

# The Throne of God

## Revelation chapter 4

1 After these things I looked, and behold, a door *standing* open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard *was* like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, "Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this."

2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne.

3 And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and *there was* a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.

4 Around the throne *were* twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.

5 And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire *were* burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

6 Before the throne *there was* a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, *were* four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.

7 The first living creature *was* like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature *was* like a flying eagle.

8 *The* four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!"

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever,

10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

11 "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honour and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."

## Introduction

Commentaries on the symbols in Revelation tend to be of two types.

The first clearly have no spiritual understanding of the topic and approach it in a technical manner, They will give you all sorts of peripheral background information about a verse, occupying many lines, and then fail to tell you what it all means.

The second is the opposite. This proposes to explain the symbolic meaning but gives very little background data to back up their claim. This reduces the comments to mere speculation.

The art is to give sufficient background data, without including lots of flummery and unnecessary information, but centring on what the symbols actually mean and what the import of the text is all about. This is a difficult balance; but I will venture to try.

## Biblical background to this vision

### Context in Revelation

The letters to the seven churches and the initial vision of Jesus in glory form a kind of covering letter to introduce the main visions. The letters warn the churches that they are in a war and must prepare for this ordeal to secure God's reward. The subsequent visions are a spiritual explanation of this ordeal to those who have ears to hear.

Thus the first vision opens with the glory of God on the throne of heaven.

John's use of symbolism is fluid and varies to make an emphatic point. Thus here heaven is God's throne-room. Elsewhere it is a military headquarters (e.g. 7:3), a temple with an altar and incense (8:3), a synagogue where the scroll is read out (5:1) and a law court, which condemns the Accuser (12:10).

No one metaphor alone is great enough to describe the authority and sovereignty of God.

John's symbols also vary in meaning. For example, *ouranos* sometimes signifies the material atmosphere, the sky, at other times it is God's heavenly dwelling place.

### Biblical context

- Ezekiel's vision of God and the wheels of God's authority (Ezek 1).
- Isaiah's vision of heaven as a holy temple (Isa 6).
- The heavenly judgment visions of Daniel (Dan 7).
- Micaiah ben-Imlah's vision of God on his throne (1 Kg 22:19).<sup>1</sup>

For who has stood in the counsel of the LORD, and has perceived and heard His word? Who has marked His word and heard it? Jer 23:18

## The overall point of this chapter

This chapter is a view into a symbolised heaven and the throne of God. This is clearly explained by the first two verses:

1 After these things I looked, and behold, a door *standing* open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard *was* like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, "Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this."

2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne.

### 'After these things'

Not referring to chronological time but to the order of the visions. Revelation is not structured chronologically but as a series of visions describing all salvation history from various viewpoints. A fresh series of visions starts.

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<sup>1</sup> "Then *Micaiah* said, "Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right hand and on His left".'

### John in the heavenlies

John sees a door opening into heaven and is welcomed in ('Come up here'; 'Immediately I was in the Spirit') and then describes what he sees.<sup>2</sup> The trumpet-like voice speaks of the authority of God – ringing, penetrating and majestic. It is the voice of the Lord Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

John is again in the Spirit after returning to his normal state after his first vision (1:10). The first vision related to the earth (the seven churches that John knew – representing all churches through time) but this vision regards the heavenly purpose and the sovereignty of God.

The apostles had an open door to God as a result of their redemption in Christ; they understood much more about the purposes of God than OT prophets. Clarity about eternal things only comes from the indwelling Spirit who could only be poured out after the cross. The ministry of OT prophets was only preparatory.<sup>4</sup>

The open door is divine revelation to John.

John is then told about the purpose of the book; that he needs to know the things that will take place in history. Revelation is a book of encouragement to explain the sovereign control of God in history and the divine victory in the war between God and the Devil worked out on Earth.

But the first thing that he is confronted with is the divine throne and God seated on the throne. God does not actually sit on a material throne, he inhabits eternity not a material creation. The throne represents kingly power, sovereign majesty, strength of government, ruling authority and royal purpose.

