

THE VIEW FROM THE THRONE ROOM

REVELATION 4 & 5

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Chapters 4-5 present a scene change from the seven letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3. Isn't it interesting that, in spite of the differences among the seven churches, one common vision and message is sufficient to address their varying circumstances? The remainder of the book is written without making distinctions or divisions regarding the relevance of the vision. In other words, chapter 6 or 7 will not begin with "Now, to the church in Pergamum, this is what I saw." Part of the genius behind the book of Revelation is that its common message is universally applicable to any church in any age.

ENTERING THE THRONE ROOM

It was said back in the analysis of chapters 1-3 that both the transcendence (separateness) and immanence (nearness) of God were evident. Here, in chapters 4-5, it is God's transcendence that is on display. In a touch of irony, Jesus stood outside a closed door to the church in Laodicea (3:20), but now John sees an open door in heaven and hears the voice of the same figure from chapter 1—that is, "someone like a son of man,...the First and the Last...the Living One...[who] was dead, and now look...am alive for ever and ever" (1:13, 17-18). The invitation John receives in v. 1 is to "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (NIV). As in 1:10, John is once again "in the Spirit" (v. 2). Let the vision begin!

"Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit..."

Revelation 4:1-2

The most shocking and central details in all of Revelation are found in these chapters. One way to understand the scene of the throne room is that it is meant to reorient the eyes of the seven churches away from the details of their current circumstances in chapters 2-3 to the reality of heaven. Maybe more accurately, though, their current circumstances can only be properly viewed by gazing at them through the lens of the heavenly throne room. The details of chapters 4-5 help to recalibrate the hearts and minds of those in the seven churches so that their thoughts and attitudes will account for God's role in the midst of their struggles. At least several key themes emerge as the image unfolds:

- The incomparable sovereignty of God
- The central role of worship
- The shock of the slaughtered lamb

Altogether, these themes help form the structure for what follows in the remainder of Revelation.

The Incomparable Sovereignty of God

Numerous commentators have pointed out how the vision of the throne room utilizes language and imagery reminiscent of both the Old Testament and the contemporary setting of the Roman Empire. For example, Gorman explains that these two chapters present "a blend of temple and throne-room scenes

from the Ancient Near East, as reflected in Isaiah 6 and Daniel 7, and from the Roman Empire, where the emperor was honored and worshiped as sovereign of the universe.”¹ Regarding the Old Testament allusions, Gorman finds multiple reflections in Revelation 4-5:

There are echoes of the stories of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3) and the giving of the Law to Moses at Sinai (Exodus 19-24)...Some of these parallel features include God being depicted on a throne (1 Kings 22:19; Isa 6:1; Ezek 1:26), having a white appearance (Dan 7:9), and being surrounded by beauty (Ezek 1:18, 26-28), as well as the presence of a sea (Ezek 1:22; Dan 7:2-3), fire/smoke/lightning (Exod 3:2-3; 19:16, 18; Isa 6:4; Ezek 1:4, 13-14; Dan 7:9-10), angels (1 Kings 22:19; Exod 3:2; Dan 7:10), and various other living creatures (Ezek 1:5-25; 10:15-22; Dan 7:3-7).²

These allusions back to the Old Testament are loaded with symbolic meaning, all of which serve to remind the people of the seven churches “of the splendor and majesty and power of God that are projected by these scintillating images of the divine Presence and the radiance surrounding the throne.”³ As Metzger points out, though, the “finite languages of earth are incapable of defining the infinite realities that John saw in heaven.” Even so, the descriptions help us gain a sense—however lacking it may be—of the grandeur of heaven.

“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to
come.”

Revelation 4:8

John’s vision also contains parallels to the power of Rome. Here again, Gorman notes how “the presence of attendants around the imperial throne, the offering of hymns and acclamations to the emperor, and the practice of attendants and lesser kings giving golden crowns to him” were all rituals associated with the Roman emperor.⁴ These comparisons likely serve as a kind of parody of Roman claims to absolute power. Apocalyptic language commonly examines the claim of who has absolute power, and these chapters clearly contest the idea that the Roman emperor has ultimate control.

