

Revelation 4-5

“There is a central theme found in chapters four and five. That theme is: God rules, not man. In chapter four the message is centered around the glory of God and the creation. In chapter five the message is the glory of the Map and redemption...One item of focus in this picture is the ‘throne.’ This word is found seventeen times in chapters four and five; thirteen of which are in chapter four.”¹

“The sealed book in God’s hand (5:1) contains the ultimate future ... The future is real as already exists in God’s hand ... The future orientation of the visions which begin at 4:1 does not mean that the remainder of the book is a straightforward prediction of the chronological future. John’s thinking is not so linear. The keynote throneroom scene of 4:1 – 5:14 focuses on the central figure to whom past, present, and future are all one (4:8; cf. 1:4, 8; 21:6; 22:13). Thus the visions of ‘what must take place after this’ (4:1) portray not only the diachronic future but synchronically represent what always is/will be as one tensive picture.”²

The beginning of chapter four marks a major transition. Up to this point, John has been focused on the church on earth with all its problems and challenges. It could be a discouraging picture. Now John sees the heavenly perspective. In spite of all the challenges the church faces, God is still sits on his throne as ruler and king over all creation, and Jesus has been victorious over death. Keep in mind that the apocalyptic genre appeals to the imagination. Where a book like Romans might appeal to the intellect, and Psalms to the heart, Revelation appeals to the imagination. Elements of the visions evoke word or picture associations, feelings, and images.



All of creation is represented in this vision, from the animals, nature, and man. All of creation acknowledges God as the ruler, and the lamb as the redeemer. It is significant that the next set of visions begins with the throne room scene. It portrays the message that through all disasters that will follow, God has not lost a handle on his creation. He is on the throne through it all.

¹ Myers, Edward P. *After These Things I Saw: A Study of Revelation*. (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1997), 133.

² Boring, M. Eugene. *Revelation*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 101

The throne room (4:1-11)

I. Description of the one sitting on the throne

A. He was sitting

1. Throne in Heaven is not vacant
2. Demonstrates God was ruling.
3. Throne room seems to represent all of creation

B. He was glorious

1. He appeared like dazzling precious stones
2. There was a halo/rainbow³ around the throne
 - a. This may merely be a reference to his radiance
 - b. It also brings to mind the “bow” God placed in the sky after the flood in Genesis 9. This would remind the readers that God keeps his promises

C. Lightning and thunder

1. This is typical when God reveals himself
2. Examples of God’s physical manifestation
 - a. Exodus 19:16-19 – At Sinai
 - b. Psalm 18:4 – 19 – When God rescues his own
 - c. Ezekiel 1:4, 13, 24
 - d. Isaiah 6:1-4
3. This is a manifestation of God’s power and holiness

D. Seven lamps before the throne

1. John explains that these represent the Spirit of God (1:4)
2. Seven is the number of divine perfection. God is perfectly able
 - a. (John 14:16-17) – The Spirit is a helper/comforter⁴
 - b. (Rom 8:11) – Spirit will raise us from dead
 - c. (Rom 8:15) – Spirit testifies we are children of God
 - d. (Eph 3:16) – Spirit strengthens inner person
3. Luke 12:11-12 – Jesus said the Spirit would help them when before authorities. Spirit gave boldness and confidence.
 - a. Acts 4:31 - Disciples
 - b. Acts 6:10 – Stephen
4. The seven Spirits are represented by lamps, which seems to indicate enlightenment
 - a. (1 Cor 2:14) – Spiritual discernment from the Spirit
 - b. (Prov 9:10) – Fear of the Lord beginning of wisdom
5. (Zech 4:1-6) – God accomplishes through his Spirit



³ The Greek word, *iris* could mean “rainbow”, “halo”, or “radiance”