The start of all things is God followed by the purposes of God. All else flows from this.

The end of things is God's throne (20:11).

Although the Lamb is on the throne in 5:6, here the emphasis is upon the sovereign purpose of God as the beginning of all things on Earth.

The things that follow, that are connected to the throne, explain two things.

The first is the decree of God (the eternal plan of God in creation, providence and salvation history). Everything that happens in the world, both in the sinful world and church history, flows from God's eternal counsel and decree. This is developed in the next chapter about the scroll (which symbolises God's decree).

The second is the experience of God's people in history as ambassadors of the decree; the working out of the decree in people. Thus the key issue (as elsewhere in Revelation) is

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<sup>2</sup> No one knows whether this entering into heaven was bodily or just in the spirit. When it occurred to Paul he did not know either (2 Cor 12:2-4).

<sup>3</sup> Although 'voice' is feminine, 'saying' (*legon*) is masculine. John is not bothered about being pedantic in his grammar.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Pt 1:10-12, 'Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven -- things which angels desire to look into'.

testimony or witness. The symbols in this chapter are often regarding testimony in some form or another.

So the throne emphasises God's sovereign government of the universe and all history. This is followed by the decree of God in time, which is manifest in the world through the testimony of the saints.

## The description of God

**3 And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and *there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.***

There are multiple symbols going on here.

There are the gemstones, what the two particular gemstones point to, the rainbow, and the appearance of an emerald.

I will avoid lengthy debates and suggestions about these items (q.v. commentaries galore) which is not edifying but will get to the marrow.

The description of God is not picture of God's being, which is invisible and spiritual and cannot be described (Exod 20:4), but of God's character and rule, his radiance.

### **God is seated**

God is perfectly calm and seated, even though he is at war. God is not rushing around like a worried general or seeking advice from multiple advisors. Rather, God is simply sat on his throne. He rules in perfect peace and judgment.

### **Jasper with sardius: election**

Gemstones, in general, represent beauty, radiance and permanence.

The first point is that jasper and sardius were the first and last stones on the High Priest's breastplate. Sardius was the first, jasper the last. The 12 stones were engraved with the names of the 12 tribes.

This inclusive reference (first and last) typifies the elect. So God is identified with his people. The saints are united with God on the throne. There are many dogmatic statements in the apostles that describe this unity. We will come back to this later.

### **God's appearance is like a jasper**

'Jasper' in the Bible is a term applied to, potentially, several stones and there is much conjecture about what it means. Today it refers to an opaque reddish-brown variety of chalcedony.<sup>5</sup>

John does not refer to the modern semi-precious stone called jasper since it was claimed to be 'most precious' and translucent in Rev 21:11. This is why some claim that it refers to a diamond, but this is less likely.

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<sup>5</sup> A variety of silica (SiO<sub>2</sub>), found in various forms and colours.

Clearly a jasper came in different colours and even stripes ('striped jasper' = agate and onyx) being a type of quartz. The reddish-brown agate version is called a carnelian.<sup>6</sup> These were used for making seals.

According to Vincent<sup>7</sup> the best of the colours of jasper was the purple version that had a brightness to it. Since this is the best form, that is what I take it to be here.

Therefore this is a purple stone.

Purple in Bible typology signifies Gentile royalty and great wealth.<sup>8</sup> Thus it signifies kingly power and glory to Gentiles.

This declares that God is sovereign.

Jasper is also the first of the twelve stones listed in the foundation of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:19) and of the wall of the heavenly city (Rev 21:11).

If you believe that the stone is rather a diamond, then the dazzling whiteness of this stone would represent God's bright holiness. However, I see less evidence for this conclusion. Referring to Rev 21:11, 'like a jasper stone, clear as crystal', and saying that this must mean a diamond is presumptuous. The point here is clarity of a shining stone. Any coloured gemstone, sapphire blue, ruby red or emerald green, could be denoted as 'clear as crystal'. The purple jasper could still be 'clear as crystal'; i.e. crystalline luminescence. The comparable brightness in Ezekiel's vision (Ezek 1:26-28) refers to an amber not a diamond.

