



Route 66, Revelation

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Excerpts from William Barkley's commentary on Revelation 4

Revelation 4:1

After this I saw, and, behold, a door in heaven was standing open, and there came to me the voice that I had heard before, speaking to me like the sound of a trumpet, and the speaker said: "Come up here, and I will show you the events which must follow these things."

In Revelation 2-3 we saw the Risen Christ walking amidst his churches upon earth. Now the scene changes to the court of heaven.

A door was opened in heaven for the seer. There are two possibilities here: (a) It may be that he is thought of as already being in heaven, and the door is opening into still more holy parts of heaven. (b) It is much more likely that the door is from earth to heaven. Primitive Jewish thought conceived of the sky as a vast solid dome, set like a roof upon a square flat earth; and the idea here is that beyond the dome of the sky there is heaven, and a door is opened in that dome to give the seer entry into heaven.

In the early chapters of the Revelation there are three of the most important doors in life.

(i) There is the door of opportunity. "Behold," said the Risen Christ to the Church at Philadelphia, "I have set before you an open door" (Revelation 3:8). That was the door of the glorious opportunity by which the message of the gospel could be taken to the regions beyond. God sets before every man his own door of opportunity.

(ii) There is the door of the human heart. "Behold," says the Risen Christ, "I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20). At the door of every heart there comes the knock of the nail-pierced hand, and a man may open or refuse to open.

(iii) There is the door of revelation. "I saw a door in heaven standing open," says the seer. God offers to every man the door which leads to the knowledge of God and of life eternal.

More than once the New Testament speaks of the heavens being opened; and it is of the greatest significance to see the object of that opening.

(i) There is the opening of the heavens for vision. "The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (Ezekiel 1:1). God sends to those who seek him the vision of himself and of his truth.

(ii) There is the opening for the descent of the Spirit. When Jesus was baptized by John, he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon himself (Mk.1:10). When a man's mind and soul seek upwards, the Spirit of God descends to meet them.

(iii) There is the opening for the revelation of the glory of Christ. It was the promise of Jesus to Nathanael that he would see the heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (Jn.1:51). Some day the heavens will open to disclose the glory of Christ; and inevitably that day will bring joy to those who have loved him and amazement and fear to those who have despised him.

THE THRONE OF GOD

Revelation 4:2-3

Immediately, I fell under the influence of the Spirit; and, behold, a throne stood in heaven, and there was One seated on it. And he who was seated on the throne was like a jasper stone and a sardian to look at; and there was a rainbow circling round the throne, like an emerald to look at.

When the seer entered the door into heaven, he fell into an ecstasy.

In heaven he saw a throne and God on the throne. The throne of God is a common Old Testament picture. The prophet said: "I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him" (1 Kings 22:19). The Psalmist has it: "God sits on his holy throne" (Psalm 47:8). Isaiah saw the Lord "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1). In the Revelation the throne of God is mentioned in every chapter except Revelation 2, Revelation 8 and Revelation 9. The throne of God stands for the majesty of God. When Handel was asked how he had come to write the Messiah, his answer was: "I saw the heavens opened and God upon his great white throne."

John saw One seated upon the throne. There is something very interesting here. John makes no attempt to describe God in any human shape. As Swete says, "He rigorously shuns anthropomorphic details." He describes God in "the flashing of gem-like colours," but he never mentions any kind of form. It is the Bible's way to see God in terms of light. The Pastorals describe God as "dwelling in the light that no man can approach unto" (1 Timothy 6:16). And long before that the Psalmist had spoken of God who covers himself with light as a garment (Psalm 104:2).

John sees his vision in terms of the lights which flash from precious stones. We do not know what exactly these stones were. The three names here are the jasper, the sardian and the emerald. One thing is certain; these were typical of the most precious stones. Plato mentions the three of them together as representative of precious stones (Plato, *Phaedo* 111 E). They were part of the rich array of the King of Tyre (Ezekiel 28:13); they were among the precious stones on the breast-plate of the High Priest (Exodus 28:17); and they were among the stones which were the foundation of the Holy City (Revelation 21:19).