⁴ The Greek word *parakletos* could mean advocate, helper, or comforter

E. He is timeless – As seen in the phrase – “Who was and is and is to come...”

F. All things exist by the will of God (not Ceasar) (v.11)

II. The Sea

A. The sea is a common Ancient Near Eastern figure of chaotic power and even evil

B. Examples of this in the Bible

1. Genesis 1:2 – And the earth was a chaotic emptiness⁵
 - a. When the earth was covered in water, it was a chaotic emptiness
 - b. God proceeds then to bring order to chaos by putting up boundaries for the water for dry land to appear
2. To express wrath and judgment, the prophets at times used poetic, creation-reversal language. In other words, God will remove the boundaries of the waters and allow chaotic desolation to return as a sign of his judgment and wrath.
 - a. Isa 34:8-11 – In verse 11, the same words are used from Genesis 1:2, desolation/chaos, and emptiness/nothingness
 - b. Jer 4:23 – Everything would once again be a chaotic desolation (or formless and void) due to God’s wrath
3. Leviathan and the sea – Leviathan is a common Ancient Near Eastern figure of chaotic power and evil, and is always associated with the sea. He is a “sea-monster” Leviathan represents the reversal of the good, created order.
 - a. Job 3:8-9 – Reversal of what is good
 - b. Job 41 – Only God can subdue Leviathan
 - c. Ps 74:12-17 – God’s overcame the sea & Leviathan
 - d. Ps 104_6 – Leviathan (chaotic power) of the sea
 - e. Isa 27:1-2- God will punish Leviathan in the end
4. In Jewish interpretation, both the flood and the drowning of Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea is seen as a removal of the boundaries holding back the chaotic waters of creation.

⁵ Another translation of the Hebrew, *tohu wabohu* is “a desolate wasteland. But it is typically translated in English versions as “formless and void”

5. Not only did God demonstrate his power over the sea (and its so called “sea monsters”) in creation, but Jesus, the Son of God demonstrated it as well.
 - a. (Mark 4:38) Jesus stilled the sea by rebuking it, just as God rebuked the waters in creation
 - b. (Mark 6:48) Jesus walked on the sea, and the sea did not take him
 6. If you have ever been on or near the sea during a storm, you can understand where the image of the sea as an unpredictable, chaotic place came from in Ancient Near Eastern Culture.
- C. In this vision the sea is as glass, which shows that God has subdued it completely
- D. There are those that interpret the sea as separation. There is currently a separation between the holy God and fallen creatio

III. Twenty four thrones and elders

- A. This may be an indirect slap on the Roman Emperor Domitian⁶
1. Domitian was surrounded by 24 lictors⁷
 2. The title “lord god” was a title that Domitian insisted be used of him (see introduction).
 3. “Worthy art thou” was commonly ascribed to emperors
 4. In this vision, homage is paid not to Domitian, but to the true God on his throne.
- B. The number 24 is significant for other reasons
1. 12 is a number that represents the people of God
 2. 24 may be a representation of both the Old Kingdom (12 tribes) and the new (12 Apostles)
 3. (Matt 9:27-28; Luke 22:30) May fit in with this vision
 4. So, the 24 elders stand for the totality of the people of God who are worshipping him as king
- C. Thrones and crowns
1. The elders acknowledge God as all powerful
 2. They pay homage to him
 3. They cast their crowns before him⁸

⁶ Boring, 103

⁷ A lictor was a minor official in ancient Rome whose duty was to carrying an ax as a symbol of the emperor’s authority and clearing the way for them in crowds

⁸ There are two Greek words for crown. One is *diadema*, which is a kingly crown. The other is a *stephanos*, which is the victory wreath that the victor won in the games. The word used here for the crown of the elders is *stephanos*.

4. They attribute all power and authority to God

IV. The four living creatures

- A. Each represented some part of the living creation.
 1. Lion – Represented wild beast.
 2. Ox – Represented domestic animals
 3. Man – Represented mankind
 4. Birds – Represented the flying creatures
 5. All creation acknowledges God
- B. Similar creatures can be found in other Biblical passages
 1. Ezekiel 1:5, 10, 26
 - Ezekiel calls them Cherubim (Ezek 10:20-22)
 2. Isaiah 6:1-4
 - Isaiah calls them Seraphim

V. Discussion Questions for 4:1-11

1. What are some ways you have used to motivate yourself or others?
2. Do you think John may have needed some motivation? Why?
3. What effect might this vision have on John?
4. What things does this vision tell us about God?
5. What things does this vision tell us about ourselves and our world?
6. How did the elders express their worship to God?
7. Does it make you uncomfortable to kneel or prostrate yourself? Why?
8. What attitudes do you think are expressed by falling down before God?
9. How would you answer someone who complained that "heaven will be boring . . . like one eternal church service"?
10. Are there any changes you are moved to make when you reflect on the holiness and majesty of God Almighty?
11. What reminders can you use this week to keep the reality and glory of God at the front of your mind?
12. How can you begin today to make praise and worship of God a more regular part of your life?