the lion, ox, man and eagle (according to tradition at least) graced the tribal standards that surrounded the Hebrew tabernacle in the wilderness. These were the standards of Judah, Reuben, Ephraim and Dan (see Numbers 2:1-34). In Jewish tradition Judah was associated with the lion, Reuben with the man, Ephraim with the ox and Dan with the eagle. The characteristics of the four living creatures (lion, ox, man, eagle) in the early Christian centuries were, therefore, seen as Christian equivalents of the tribal standards. Among those equivalents were "the four chief apostles." One listing had these as Peter (lion), James, the Lord's brother (ox), Matthew (man), and Paul (eagle— John is omitted because he wrote the vision and was still alive when it was written). Other lists replaced Matthew with Barnabas or Paul with John the beloved disciple. Another Christian equivalent was the list of the four major cities in the eastern half of the church. These four were Jerusalem (lion), Antioch (ox), Alexandria (man) and Byzantium or Constantinople (eagle).

The characteristics of the four living creatures have attracted many other associations that have received even less support than the four gospels or the tribal standards. They have been associated, for example, with the basic elements of the universe (as listed by the ancients); earth, wind, fire and water. Some have felt they could also represent the four main categories of conscious, land-based life; wild animals, domesticated animals, humans and birds. They have also been associated with the four main attributes of Jesus Christ; His humanity, sacrificial life, kingly nature and divine character. Additional associations are with the four orders of the medieval church (pastoral, diaconal, doctoral and contemplative), the four cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice), and the four chief attributes of divinity; in one listing wisdom, power, omniscience and creation (Renan). Obviously, these exercises are speculative at best, but in the current, scientific world one could note that there are four main quadrants of the brain, each housing a different major personality type, roughly equivalent to the four temperaments of the ancients; the sanguine, the choleric, the phlegmatic and the melancholy.

The Greek text of Revelation 5:9 used to raise the same problem for the four living creatures as it did for the twenty-four elders. In the text that lies behind the King James Version, the living creatures and the elders sing together, "Thou. . . hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation." This was a legacy of the limited manuscript resources available to Erasmus when he created the first scholarly text of

the New Testament. But earlier and better manuscripts literally read “You have purchased for God with your blood (“people” or “some”— not stated but understood) from every tribe and language and people and nation.” So the song of the elders and the four living creatures in Revelation 5:9-10 does not actually have any bearing on the identity of the four living creatures.

In sum, the four living creatures correspond to the *cherubim* and sphinxes of the ancient world. They would have been understood as angel guardians of the throne in God’s heavenly temple, probably corresponding to the four archangels of Jewish tradition. As such, the four living creatures represent the angelic portion of God’s kingdom, while the twenty-four elders, whatever their exact origin, represent the human race before God.

Rev 4:7— “The first living creature was *like a lion*, the second was like a calf, the third had a human face, and the fourth living creature was like an eagle in flight.” As we have seen already, each of the four living creatures is like one of the creatures found on the four faces of each throne creature in Ezekiel 1. Since they are introduced with ordinal numbers (first, second, third, fourth) the four living creatures are probably always listed in this order. That has importance when we come to the four horses of Revelation six, where each horse is introduced by a successive living creature. The first living creature in chapter four is the lion and in chapter six the first living creature has a voice like thunder (Rev 6:1-2). That makes a natural pair. The second living creature here is the ox and there is associated with sacrifice (6:3-4). The fourth living creature here is the eagle/vulture and there is associated with death (6:7-8).

“The first living creature was *like a lion*, the second was like a calf, the third had a human face, and the fourth living creature was like an eagle in flight.” The first living creature looks like a lion. The lion is the “king of beasts” (Prov 30:30; Mic 5:8). It could well represent leadership and authority in general and the divine rulership in particular. Since the third living creature is said to have the face of a man, the first probably does not look like a lion on the whole, but has a face like that of a lion. We are not informed as to what the living creatures look like as a whole, except that they are covered with eyes and have six wings (Rev 4:6, 8). The standard of the tribe of Judah portrayed a lion, no doubt because Jacob likened Judah to a lion or a lioness (Gen 49:9). While a lion can portray the evil one and his minions (Prov 28:15; 1 Pet 5:8; Rev 13:2), the image of the lion in Scripture is often a positive one (Num 23:24; 24:8-9; Ezek 1:10; 10:14; Rev 5:5).