The Central Role of Worship

These chapters present a variety of challenging symbols to interpret; however, the relatively cloudy details of the throne room should not take away from the clarity of the activity taking place there—worship. However one identifies the beings around the throne, it is unmistakable that their role is one of worship. One commentator points out how “All of these superhuman creatures are focused on the enthroned One and the Lamb, offering continual worship and adoration.”⁵ Furthermore, the worship depicted is such that “articulate[s] a model of a well-ordered cosmos in which all created beings in every region of the map turn toward this one center—the throne of God and of the Lamb...In so doing, they also articulate a model for the orientation of the congregations in the seven churches” who live in a world where only a counterfeit of ordered worship exists, and where it does, it is directed elsewhere.⁶

¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb Into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 103.

² *Ibid.*, 106-7.

³ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 49. See pp. 48-9 for a brief explanation of the significance of many of the details John records.

⁴ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 106.

⁵ David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 97.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98. deSilva continues on to describe the contrast between the order of the worship in heaven and the relative present chaos of the world. Tracing the story line of Revelation leads us to see how God is restoring order to a presently “out of order” cosmos. See, e.g., p. 100.

The Shock of the Slaughtered Lamb

Chapter 5 contains what is one of the most surprising and important images in the entire book. Verse 5 is a command from “one of the elders” to “See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.” This imposing description is of someone who as “triumphed,” which is the same word that has been used eight previous times to describe the action of overcoming or being victorious (2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21 x2). It is the first explanation of what is intended for the churches to overcome or be victorious in chapters 2-3.

The image is shocking because it is entirely unexpected. John looks at this “Lion” and instead sees “a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain” (v. 6). One scholar describes it as “perhaps the most mind-wrenching “rebirth of images” in literature.”⁷ Another states that, “The shock of this reversal discloses the central mystery of the Apocalypse: God overcomes the world not through a show of force but through the suffering and death of Jesus.”⁸ Gorman proposes that the image of the slaughtered Lamb is “the central and centering image, the governing metaphor, the focal point of Revelation: a slaughtered Lamb, a crucified Lord.”⁹ Moreover, “the nature of power is being redefined” to include the notion that conquering or overcoming is found “not in the raw power associated with a lion, but in the power of faithfulness to death.”¹⁰ This challenges common assumptions about power, but also about the exalted, post-resurrected Christ. Gorman captures this view:

“See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed...Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain...”

Revelation 5:5, 6

Human beings, even apparently faithful Christians, too often want an almighty deity who will rule the universe with power, preferably on their terms, and with force when necessary. Such a concept of God and of sovereignty induces its adherents to side with this kind of God in the execution of (allegedly) divine might in the quest for (allegedly) divine justice. Understanding the reality of the Lamb as Lord...should terminate, all such misperceptions of divine power and justice, and of their erroneous human corollaries.¹¹ (emphasis added)

For the seven churches, then, overcoming or being victorious in their various circumstances is about faithfully following and worshipping the Slaughtered Lamb, even to death.

⁷ Eugene M. Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1989) 108, as quoted in Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 108.

⁸ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*; *Cross, Community, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 174, as quoted in Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 108.

⁹ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

TRYING (HARD) TO MAKE SENSE OF THINGS

With these major themes in mind, the challenge still remains of trying to understand the meaning and significance of the various symbols in these chapters. What follows here is a limited survey of what some of the well-regarded commentators have said for the major symbols. Metzger's summary in chapter 5 of *Breaking the Code* is also very helpful and may prove to be more helpful than this summary.