### **God's appearance is like a sardius**

This seems to refer to a type of red carnelian. This is something agreed by all – it is a red or scarlet stone. Some think it actually refers to a carnelian of the type found in Sardis.<sup>9</sup>

The symbolism of this is twofold. First it refers to Hebrew royalty<sup>10</sup> – another reference to God's kingly power.

It is also a reference to sacrifice. It is impossible to consider God's decree without reference to the great sacrifice of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> The basis of the decree of salvation is the precious blood of Jesus.

So this stone denotes God's kingly glory as it appears to Hebrews and also is a reference to the need for sacrifice in fulfilling the decree.

Sardius is the 6<sup>th</sup> foundation stone of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21:20).

### **Purple and red (scarlet)**

These colours are repeatedly seen together typifying divine sovereignty in the Bible. They are featured heavily in the construction of the Tabernacle and the Temple (e.g. Exod 25:4, 26:1, 28:5, 35:6; 2 Chron 2:7, 3:14).

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<sup>6</sup> Also known as a cornelian.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent's Word Studies.

<sup>8</sup> Gentile royalty: used by Greeks & Romans; Hom. Od. XIX 225; Virg Georg. II, 495; see Jud 8:26; Dan 5:7; Mk 15:17-18. Jesus was clothed in purple to be mocked by the Roman soldiers (Matt 15:17). See also Est 1:6, 8:15; Ezek 23:6.

<sup>9</sup> According to Pliny.

<sup>10</sup> The colour of Israel [Nah 2:3] Jewish royalty. [2 Sam 1:24; Rev 17:3].

<sup>11</sup> Scarlet is deeper than red, refers to Christ's death. [Lev 14:6] Jesus' human glory in death.

However, in the OT they are always associated with blue. This is to denote heaven, spiritual things (blue is the colour of the sky, hence heavens). The reason that blue is not mentioned here is because we are already in heaven and there does not need to be a symbol for it. John's vision is in heaven.

### **The names of the saints**

In the High Priest's garments of glory and beauty the names of the tribes are inscribed twice: once on the shoulders (to represent God's supporting strength) and once on the breast-piece (to represent being close to God's heart).

The name inscribed on the jasper stone is Benjamin – the last of Jacob's children.

The name inscribed on the sardius stone is Reuben – the first of Jacob's children.

Thus these two stones in Revelation are another reference to the inclusivity of election. All of God's children are represented as being part of his throne.

*There was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.*

### **Rainbow**

God's throne is surrounded by a rainbow.

The rainbow speaks of covenant and peaceful relationship: 'I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant' (Gen 9:13). It speaks of the grace of God appearing after judgment as the Noachic covenant appeared after the flood. In the same way the rainbow only appears after rain.

The decree is enacted by a covenant in Christ. The Noachic Covenant is a divine covenant with the Earth. The Abrahamic Covenant is a foretaste of the Gospel based on election and the New Covenant is the fulfilment of the Abrahamic Covenant.<sup>12</sup>

The Davidic Covenant is fulfilled in the kingship of Christ; the sovereignty of Christ over all things (Matt 28:18).

Thus the rainbow speaks of God's decree enacted by covenants that all teach the sovereignty and divinity of Christ, who effects peace and reconciliation. These speak of judgment on sin followed by grace and reconciliation for the elect after holiness and justice are satisfied.

While the subsequent visions will enumerate God's judgments on the Earth, the rainbow here reveals that, despite these judgments, God has not forgotten his promise to Noah; his covenant with the earth.

### **Appearance of an emerald**

This is more difficult to interpret.

The name given to this stone in the Greek is *smaragdus*, which means 'live coal'.

Emeralds usually signify preciousness coupled with life & hope or grace (green colour; Ps 52:8; Lk 23:31).<sup>13</sup> Here it is stated that it is the appearance of an emerald – i.e.

<sup>12</sup> The Old Covenant is the Mosaic Covenant that is now cancelled (Heb 8:13).