“The first living creature was *like a lion*, the second was *like a calf*, the third had a human face, and the fourth living creature was like an eagle in flight.” The second living creature was *like an ox or a calf*. The Greek word (*moschos*) itself, does not determine the age or type of ox, that must be determined by the context, which is not helpful here. In the Greek Old Testament (LXX) this word generally signifies an ox or a bullock, a young bull that has been castrated so that it cannot breed (the word is used in the LXX for Aaron’s golden calf [Exod 32:4, 35] but not the images made by Jeroboam [1 Kings 12:28-29, uses the word for heifer]). But in at least one place, the *moschos* is likely female (Exod 34:19). The ox signifies endurance, perseverance, and strength (Prov 14:4). It was a sacrificial animal mentioned frequently in Exodus and Leviticus (Exod 29:10-14).

“The first living creature was *like a lion*, the second was like a calf, the third **had a human face**, and the fourth living creature was **like an eagle in flight**.” The third living creature was had a **face like a man**. As noted earlier, ancient sphinxes usually had the body of an animal but a human face. Within the animal kingdom humans stand out for intelligence, reason, and the ability to tell right from wrong.

The fourth living creature was **like a flying eagle/vulture**. The emphasis here is less on the bird itself than on the fact that it could fly (Greek: *petomenô*). While most birds fly, the eagle (Greek: *aetô*) is known for the speed, power and altitude of its flight. In the Old Testament the eagle is often used as a symbol of God’s protecting care (Exod 19:4; Deut 32:11-12; Psa 17:8; 63:7). Perhaps the best-known Old Testament eagle text is Isaiah 40:31, where the eagle symbolize the energy and strength bestowed on those who “wait on the Lord.”

What may be most significant for the understanding of Revelation 4 is that the lion, ox, man and eagle exhibit qualities that are all ascribed to angels in the Bible. As noted by Hendriksen, angels are portrayed as having great strength (like a lion: Psa 103:20), the ability to render service (like an ox: Heb 1:14), intelligence (like a man: Luke 15:10) and great swiftness (like an eagle: Dan 9:21). So the characteristics of the four living creatures are appropriate to the angelic realm, while the twenty-four elders clearly represent the human realm. Thus the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders together represent leadership under God for the angels and the human race. Swete speaks of the four living creatures as the “noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest” creatures in nature.

Rev 4:8– “Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and the wings were full of eyes, all around and even underneath. And they have no rest day or night, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” The first seven verses of this chapter are concerned with what heaven looks like. From this verse on, the sounds and the songs of heaven are in view. The translation “each” is based on an unusual Greek phrase *en kath’ en*, which could be literally translated “one according to one,” or simply “one by one” (note that a similar expression [Greek: *eis kata eis*] is used for the “one by one” responses of the disciples to Jesus’ comment that one of them would betray Him in Mark 14:18-19).

Each particular living creature had six wings. As noted previously, the *cherubim* of Ezekiel 1 had four wings, so the six here directly recalls the vision of Isaiah 6. In Isaiah 6:2, two wings of the *cherubim* were used to cover their faces, two wings to cover their feet and two were used to fly. The covering of face and feet is a signal of reverence and humility. They were in continual readiness to perform the commands of God. In this verse no mention is made of how the six wings were arranged on the body of each living creature. Perhaps in Revelation all six wings were used for flight. These living creatures are not only in continual readiness to carry out God’s directions, they are speedy in doing so. After all, it was Mercury, among the Roman gods, who was arrayed with wings as a symbol of speed.

“Each of the four living creatures had six wings, **and the wings were full of eyes, all around and even underneath**. And they have no rest day or night, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” The creatures are full of eyes “all around and inside” (Greek: *kuklothen kai esôthen*), which has puzzled commentators for centuries. This

is in contrast to verse 6 where the eyes are “in front and behind” (Greek: *emprosthen kai opisthen*), which is a little easier to understand and translate. The focus in verse 6 is the bodies of the living creatures, here the Greek word order indicates that the reference to eyes is focused on their wings. In this verse the “all around” (Greek: *kuklothen*) probably sums up the phrase “in front and behind” of verse 6, while the “inside” (Greek: *esôthen*) seems to add the idea that eyes are not only all around the visible parts of the body but even on the under part of the wings and the parts of the body that the resting wings would cover. This indicates that no matter what use is made of the wings, the living creature’s vision is not impeded in any way. Not only the body, but also the wings of each creature are “full of eyes.” The four living creatures are full of alertness, perception and knowledge.

“Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and the wings were full of eyes, all around and even underneath. **And they have no rest, day and night saying**, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” The words “day” and “night” are not symbolic, but are to be taken literally at first glance, not to express that there are light and dark periods in heaven, but the phrase is a colorful way of saying that the living creatures offer continual, ongoing praise. In the Greek and the KJV it is not clear if the “day or night” is primarily connected to the lack of rest or the act of saying, but most modern translations tie the day and night to the saying (ESV, NASB, NIV, RSV). The conjunction between day and night (Greek: *kai*) is simply a Greek “and,” it is not the special word for “or” (Greek: *ê*). If it were “or” the connection would be to the resting (they did not rest either in day time or night time), but the “and” connects better with “saying.” So I have translated as above. The meaning, however, is essentially the same either way. The four living creatures are depicted as day and night, without ceasing, singing “holy, holy, holy, etc.”

The idea of anyone singing “holy, holy, holy” without ceasing throughout eternity is not the most attractive thought to most readers. It seems boring and repetitive, contradicting the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:7-8 (not to pile up vain repetitions). But the use of the phrase “day and night” has a deeper purpose that only becomes visible on a second reading of Revelation. When one has read the entire book, it becomes striking that the two main characters of the book, Jesus and Satan, are missing in chapter four. In chapter twelve heaven is wracked by a war between the dragon/Satan and Michael/Christ (Rev 12:7-10). But there is no trace of either in chapter four! The phrase “day and night” gives a clue. In Revelation 12:9-10 the dragon/Satan is thrown out of heaven as the “accuser of the brethren,” the one who accuses them “day and night” before God. The time of this casting down is the time when Christ assumes authority in heaven (Rev 12:10). That moment occurs also in chapter five. On the two different times Satan was cast out of heaven see comments on Rev 12:4 and 12:7-10.

The link between this verse and Revelation 12:10 (in one there is praise to God “day and night,” and in the other accusations “day and night”), indicates that the “vain repetitions” of the four living creatures are actually countering the accusations of Satan. Satan is not mentioned in chapter four, but his work of accusation in heaven is nevertheless being countered. The “holy, holy, holy” refrain counters Satan’s accusations against God’s people, and by implication, against God Himself (see comments on Rev 12:9-10, see also Job 1 and 2). So while the scene of Revelation 4 is a general scene of worship in heaven, that general scene is

located during the run-up to the enthronement of Jesus Christ in Revelation 5. Satan's accusations are thrown down in the light of the cross, preparing the way for Jesus to assume the throne. It is the acclamation of the heavenly hosts that "throws down" the accusations of Satan. No one in heaven believes those accusations any more. All of this explains why neither Satan nor Jesus appears in chapter four. It takes place in the interim between the cross and the ascension/enthronement of Jesus.

In light of the above, the reason for the massive attention to the throne in this chapter now becomes clear. The throne represents the rule and authority of God, but that rule had come into question, or more accurately, under accusation. The one sitting on the throne is acclaimed as worthy on the basis of creation (Rev 4:11), but in the context of Satan's accusations and what we learn from chapter five, it is clear that creatorship is not enough in itself to ground God's fitness to rule. The solution to the problem in the universe is in the scroll and on the throne, yet the one sitting there is unable to open it (Rev 5:1-4). This is not on account of weakness, but by design. The one sitting on the throne cannot resolve the controversy by Himself in part because that would be self-testimony (see John 5:31-32), which in a time of conflict falls short of being able to persuade. The claims of God are not enough to resolve the controversy, it can only be resolved on the basis of evidence. The drama of chapter five calls attention to the contrast between the character of Satan and the character of God as demonstrated at the cross.

