

## Revelation Chapter 4

### An Interpretation

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#### Introduction:

1. Revelation has opened with John the Apostle and Jesus identifying themselves. The early part of the book was dictated by Jesus to John and chapters two and three evaluate seven churches of Asia Minor or today's Turkey.
2. It is popular to interpret Revelation as a series of five or seven cycles, each beginning in the present and ending with the great Judgment day. However, we cannot locate the evidence that the book contains cycles, so we are understanding it as a sequence of events ending in chapter 11 and beginning anew in chapter 12.

How would John's readers know that the book was not sequential? Verse 1 below shows this fourth chapter to follow after the letters to the seven churches.

3. Now we have a short chapter describing the throne room of God. John hasn't been there, but must put in writing the vision that he saw of it.
4. Artist **Pat Marvenko Smith** has painted her understanding of the heavenly scene as John described it. Her painting is reproduced on page seven.
5. **B.W. Johnson** writes:

It is noteworthy that the two greatest prophets of the Old Testament, those who had the clearest visions of the reign of Christ, were permitted to behold a similar scene as a preparation for their revelations. Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1) and Isaiah (Isaiah 6) are each allowed to behold the glory of God.

As the Old Testament prophets, when about to enter upon their work, were inaugurated to the office of making known the future by a vision of the Almighty, so

John, the New Testament prophet, the last prophet of the world, was permitted to have a similar vision. Though the visions differ, the most striking symbols are beheld by all three of the prophets.

All see and describe the throne of God, with its sublime surroundings; all speak of the One who sits on the throne, though they make no attempt to describe his person; all record his glory; Ezekiel beholds living creatures around the throne, full of eyes, with four wings and two hands; Isaiah sees the seraphim with six wings who cry, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts.”

In John’s vision the four beasts are about the throne, full of eyes, with six wings who cry, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty.” In the case of all the prophets the vision of God is preparatory and indicates that he is about to impart the secrets of his future, hitherto held in his own bosom.

## THE THRONE IN HEAVEN

**(1) After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.**

- **After these things** is saying that the previous vision of Christ speaking to the seven churches is complete. John had a vision of Christ in 1:10 through the end of chapter 3.
- Jesus had promised to John information about what is and what is to come in 1:19. Now we begin the revelation of the future or **what must take place after these things**. Note that the future was not being unfolded yet. This is describing a reality that was present in John’s time. The future begins in chapter 6.
- Instead of being an event on the Isle of Patmos, this one required a peek into a vision of **heaven**.
- Needless to say, John accepted the invitation from the loud **voice** to see into the future.
- **Willie Wallace Speck:**

After the experience of the first vision (we do not know how long a time elapsed), John saw a door opened into heaven and Jesus (the voice of the first vision)

addressed him in a voice clear and distinct.

Immediately John, in the spirit, was transported into heaven (the heaven of the vision, that is). When both Isaiah and Ezekiel were being conditioned for their missions, they were each privileged to have a vision of the glory, majesty, power, and authority of the God in heaven. It seems quite appropriate that John also should have the same assurance to pass on to Christians of that and succeeding persecuted eras.

**Discussion:** Do we have to agree on the meaning of Revelation to be pleasing to the Lord?

**(2) Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne.**

- There was no time lost. John was **immediately “in the Spirit”** - probably under the control of the **Spirit**.
- In this great room of **heaven** the focus was on **a throne** and its Magnificent Occupant.

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

- No personal description of God is given that might lead to idolatry.
- Language authorities differ widely over the color of the **stones**, but agree on emerald being dominant in the rainbow.
- Making a positive identification of the **stones** is difficult, but according to several translations, the first stone on the breastplate of the High Priest was **jasper** and the last stone was **sardius**. Exodus 28:17-20.

**And thou shalt set therein a setting of stones, four rows of stones, —one row—  
a sardius, a topaz and an emerald, the first row;  
and the second row a carbuncle a sapphire and a diamond;  
and the third row an opal, an agate, and an amethyst;  
and the fourth row, a Tarshish stone, a sardonyx, and a jasper,  
—enclosed with gold, shall they be when they are set. -**

Rotherham Translation

- God had used a **rainbow** before as a token of a covenant that he would not again destroy mankind with water in the time of Noah.

**(4) Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.**

- In addition to the central **throne**, John observed a circle of **thrones**.
- **B.W. Johnson** says of these 24 elders:

It will be seen that the elders are grouped, not with the martyrs, or redeemed, or the one hundred and forty and four thousand; not with saved men, but with the angels and the cherubim about the throne of God. This distinction marks their character.