<sup>13</sup> The colour of spring, of nature budding and grass growing; hence renewal of hope.

luminescent green. I believe that the green colour of the emerald is a reference either to the Earth (Gen 1:30; Job 38:8; Ps 23:2; Rev 9:4) or to grace. It is hope for the Earth.

The rainbow is a covenant with the world, through Christ, to bring about a new world filled with saints and a redeemed creation.

In the High priest's garments the emerald had the name of Judah inscribed upon it. 'Judah' means praise. Praise surrounds God's throne (Rev 4:8, 10-11). The new world will be filled with praise.

An emerald is also the fourth stone in the foundation of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:19).

Green is also the central colour in the spectrum found in a rainbow (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet) and it is known as a peaceful colour (hence the comfort found in the countryside).

The covenant brings comfort because it establishes relationship and friendship with God. In the same way the book of Revelation is designed to bring comfort to God's suffering people by explaining what is happening in the world and declaring the victory of God. The emerald thus suggests assurance in God's purposes.

### Summary

In this verse alone we have the following items signified:

- The glory of God.
- The divine decree.
- Royalty and sovereignty.
- Covenant.
- Comfort.
- Sacrifice.
- Election.
- Creation.
- Praise.
- Sacrifice.

## The elders on thrones

4 Around the throne *were* twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.

### 24

24 is 12 x 2.

12 is the number of divine government expressed in covenant, the church.<sup>14</sup> Two is the number of witness or testimony, especially in Revelation (Deut 17:6, 19:15; Matt 18:16; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Rev 11:3). Together they mean the testimony of God's government in covenant. This is the testimony of the church, governed by God as king. 'Thrones' refers to the church reigning with Christ.

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<sup>14</sup> 12 tribes in OT, 12 apostles in NT.

Compressed together, the two twelve's as '24' mean the fulness and completion of the church, both of Hebrews and Gentiles. The saints in the Old and New Covenants – symbolised by the 12 sons of Jacob and the 12 apostles of Christ.

The origin of the concept of two armies of the Lord goes back to Jacob at Peniel. After seeing the angels of God in two hosts (Gen 32:1-2),<sup>15</sup> he called the place '*Mahanaim*', meaning 'two hosts'. Solomon also refers to this in Song 6:13, 'What would you see in the Shulamite -- As it were, the dance of the two camps? THE BELOVED'. 'Two camps' is *machaneh*, related to *Mahanaim* (see Gen 32:2).

Note that the OT priesthood was divided into 24 courses (1 Chron 24:3-19).

It is important to stress that the NT teaches the unity of the church in the OT and the church in the NT (unlike Dispensationalism). However, in the OT the church was under a pedagogue ('tutor', 'steward', Gal 4:1-7). The full privileges of the church came with the outpouring of the Spirit after the ascension and the indwelling of the Spirit in the saints (Jn 7:39).

The church is mentioned first because it is the most important feature of God's creation – the elect in Christ. Though the church has delegated spiritual authority (gold crowns), it is preoccupied submitting humbly before God praising him. The elders enhance the glory of God's sovereignty.

### **White robes**

White is a universal symbol of righteousness or holiness: 'These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Rev 7:14). White robes refer to the glory of righteousness and purity (cf. Matt 17:2).

### **Crowns of gold**

This refers to the delegated authority given by God to saints to rule on his behalf. All saints have a crown (1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8; Jm 1:12; 1 Pt 5:4).

### **Elders**

This is a more direct reference to the church, which is led by elders. Elders represent their churches.

Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth'. Rev 5:8-10

In short, this is the church victorious and triumphant. The crowns represent that they reign with God (Rev 5:10).

### **The lamb**

Obviously this is Christ viewed as a sacrificial offering.

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<sup>15</sup> Gen 32:2, 'When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp [*machaneh*]." And he called the name of that place Mahanaim'.

**Harp**

A symbol for the praise of the saints. Praise is connected to prayer.

**Incense**

This is interpreted for us, the prayers of the saints that rise up like the smoke of incense.

This is developed in 8:3-5

Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar ...