What cements the worthiness of God to sit on the throne is the death of the lamb (Rev 5:5-6). The death of the Lamb refutes the accusations of Satan that God is arbitrary, judgmental and severe. Satan's accusations project his own character onto God and the cross fully and finally exposes Satan's lies. It demonstrates that there is no reason to be afraid of God. He is worthy of the freely-bestowed devotion and affirmation of the created universe. The heavenly intelligences are no longer duped by Satan's deceptive words (Rev 5:9-14). Satan as accuser of the brethren (Rev 12:10) is cast out. He is no longer worthy of the heavenly beings' time and attention. The slain Lamb has proven to the heavenly host that God is truly worthy of worship and rulership. One purpose for the book of Revelation, therefore, is to expose on earth what the inhabitants of heaven already know.

"Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and the wings were full of eyes, all around and even underneath. And they have no rest, day and night saying, **"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come."** The triple holy (called a *trishagion* by scholars) is found in an ancient version of the *Shemoneh Esreh*, the series of benedictions at the end of each synagogue service. Some Greek copyists of the manuscripts of Revelation emphasized the repetition by repeating it nine times, as happens in some eastern orthodox traditions. But John here follows the threefold repetition of Isaiah 6 (there is also a three-fold holy in Psalm 99:3, 5, 9, but that was probably not in John's mind when he wrote Revelation). In Isaiah 6 the three-fold holy is followed by "the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa 6:3). This latter part is left out in Revelation 4, no doubt because that would not be true until after the Second Coming of Christ.

"Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and the wings were full of eyes, all around and even underneath. And they have no rest, day and night saying, **"Holy, holy, holy,**

Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” Holiness (in this verse the Greek has *hagios*) has the root meaning of separation. When applied to human beings holiness means separated by God for a specific purpose. When applied to God, holiness means separate from all things impure, separate, in fact, from all creation, from all created things. It means God is transcendent, pure, upright and morally perfect. That which is consecrated to God is also holy, separate from all other things. Human beings are holy to the degree that they are like God. Within this chapter, the three-fold cry of holy is in response to God’s glorious majesty (4:1-2), His mercy (4:3), and his powerful presence (4:5).

“Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and the wings were full of eyes, all around and even underneath. And they have no rest, day and night saying, “Holy, holy, holy, **Lord God Almighty**, who was and is and is to come.” “Almighty” translates the Greek *pantokratôr*, which means “ruler of all.” *Pantokratôr* is a Greek translation of one of the names of God in the Old Testament (Hebrew: *shaddai*– see Gen 17:1; 28:3, etc.). It is also used to translate the Hebrew *tsebayôth*, which in other forms means army, warrior and warfare (as in “Lord of hosts” [Amos 9:5] or “God of hosts” [Amos 3:13; 6:14– note the “Lord God of hosts” in Hos 12:5– 12:6 in Hebrew]). In Hebrew it is more of a military term, in Greek it has more political connotations. Many eastern orthodox churches are topped by a painting of Christ as “pantokrator,” the one who watches over and rules over His whole creation. The term “almighty” is certainly appropriate for God in the book of Revelation, as evidenced by all the mighty acts described in the book.

“Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and the wings were full of eyes, all around and even underneath. And they have no rest, day and night saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, **who was and is and is to come.**” The three-fold cry of holy corresponds to the “was and is and is to come” at the end of the verse. This three-fold description of God occurs four times in the book (Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8; 11:17). It may be another way of saying God is the same yesterday, today and forever (compare Heb 13:8). This particular iteration of the phrase echos the two-fold recitation in chapter one (1:4, 8). But in Revelation 11:17 the phrase is modified. God Almighty is the one “who is and who was.” In the best manuscripts the “is to come” is left out in 11:17. See comments on Rev 1:4. All four uses of this phrase apply to God the Father. But other titles of the Father, such as “the first and the last,” “the beginning and the end,” “the Alpha and the Omega,” are all applied to Christ in Revelation 22:12-13. So Father and Son are clearly distinguished in the book of Revelation, but are just as clearly equal in rank, power and character.

Rev 4:9-10– “And **whenever** the living creatures express glory and honor and thankfulness to the one sitting on the throne, . . .” The key word of this clause is translated “whenever” (Greek: *hotan*). Whenever *hotan* is combined with a subjunctive verb, it means repetitive action (“as often as”). While the Greek present participle expresses extremely continuous action, *hotan* with the subjunctive expresses extremely repetitive action. Whenever someone does the action described in the verb, something else follows. The repetitive nature of this construction is similar to the Hebrew imperfect.