They belong to the heavenly intelligences; to the same class as the cherubim and angels. They are princes of heaven. They are twenty-four in number. This number is probably associated with the twenty-four courses of priests engaged in the service of the temple, the institutions of which were “patterns of things in the heavens.”

They are of the retinue that surround the throne and serve in the presence of God, and they constantly join in the adoration of the angelic hosts, and are incessantly employed in carrying out God's plans for the salvation of the world.

- The **white garments** symbolize purity and the **crowns** symbolize their authority. The **crowns**, even though made of **gold**, are still the *stephanos*, awarded to the saints on earth. Revelation 2:10.

**(5) Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God;**

- When there are **peals of thunder** and **flashes of lightning**, John's attention is focused.
- **John T. Hinds:**

These awe-inspiring sounds which John heard were, doubtless, intended to indicate the majesty and power of God.

- **Seven lamps** burning show that the scene was perfectly and continuously illuminated. John himself says that these lamps **are the seven Spirits of God**. Seven stands for total, complete. The Spirit had different manifestations. 1 Corinthians 12:7.

**(6) and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind.**

- Rather than floating on nothing, the scene is hosted on a **sea of glass**.
- The **sea of glass** was calm, as seen in **crystal**.
- The **four living creatures** are introduced next:

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

- We are introduced to four living **creatures** with lots of eyes (verse 6). Like savvy mothers, they have eyes in the back of their heads. These **four** are God's attendants. These creatures are easily identified with the four creatures of Ezekiel 1:4-11. In each case, the prophet is describing what they saw and they do not choose identical words.

**(4) As I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire. (5) Within it there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form. (6) Each of them had four faces and four wings. (7) Their legs were straight and their feet were like a calf's hoof, and they gleamed like burnished bronze. (8) Under their wings on their four sides were human hands. As for the faces and wings of the four of them, (9) their wings touched one another; their faces did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward. (10) As for the form of their faces, each had the face of a man; all four had the face of a lion on the right and the face of a bull on the left, and all four had**

the face of an eagle. (11) Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each had two touching another being, and two covering their bodies.

- **B.W. Johnson says:**

These angelic intelligences represent the courage of the **lion**, the patient strength of the **ox**, the intellect of the **man**, and the swiftness of the **eagle**.

**(8) And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY IS THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME."**

- These highly mobile creatures who could see everything and never rested, speak non-stop of God **holiness**, His power and eternity.
- The Christians would be concerned about the Roman Empire, but the God of heaven is altogether **holy**, altogether powerful and will outlast any empire on the planet.

**(9) And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever,**

- **Hinds:**

Since verse 8 shows that the living creatures give glory to God continually, the expression "when" they shall give glory must mean they repeated their praises again and again. God is so perfect in being and acts that the heavenly intelligences were continually repeating their thanksgiving because of his glory - ascribing to him all honor.

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

- **Hinds:**

Whatever caused the living creatures to give glory and honor to God also caused the twenty-four elders to fall before him and do the same.

The elders wearing crowns show that in some sense they were rulers. Casting their crowns before God

evidently indicates that they recognized that all their success came from God, and that their garlands of victory were as nothing in comparison with worshiping God.

**(11) "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created."**

- The 24 elders are saying nearly the same words as the four living creatures.



**This concludes the text of Revelation chapter 4.**

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Because we are launching into the part of the book that is so dependent on visions, we list here the systems of interpretation that have been used.

1. **The Preterist View.** (It means “past tense”) The more conservative adherents date the writing of Revelation to before the Destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. To them, all

prophecies in the book are fulfilled in the Destruction itself which was also the second coming of Christ.

**Jack Cottrell** writes:

The dominant version of preterism says that everything—EVERYTHING—associated with the second coming of Jesus happened in A.D. 70, in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem as an act of judgment on OT Israel. This includes the antichrist, the man of sin, the second coming of Jesus, the rapture, the resurrection, and the judgment day. Everything predicted in Matt. 24 and in the book of Revelation (which is dated c. A.D. 65) was fulfilled at that time (says preterism).

**Response:**

- The evidence that Revelation was written before A.D. 70 is not only lacking, but is improbable.

1. Let's begin with the Apostle Peter. He was the leader of the apostles because he is named first in the lists. He is a chief spokesperson for Christ. He was the chief spokesman when the church began on Pentecost in Acts, chapter two.