Our prayers are weak and filled with errors because we are human. God takes our prayers and mixes with them the purity of the virtue of Christ to make them acceptable in heaven.

This is explained by fire (the holiness of Christ's sacrifice) from the altar (the cross) and burning incense with this (incense is the life of Christ given up to be crushed in death). This value of Christ's virtue is offered with the prayers of the saints enabling them to ascend.

**Sang a new song**

The song of the elders (v8-11) is the song of the redeemed.

'Sang' is *ado* meaning to sing or to sing praise. Only the redeemed are said to sing in Scripture. Angels do not sing, they say praise. Sometime translations get this wrong. [Note Lk 2:13.]

The song is founded on the following:

- Only Jesus can fulfil the decree (scroll) of God (see next chapter).
- The death of Christ.
- Redemption by blood.
- Election of saints out of all nations.
- Delegated ruling authority of saints.
- Delegated priestly authority of saints.
- The stewardship of saints on the restored earth.

This is a sevenfold (perfect) basis for praise.

**Summary**

This is the church as a royal priesthood (1 Pt 2:9) seated with God (Eph 2:6) in the heavens praising God continually. The testimony of the righteous church.

**Around the throne**

5 And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire *were* burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

6 Before the throne *there was* a sea of glass, like crystal. ...

### **Lightnings, thunderings, and voices**

These things proceed from the throne; they are emanations of God who sits on the throne.

Lightning is violent light from heaven. It is a brilliant burst of incandescent light from on high. This refers to the brilliant glory of God expressed in revelation and often in the sense of judgmental revelation.

Thunder is a huge noise out of heaven. Ancients thought it was the voice of God. It is fearsome and terrifying. It is here the glorious declaration of God expressed in judgment.

So thunder and lightning express the dominion of God manifest in judgment (Ps 18:7-14; Lk 10:18). But they also point to the sovereign glory of God, the majestic might of God, the power of God; the one who commands thunder and lightning.

‘Voices’ appears to refer to the thunder and lightning. These are seen as the voice of God, the sound made by thunder. There are voices in the thunder (Rev 10:3).

Thunder and lightning were associated with the giving of the law at Sinai (Exod 19:16). In this case the associated voice was the voice of a trumpet, the proclamation of divine majesty. God’s judgment is based upon his law.

Lightnings and thunders are mentioned in Rev 11:19 with the revelation of the temple of God. There they refer to divine majesty as at Sinai. Also in Rev 16:18 where voices, thunders and lightnings reveal God’s glory at the last day.

In general these things refer to God’s great power in creation, but often they are associated with judgment.

### **Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God**

This is another reference to the Spirit of God symbolised as a light giver (cf. Rev 1:4, 3:1). Fire is frequently associated with the work of the Spirit (Matt 3:11). Fire also speaks of purification (1 Pt 1:7) and judgment (1 Cor 3:12ff.).

The actual Greek word for ‘lamp’ means a torch (*lampades*) rather than a lamp, but the intent is the same. It is a different word to the lampstands (*luchniai*) in Rev 1:12, 20; neither is it a hand-lamp (*luchnos*) as in Matt 5:15.

There is a clear allusion to the *menorah* of the Tabernacle, the lampstand containing seven oil lamps (Exod 25:31-40).

The Holy Spirit is often portrayed in terms of light because he guides the saints and brings revelation of Christ. He is the illuminator. Compare the one gold lampstand with seven lamps fed by two olive trees (the witness of Christ) in Zechariah 4.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike heretics that state that there are actually seven different spirits of God (yes that actually happens),<sup>17</sup> seven is the number of divine perfection, repeatedly used in

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<sup>16</sup> Note that the visions of Zechariah were after the destruction of the earthly temple. The visions of Ezekiel were after the destruction by the Babylonians, The comparable visions of John were after the destruction of the temple by the Romans. The visions of God’s glory relate to the spiritual temple, the church.

<sup>17</sup> This occurs when you act upon symbolic terms in an apocalyptic book and ignore all the sound teaching displayed in dogmatic apostolic statements otherwise.