What has puzzled commentators is that in this verse *hotan* is followed by a verb in future indicative tense (Greek: *dôsousin*) rather than an aorist subjunctive (Greek: *dôsôsîn*). In most settings the aorist subjunctive and the future indicative are virtually identical. Both express action that has not yet occurred. The future indicative states that the action contemplated by the verb has not yet occurred in fact. The aorist subjunctive expressed that the action of the verb is probable, it is not yet begun or completed. Since the two expressions are so similar in form and meaning, the simplest explanation of the future here is John's lack of sophistication in Greek grammar. It is the kind of blunder that a fifth-grade student of Greek would make (as evidenced by ancient papyri containing student schoolwork). For an example of correct usage see 1 John 5:2 ("whenever we love. . .", Greek: *hotan agapômen*). If John did this "blunder" intentionally, it would probably be to express that such worship of God will continue without fail throughout eternity. The subjunctive would put a little more uncertainty into it. Given the connection with the cosmic conflict and the impending enthronement of the Lamb referenced earlier, the subjunctive force is actually to be preferred. If the triple holy plays a role in the casting down of Satan's accusations, then they are not necessarily a feature of eternal worship, but designed for a unique situation in heaven.

"And whenever the living creatures express **glory and honor and thankfulness** to the one sitting on the throne, . . ." Glory, in the first sense, is the literal brightness or radiance that surrounds a divine figure. But in an extended sense it is a verbal enhancement of the prestige and reputation of God. In this verse, glory (Greek: *doxan*) is given to God freely and spontaneously. In Revelation 16:9 it is given on account of fear of judgment and punishment. Honor, in the literal sense, is the word for price or value of an object or service. In the extended sense it is the expression of reverence or respect toward another. Honor (Greek: *timên*), when combined with "glory" in doxologies amplifies the sense of veneration and awe. To give thankfulness (Greek: *eucharistian*) is not a concept normally combined with glory and honor in Greek, but is in a sense foundational for the other two. Those who are mindful of all that God has done for them will express themselves with gratitude and this gratitude keeps them focused on God's character and actions. In experience, gratitude is the foundation of true worship. The threefold glory, honor and power here echo the threefold holy in the previous verse.

"And whenever the living creatures express glory and honor and thankfulness to the one sitting on the throne, **who lives forever and ever**. . ." The God Osiris in Egypt was entitled "the one who sits on the throne." The phrase "the one sitting on the throne" is not identical to the first reference in verse two, but is a natural second reference. Here the reference is further qualified as the one "who lives forever and ever." The full expression is repeated in the following verse, but there the twenty-four elders rather than the four living creatures are the worshiping agents. The "one who lives forever and ever" is probably another way of describing the eternity of God, echoing "the one who is and was and is to come" in verse eight.

"The twenty-four elders fall down before the One sitting on the throne and worship the One who lives forever and ever, and throw their crowns before the throne, saying. . ." The phraseology of verse nine is repeated in verse ten to express the worship of the twenty-four elders. The two key words for worship in Revelation are here translated "fall down" (Greek:

pesountai) and “worship” (*proskunêsousin*). “Fall down” means to prostrate oneself as a sign of devotion. “Worship” is similar in meaning, to prostrate oneself toward another in obeisance. These two words are combined with the two phrases for God in verse nine. Both words for worship are future indicatives. This supports the priority of the four living creatures in this act of worship. Whenever the four living creatures offer their triple praise to God, the falling down and worshipping of the twenty-elders follows. Heavenly worship is initiated by the leaders of the angelic hosts (as represented by the living creatures), they are then joined in worship by the representatives of the human race.

The crowns that the twenty-four elders throw down are not royal crowns (Greek: *diadêma*) but crowns of victory (Greek: *stephanous*), along the lines of olympic gold medals. To cast a crown before the throne indicates that the wearers do not claim independence of achievement or authority, but acknowledge that all of their status is due to the one they are worshipping. It is an act of submission and homage. They acknowledge that they owe their triumph completely to Him. It is, in a sense, that they feel unworthy to wear them in the presence of the One who gave them their crowns.

Rev 4:11– “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, because You created all things, and on account of Your will they came into existence and were created.” This verse contains the second of five songs that form the heart of the theology in the heavenly vision of Revelation four and five. The first song was sung by the four living creatures and praised the one sitting on the throne for His holiness and eternal existence (Rev 4:8). The second song is sung by the twenty-four elders and praises the one sitting on the throne because He created all things according to His will and purpose.