2. In his 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter book (about A.D. 66), he writes:

**And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him . . . 2 Peter 3:15.**

Here Peter endorses the writings of Paul as the wisdom of God, inspired just like his own writing.

Peter had written 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, but also the Book of Mark is mainly the story of Peter's experience with Jesus. So Peter has been responsible for three books.

Now he endorsed **"Our beloved brother Paul,"** so Romans,

1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians,  
Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians,  
1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians,  
1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, Titus and Philemon are  
approved by Peter.

Paul, in turn, has endorsed Luke the physician.

**For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." 1 Timothy 5:18.**

These two quotations are called Scripture. The first is from Deuteronomy 25:4 and the other is from Luke 10:7, putting Luke's writings on a level with Deuteronomy. So the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are now on the earliest list of inspired New Testament books. This is an inspired but temporary canon of Scripture that was later expanded to include James, Jude, Hebrews and others.

**Discussion:** How did the Lord define the temporary canon of the New Testament.

The gospel of John was not included because it had not been written yet. If Revelation had been written early, it would surely have been included, especially because it contained the direct words of Jesus. But there is no reference that such a book existed when Peter wrote his list about A.D. 66.

So the view that Revelation was written before the Destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 does not have support from any inspired writer.

- There is no evidence that church of the first and second centuries knew of such a view as an early writing of Revelation. The book is of late origin. The early church with its inspired prophets was unaware of this view. The system of interpretation of Revelation called Preterism cannot pass this simple test. It was not known in the literature of the time. This is a reason to reject the system.

- Further, why would all of this information about the Destruction of Jerusalem being given to the Seven Churches in remote Asia Minor? They were more than 1,100 miles away by land. How could it encourage them?
2. **The Historicist View.** (*The view of these lessons.*) This view sees in Revelation a panoramic view of history from John's time to the Second Coming of Christ.
- This view requires a late date (A.D. 95 or 96) for writing Revelation.
  - One weakness of the view is that the visions deal primarily with Europe and not Asian nations.
  - Another criticism of the historicist view is that a symbol can match more than one world event. We do not see that difficulty is serious enough to abandon the entire view.
3. **The Futurist View.** This view sees all of the visions as relating to the time of the Second Coming of Christ.
- This does not match well with Revelation 1:3:
 

**Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.**

The time cannot be *near* and *far* at the same time.
  - **Ralph Johnson** describes the Futurist View this way:
 

Most of the fulfillment of the book is still future. This is the popular view among the denominational world today. It is super- literalistic and predominantly pre-millennial. Jesus will come and take away the righteous to his marriage. During that period "the great tribulation" will take place with the Anti-Christ ruling on earth. He will then return and bind Satan followed by setting up his kingdom and reigning in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem for a thousand years.

4. **The Idealist View.** Here the main idea is to encourage persecuted Christians to be faithful to death. Whatever the visions mean, God will win over evil.
- This does not match well with Revelation 1:3 either.

| Things Present                                  | Things Hereafter                     |   |  |  |  | Things Eternal                                |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|--|---|
| 1:9 – 3:22                                      | 4:1 – 8:1                            | 8:2 – 11:19                               | 12 – 14                                    | 15 – 16                                  | 17 – 20  | 21 – 22:5                                     |
| 7 churches                                      | 7 seals                              | 7 trumpets                                | Enemies exposed                            | 7 Bowls                                  | Enemies judged   | Glorified church                              |
| Christ rebukes & encourages the saints on earth | Christ begins his reign on the earth | God responds to the prayers of the saints | God exposes the evil nature of his enemies | God responds to the plight of the saints | Christ completes his victory over God's enemies on earth | God and Christ dwell with the saints in glory |

— Chart by David Mills

## *What can I say?*

*And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it.*

*1 Peter 3:15 New Living Translation*

*Questions by Charles Dailey*

1. What Old Testament prophets had visions like in this chapter? (Page 1)
2. Where have we encountered a rainbow earlier in Scripture? (3)
3. Are the 24 elders grouped with men or the heavenly creatures? (3)
4. Preterist means past tense. (6)
5. Peter was the least of the apostles. (7)
6. Peter endorsed the writings of Paul. (7)
7. Paul wrote 12 books. (7)
8. Luke endorsed Paul. (7)
9. Was there an temporary canon of Scriptures? (8)
10. The Idealist view seems most probable. (9)