Revelation, and it also implies strong emphasis. It speaks of the sevenfold perfections and ubiquity of the Holy Spirit.

**Before the throne *there was a sea of glass, like crystal.* ...**

'Sea' in Revelation can mean the peoples of the world, but not here. The text refers to a 'glassy sea' as in Rev 15:2. 'Glass' is mentioned for its appearance not the actual state of the sea; it was like glass, transparent.

One thought is that this is the likeness of the sky, a vast expanse. In Exod 24:10 the elders see an expanse under the feet of God, a paved work of sapphire, which was like the clear heavens.

The glass here is like crystal, that is, its transparency has the clarity of rock-crystal in appearance, i.e. not perfectly transparent. The Greek word is sometimes used for ice. This expanse is like a sea of ice.

This may suggest purity. It may also suggest settled government. The expanse before the throne is not raging like the many waters on which the harlot sits (Rev 17:1, 15). This is not an unsettled, unstable expanse but a calm foundation.

By calling this expanse a 'sea' it implies something that stretches out a long distance; i.e. infinite settled government as a foundation for God's throne (rule).<sup>18</sup>

God's judgments (thunder and lightning) rage against the wicked but God's throne is settled in peace upon an expanse reflecting his glory and attributes.

## The living creatures

6 ... And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, *were* four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.

7 The first living creature *was* like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature *was* like a flying eagle.

8 *The* four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!"

### The Cherubim

These living creatures are the Cherubim of the Tabernacle and the living creatures of Ezekiel's vision (Ezek 1:5), though there some differences.

They are not angels, who first appear in 5:11 and Cherubim are separated from them in 5:8 and 11. They are not the Seraphim of Isaiah. They are the associates of the majesty and government of God that are always identified as being by the throne of God. Indeed, in the Holy of Holies, God was figuratively said to dwell between the Cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant (Exod 25:22; Ps 80:1, 99:1).

We cannot study everything about the Cherubim here (see my paper on this subject) but essentially they represent the redeemed creation crowned by mankind; the vehicle of God's manifestation in the world. They are the embodiment of the energy, power and wisdom of

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<sup>18</sup> Lenski believes it to represent God's providence; but this is better included in the scroll, not the sea.

God revealed in creation. There are four because four is the number of creation or universality (see later). They represent the universal creation in all its fulness of power to praise God.

Essentially, the Cherubim represent the fullness of God's completed decree united in praise, to be found materially in the redeemed creation at the end.

### **Characteristics**

*'And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne'*

Ancient kings had thrones that included carved images of things that were symbolic of their governing power. Solomon's throne had twelve lions carved on each side (1 Kg 10:10, 20). The African kings of Dahomey<sup>19</sup> had a throne that rested on four actual skulls of conquered enemies representing power over those people.

God's throne is closely identified with the Cherubim; they surround his throne.

Cherubim are always associated with God's glory and its expression (Ezek 9:3; Heb 9:5). Their descriptions point to man and creation (Ezek 1) and they represent the vessels for all the blessings of creation. They hold the place of God's chosen vessels until redemption is complete and their place is taken by the resurrected church in the restored world. They are representatives of the redeemed creation.

*'... Were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back'*

Being full of eyes signifies God's ability to see and know everything, everything in the past and everything in the future. God's knowledge, foreknowledge and predestination. They are also connected to his Spirit who penetrates all things. However, the eyes here chiefly refer to the inmost soul of the living creatures. The eye reveals the spirit of the creature, the nature of the creature, the spirit of life. Idealised creation.

*'The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle'*

Each animal is the exalted creature of its type: man above all animals, the eagle above all birds, the ox above domestic animals and the lion above wild beasts. The dominion of each is below the throne. Creation is submitted in worship to God.

These figures were used by the early fathers to apply to the four Gospels.<sup>20</sup> The animals listed give the characteristics of the Cherubim:

- Lion: royal dignity, ruling power, strength.
- Calf: service and strength.
- Man: intelligence, wisdom, and creativity.
- Flying eagle: swiftness of travel (Exod 19:4), thus omnipresence; perhaps also care (Deut 32:11).