In chapter five the Lamb is praised on account of the cross. The cross exhibits the self-sacrificing love of God to the universe. But creation is also an act of divine self-sacrifice. When God created human beings with the ability to create little replicas of themselves, God was limiting His own freedom. In allowing human beings freedom of choice and even freedom to create other creatures like themselves, God sacrificed a great deal of control over the course of events in the universe. That means God is not a micro-manager who forces every detail into a pre-conceived mold. Why did God choose such a course? Because God wanted a universe where love would rule and love cannot be forced. True love can only occur where there is freedom. And freedom means that love can be rejected and rebellion can occur. So in a real sense, the pain of the cross goes all the way back to the decision to create the universe (Rev 13:8). Love was worth the risk.

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, . . .” The word “worthy” (Greek: *axios*) is one of the key words of chapter five, but its first appearance in the larger vision is here in the last verse of chapter four. Worthy is an adjective which means deserving, qualified, fitted for. The one sitting on the throne is deserving of worship because He created all things. According to Fiorenza, a chant of “you are worthy” greeted the Roman emperor during triumphal entry into cities, so the meaning of this song would be readily recognized in First Century Asia Minor. The construction “you are worthy” is a predicate

adjective; the object of the sentence (“worthy”) is descriptive of the subject (“you” is understood in the Greek, it is not stated).

“You are worthy, **our Lord and God**, to receive glory and honor and power, . . .” The one seated on the throne is addressed as Lord and God. The basic meaning of “Lord” (Greek: *kurios*) is owner, master or husband. It is often used as an expression of respect, like “sir” in English. In the New Testament it can be used to designate God (Matt 5:33; Mark 12:29-30; Luke 1:11, 15, 17, etc.), Jesus Christ (Matt 20:31; Acts 2:36; Rom 1:4; 10:9; 1 Pet 1:3) or the Roman emperor (Acts 25:26). In the Old Testament *kurios* is the Greek word nearly always used to translate the Hebrew Yahweh (Gen 2:4; Exod 6:3; 20:11; Deut 7:7-9; Psa 1:2; Isa 53:1; Hos 1:1). So the reference here is to the God of the Old Testament, Yahweh, called the Father in the New Testament.

The word “God” (Greek: *theos*) is used for the one God or the many gods of the ancients, beings whose power is far beyond that of mortals. In the New Testament, the word is used for the God of Israel in contrast to other gods (Gal 4:8) and the Father who sent Jesus (John 17:3). It is the Greek word normally used to translate the Hebrew word for God (*elohim*—Gen 1:1; Exod 2:24-25; Psa 119:115; Isa 40:1; Jer 31:33; Dan 2:44-45). In First Century Asia Minor, the emperor Domitian was known as “Lord and God.” So the God of Revelation is being addressed in this verse in language familiar to the context of those receiving John’s vision account.

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, **to receive glory and honor and power**, . . .” The one seated on the throne is accounted worthy to receive glory, honor and power. All three words are preceded by a definite article in Greek (*tên doxan kai tên timên kai tên dunamin*). The three-fold use of the article (perhaps echoing the three-fold “holy” of 4:8) can represent universality (“all” glory, honor and power) or it is referring back to the glory and honor mentioned already in verse 9 (note also the reference to glory and power [*kratos* rather than *dunamis*] in 1:6). The former is more likely in this case. Here “power” is added to glory and honor rather than thankfulness. God is in possession of infinite power by nature.

The Greek word for “receive” (here *labein*) can also mean “take.” In light of the previous, that may be the more appropriate interpretation. All power inherently belongs to God, there was never a time when He did not have it. But until the whole earth is ready to acclaim Him (as is foreshadowed in 5:13) in the way the heavenly beings do, until He has won His case on earth, He restrains His use of that power (Rev 11:17). God never forces anyone, but seeks to win allegiance to His character rather than to His power (see Rev 15:3-4).

“You are worthy, . . . **because You created all things**, and on account of Your will they came into existence and were created.” I translate “because” (Greek: *hoti*—most English translations have “for” instead) since in the original this is a causal conjunctive, giving the reason why another part of the sentence happens. Creation is the foundation for all of God’s works. Therefore, creation is the reason or the basis for the praise in the first part of the verse.