Various stones and the rainbow around the throne (4:3): Together, these are used to describe or depict the majesty of God.¹² Furthermore, the rainbow “conveys the impression of God’s encircling brilliance (cf. Ezek 1:27-28).”¹³

The twenty-four elders (4:4): Various options exist here, but perhaps they represent “an exalted angelic order who serve and adore God as the heavenly counterpart to the twenty-four priestly and twenty-four Levitical orders.”¹⁴ Their appearance of being clothed in white suggests holiness, and the golden crowns convey a sense of majesty. The number twenty-four may be indicative of divine government, as a multiple of the twelve used for the tribes of Israel and the number of apostles.¹⁵

Flashes of lightening and thunder (4:5): These likely serve to recall the theophany on Mt. Sinai, causing the audience to reflect back on God’s deliverance of his people in the story of the Exodus, while also portraying the power and splendor of God¹⁶

Seven lamps or torches of fire (4:5): These are interpreted by the text as the seven spirits of God, which may represent “angelic beings rather than the Holy Spirit in his sevenfold activity.”¹⁷

A sea of glass, like crystal (4:6): This may allude to the Jewish understanding that the throne of God rests on a celestial sea; furthermore, it likely looks back to the vision of Ezekiel 1, where a similar image is used to describe what is found above the cherubim. Most clearly, though, it further increases the portrayal of the majesty of this throne-room scene.¹⁸

Four living creatures (4:6): These most likely relate with the four cherubim from Ezekiel 1 and the seraphim of Isaiah 6, although differences exist in how they are described. They are most likely some kind of angelic beings with such high status that they lead the heavenly hosts in worship. The fact that they are full of eyes in front and behind suggests that nothing is outside their notice (cf., v. 8).¹⁹

The descriptions of each of the four creatures (4:7-8): This has close ties with the cherubim of Ezekiel, although with slight variation. Various attempts have been made to draw out the unique quality or function each of the descriptions represents (e.g., strength, wisdom, etc.).²⁰ One possibility is that these descriptions “suggest qualities that belong to God, such as royal power, strength, spirituality, and

¹² Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, [NIC] rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 120-1.

¹³ Alan F. Johnson, “Revelation,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. Ed. Tremper Longman and David A. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 462.

¹⁴ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 121-2.

¹⁵ Johnson, “Revelation,” 463.

¹⁶ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 122.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 122-3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 124.

²⁰ Ibid., 124-5.

swiftness of action...Together they embody the reflection of God's nature as the fullness of life and power."²¹ The six wings likely refer to their ability to respond quickly to God's will.

The overall image of the throne room from vv. 8-11: This scene begins by affirming God's holiness, distinctiveness from the rest of the created order, and eternity—all of which carried special significance for the churches addressed previously.²²

The scroll written on front and back and sealed with seven seals (5:1): This depicts God's will or decrees for the cosmos, and has a background in Ezekiel 2, Psalm 139, and various Jewish apocalyptic literature sources. The seals communicate that God's will is to remain hidden until a time in the future.²³

The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David (5:5): The first reference is to Genesis 49, where Judah is called a 'lion's cub,' and has messianic implications. 4 Ezra 11 mentions a lion "to designate the conquering Messiah who would destroy Rome."²⁴ The second reference has similar implications, and is taken from Isaiah 11:1. This latter image looks forward to an ideal king.²⁵

The Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes (5:6): Jesus is described as the Lamb of God in John 1:29, and elsewhere in Revelation. In addition, Isaiah 53 describes a lamb being slaughtered in a prophetic vision of what Jesus would endure. Also, the notion of the lamb clearly alludes to the Passover sacrifice. The notion of seven horns describes complete strength, while the seven eyes represent complete knowledge and awareness.²⁶

The harps and golden bowls full of incense (5:8): The harp is "the traditional instrument used in the singing of the Psalms," while the "golden bowls are full of incense symbolizing the prayers of the saints."²⁷

The many angels (5:11): This signifies how the praise of God is expanding beyond the four creatures and the twenty-four elders to a much larger corporate scene of countless angels.²⁸ This is similar to the "countless multitude before the Ancient of Days" in Daniel 7.²⁹

The scene of worship in vv. 13-14: Worship expands even further to include "the entire created order."³⁰

²¹ Johnson, "Revelation," 463.

²² *Ibid.*, 125-7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

²⁴ Johnson, "Revelation," 468.

²⁵ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 131.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 132-3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁹ Johnson, "Revelation," 470.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.