The four figures represent the scope of the whole world (four is the number of the world, four winds, four corners of the earth, four points of the compass, etc. Rev 7:1). Together they show the power and character of the holy government of God in his universal decree.

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<sup>19</sup> Now in Benin.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew = the lion, royalty. Mark = the ox or patience. Luke = man, intelligence. John = the eagle, majesty and freedom.

The addition of the 24 elders to the Cherubim is because man is the crown of God's creation and the steward of the earth, the representative of God in the material realm. The rest of creation is subject to mankind on behalf of God.

There were four princes of Israel placed at each corner of the camp in the wilderness and the Jewish commentators tell us their standard images. Judah was at the east with a standard bearing the image of a lion; Ephraim at the west whose standard was a calf or ox; Reuben at the south, signified by man; and Dan at the north symbolised by an eagle.

*'The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within'*  
Six wings speak of power to fly everywhere very fast; i.e. God's immanence. The eyes show that God sees everything everywhere; universal wisdom.

*'And they do not rest day or night, saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!"'*

The Cherubim constantly praise and glorify God. This is the praise of God in all his works. It focuses on God's eternity and immutability. The thrice-holy term is called the Trisagion and is a reference to the Trinity.<sup>21</sup>

## The elders 2

**9** Whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever,

**10** the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

**11** "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honour and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."

The difference between the elders and the Cherubim is that the former represent the church as a united body in Christ while the latter refer to redeemed creation which includes redeemed humans. The Cherubim occupy this place by God until the redeemed creation is consummated in the new world; they are holding the position of the redeemed until the decree is fulfilled.

Thus the worship of the elders and the Cherubim is synocopated and united. The living creatures glorify the holiness and majesty of God while the elders celebrate the glory and power of God's work. This is the song of the new creation.

Casting down their crowns is an act of humility before the God who gave the saints their crown; it is recognition of God's grace; all that saints have is given to them.

Note it is literally 'the glory and the honour and the power'. The added definite article shows totality. God doesn't just have glory, honour and power like an earthly king, but total and supreme glory, honour and power.

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<sup>21</sup> In the Orthodox Church it is a specific hymn.

by Your will they exist and were created.

The emphasis is on the divine will. Creation was by God's will. The continuation of creation is sustained by the will of God. As this book will show, the end is also controlled by God's will. The beginning is connected to the end by the will of God – God is in sovereign control of all things. That is the comfort of the saints.

Note: the eclectic Alexandrian text has (v11), 'Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God' which is found in the ASV, NASB, RSV, NRS, Darby, BBE etc. This does not appear in the Greek translation of the OT but it is the exact rendering of blasphemous title claimed by Emperor Domitian (*Dominus et Deus noster*) who was the Roman emperor at the time John wrote. I believe this is an addition; it is not something that fits with the revelation to John, which is centred in the heavenlies and the majesty of God and not anything on Earth.

## Conclusion

In the first of the visions to John after the letters to the churches, the central focus is the throne, that is, the authority of God.

The basis of all that we do is God's throne. The source of our assurance and hope is the throne of God. Our God reigns.

All things are governed by God ruling in authority.

This message was first necessary before the visions that follow showing the suffering that the church and world must go through in history. In these trials, God reigns.

### Bibliography

The conclusions here are entirely my own and are often different in detail from many commentators that I feel have failed to grasp the true point. However, I consulted widely to ensure my comments were based on accurate facts. These include:

- Albert Barnes (US Presbyterian), *Notes on the NT*. [Always useful.]
- *The Cambridge Bible* (Anglican). [Of technical use.]
- Adam Clarke (Methodist), *Commentary on the Bible*. [Not very useful in this case.]
- John Gill (Baptist), *Commentary on the Bible*. [Often useful but sometimes dated and oblique.]
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**The following books were only consulted after I completed this work.**

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- G R Beasley-Murray (Baptist), *The New Century Bible Commentary: Revelation*. [Helpful, though interacts too much with non-evangelical commentators.]

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