The Greek word for “created” (*ektisas* from *ktizô*) is the typical Greek word for creation (Matt 19:4; Mark 13:19; 1 Cor 11:9; Eph 2:10, 15; 4:24; 1 Tim 4:3; Rev 10:6). Ironically, however, this is not the word used in the Greek translation of the creation story (Genesis 1 and 2). There the words “made” (Greek: *poieo*) and “came to be” (*ginomai*) are used to express God’s active

role in creation (see also the use of *ginomai* in John 1). The “you” in “You created” is emphatic. Creation was by the one sitting on the throne rather than anyone else. In the Old Testament God is both creator and redeemer (Psa 136:5-9, 24; Isa 43:1), but in the vision of Revelation 4 and 5, these roles are separated out to the Father (4:11) and Jesus Christ (5:9-10).

God created “all things” (Greek: *panta*). *Panta* is often used as an adjective in the New Testament, meaning each, every, all or the whole of something. But as a noun it means everyone, everything or in every way. In cases like this verse, everything means the entire universe (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 1:10; 3:9; Heb 1:3; 2:10); the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them.

“You are worthy, . . . because You created all things, and **on account of Your will** they came into existence and were created.” “On account of Your will” translates the Greek *dia* with the accusative (Greek: *dia to thelêma sou*). While the root meaning of *dia* expresses means, the tools or agents with which one accomplishes something, *dia* with the accusative expresses the ground or basis for the accomplishment. God is the first cause. Behind the act of creation lies the will and purpose of God. God’s mighty act of creation was preceded by a period of planning and reflection on the possible consequences of that act. From a trinitarian perspective, this was to some degree a collaborative process although the exact nature of the godhead is beyond our capacity to fully understand.

Creation owes its existence to the will and purpose of God. In this song, therefore, created beings lay the foundation for the act of creation that results in praise to God. Were it not for the will and purpose of God, the universe would not exist. This also tells us that the created universe is a witness to the character and purpose of God.

“You are worthy, . . . because You created all things, and on account of Your will **they came into existence and were created.**” The last clause may seem a bit redundant or awkward. The subject (“they”) is understood, a third person pronoun referring to the creation itself. “They” is followed by a compound verb, literally “were” and “created.” “Were” (Greek: *êsan*) is an imperfect indicative of the verb “to be” (Greek: *eimi*). It expresses continuous existence in the past with an emphasis on the beginning of that existence, hence I translate, “came into existence.” The second verb, “were created,” (Greek: *ektisthêsan*) is an aorist passive indicative reflecting the moment of creation in the past. Taken in a straightforward manner, the first verb expresses the continued existence of creation from the beginning until the time of the song, the second verb focuses more closely on the original act of creation itself. The second verb is the fact upon which the first verb is based. The creation now exists but once was not and owes its existence to an act of creation in the past.

Having said this, it is possible that this duplication is merely a poetic repetition of the larger idea; God’s will and purpose lie behind the creation. Similar double expressions can be found in Genesis 27:33, John 19:22; James 3:7 and Hebrews 1:12.

A handful of manuscripts (including “B”) have a variant reading that simplifies the expression a great deal, adding “not” (Greek: *ouk*) to “were.” Then the clause would read, “they were not (did not exist) until they were created by the will of God.” But such simplifications do not explain where the harder reading came from, hence the harder reading is usually original, and in this case is also reflected in the vast majority of Greek manuscripts.

Rev 4 (Summary and Conclusion)– Chapter four introduces the heavenly vision of chapters four and five. It is a general description of the heavenly throne room and the worship that occurs there. Everything in this chapter centers around the throne. So in some sense the main theme of the chapter is the character and government of God. “Day and night” the beings around the throne praise the holiness and the mighty acts of God. They are affirming God’s right to rule on the basis of His character and prior actions.

The vision of chapter four is grounded in the great heavenly throne visions of the Old Testament; Ezekiel 1 and 10, Isaiah 6, Daniel 7 and 1 Kings 22 (also in 2 Chr 18). Although the language of throne is not used in relation to Mount Sinai, God’s appearances there (Exod 19:16-20; 24:9-18; 34:1-7) are incorporated into the vision of Revelation 4. Mount Sinai for a time becomes the throne of God, the location of His rule over Israel. So the vision of chapter four is grounded in the five throne visions of the Old Testament. The scene of this chapter sets the stage for a crisis moment in chapter five.

Rev 4 (Spiritual Lessons 1)– Worship in the Bible is all about God and His mighty acts in our behalf, it is not about us, our feelings, or our duties. Worship is not a recital of what we need to do, it is a recital of what God has done. This is evident in Revelation 4. In verse 11 the ground of worship is “because” God created all things. This is a clear pattern throughout the book of Revelation and throughout the whole Bible. In Rev. 5:9 worship happens “because” (NIV) the Lamb was slain. In Rev. 11:17 the reason worship happens is “because” (NIV) God has begun to reign. God is worshiped “because” of what He has done. Worship throughout the Bible is talking about, singing about, repeating the acts that God has done (Deut. 26:1-11; Psa 66:3-6; 78:5-15; 111:4). It even includes acting out the events of the cross through baptism (Rom. 6:3-4) and the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:26).

Understanding and practicing this truth is the secret of unleashing God’s power in a local church. If worship often seems powerless, it is because it is rarely centered in God. In Bible times, when people rehearsed what God had done for them in the past, the power of God’s original act was unleashed in the worshiper’s present (2 Chr 20:5-22; Dan. 9:15; 10:19-21). Worship focuses attention away from us and toward God. Our weakness takes hold of His strength.

A danger readers face when going through a passage like Revelation 4 is the tendency to make too much of every detail and thereby miss its primary purpose. That purpose is to set forth the greatness of the heavenly throne room, and thus the surpassing greatness of God. The throne room of God lays all earthly claims to power and glory in the dust. When one has had a glimpse of the open gates of heaven, it makes no sense any more to be afraid of earthly powers or even specific human beings. The passage invites us to place all sources of earthly intimidation in the shadows of God’s transcending power and glory, and to acknowledge Him as the one true object of worship. When we truly know Him, we will know what true worship is all about. And if God thinks highly of us, it doesn’t really matter what anyone else thinks.

In the commentary on this chapter, we have given careful and detailed attention to many observations in the Greek text. To those glancing at these in passing, it may have seemed

a pointless task. But the task sharpens our awareness of the text and opens our eyes to visions of God and truth we might otherwise have missed. We can, if we will, train ourselves to be much more observant of the Scriptures so that fresh insights start popping up everywhere.

It reminds me of a photography class I took. The first assignment was to photograph “trees”--single trees, multiple trees, a forest, branches, twigs, flowers on the trees. The teacher said, “Shoot a roll of film (this was back in the 90s) that features only trees in all types of places and circumstances.” At first this seemed like an impossible task. But after a while I started looking at my world in ways I had never looked at it before. I found driftwood on the beach, stands of pines, trees that were losing their leaves, trees in color, branches on the ground, etc. The point of the project was to teach me how to observe my environment and notice things I had failed to see before. Careful study of the Bible has the same effect. We become more and more aware of God’s will and His ways, and our lives are never the same.

One day my daughter’s (she was ten years old at the time) Sabbath School teacher approached me. He had asked the kids that day who their hero was, the absolutely greatest person they knew. Different children named various athletes or movie stars. According to him, my daughter replied, “My father.” That report hit like a bullet in my chest. Do you think I was proud? *Hey, what a great father I am!* Not at all. I was humbled, I felt so unworthy of such adoration. But the great thing about it was the way that report bonded my heart to my daughter. I love her so much to this day. I don’t ever want to disappoint her. Her adoration is food for my soul. Nothing else could take its place.

People sometimes wonder why God “demands” worship. Is He full of pride? Does He need to constantly hear praise in order to feel good about Himself? No, I think he longs for our adoration the way any father longs to be admired and loved by his children. God could be self-sufficient, but He has a tender heart. His love makes Him vulnerable to those He loves. He is like a mother delighted to receive her child’s offering of dandelions. Jesus was moved by a cleansed leper who returned to give thanks. Yes, God does need our worship, but not on account of arrogance or pride. He needs it because He has chosen to put His heart in a place where he needs us. He needs it because our love makes a difference within Him. As Augustine put it, “God thirsts to be thirsted after.”



Ministry4Thinking.com