The jasper is nowadays a dull opaque stone, but in the ancient world it seems to have been a translucent rock crystal, through which the light would come with an almost unbearable scintillation. Some think that here it means a diamond, and this is not impossible. The sardian, so called because it was said to be found mainly near Sardis, was blood-red; it was a gem which was frequently used to have engravings incised on it and may correspond to the modern carnelian. The emerald is most likely the green emerald which we know.

The picture of the presence of God which John saw was like the blinding flash of a diamond in the sun, with the dazzling blood-red of the sardian; and there flashed through both the more restful green of the emerald, for in that way alone could the eye bear to look upon the sight.

It may well be that the jasper stands for the unbearable brightness of the purity of God; that the blood-red sardian stands for his avenging wrath; and that the gentle green of the emerald stands for his mercy by which alone we can meet his purity and his justice.

THE TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS

Revelation 4:4

And in a circle round the throne I saw twenty-four thrones, and seated upon the thrones twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads.

We now approach one of the difficult passages for which the Revelation is notorious. In it we meet twenty-four elders and then four living creatures; and we have to try to identify them.

We find the twenty-four elders frequently appearing in the Revelation. Let us set down the facts about them. They sit around the throne, clothed in white robes and wearing crowns (Revelation 4:4; Revelation 14:3); they cast their crowns before the throne (Revelation 4:10); they continually worship and praise (Revelation 5:11,14; Revelation 7:11; Revelation 11:16; Revelation 14:3; Revelation 19:4); they bring to God the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8); one of them encourages the seer, when he is sad (Revelation 5:5); and one of them acts as interpreter of one of the visions (Revelation 7:13). We may note five lines of explanation.

(i) In the Old Testament there are indications of a kind of council surrounding God. The prophet sees God sitting on his throne and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left (1 Kings 22:19). In Job the sons of God come to meet with him (Job 1:6; Job 2:1). Isaiah speaks of God reigning in glory--among his elders (Isaiah 24:23). In the Genesis story of the garden, the accusation against Adam is that he has eaten of the fruit of the forbidden tree and become like one of us (Genesis 3:22). It may be that the idea of the elders has something to do with the idea of God's council surrounding him.

(ii) When the Jews were in Babylon, they could not avoid coming into contact with Babylonian ideas. And it might well be that sometimes they incorporated Babylonian ideas into their own thinking, especially if there was some initial resemblance. The Babylonians had twenty-four star gods, for the worship of the stars was a part of Babylonian religion; and it has been suggested that these became in Jewish thought twenty-four angels who surrounded the throne of God, and that the elders stand for these.

(iii) We move on to explanations which we think are much more likely. There were so many priests in Israel that they could not possibly serve in the Temple at the one time and so they were divided into twenty-four different courses (1 Chronicles 24:7-18). Each of these courses had its president, known as an elder of the priests. Sometimes these elders were called princes, or governors, of the house of God (1 Chronicles 24:5). It is suggested that the twenty-four elders stand symbolically for the twenty-four courses of the priests. They present the prayers of the faithful to God (Revelation 5:8), and that is priestly work. The Levites were similarly divided into twenty-four courses for the work of the Temple and they praised God with harps and psalteries and cymbals (1 Chronicles 25:6-31), and the elders also have their harps (Revelation 5:8). So the twenty-four elders may stand for the heavenly ideal of the earthly worship of the priests and Levites in the Temple.

(iv) It has been suggested that the twenty-four elders stand for the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles combined. In the new Jerusalem the names of the twelve patriarchs are on the twelve gates and the names of the twelve apostles are on the foundation stones of the wall.

(v) We think that the likeliest explanation is that the twenty-four elders are the symbolic representatives of the faithful people of God. Their white robes are the robes promised to the faithful (Revelation 3:4), and their crowns (stephanoi, GSN4735) are those promised to those who are faithful unto death (Revelation 2:10). The thrones are those which Jesus promised to those who forsook all and followed him (Matthew 19:27-29). The description of the twenty-four elders fits well with the promises made to the faithful.

The question will then be, "Why twenty-four?" The answer is because the Church is composed of Jews and Gentiles. There were originally twelve tribes, but now it is as if the tribes were doubled. Swete says that the twenty-four elders stand for the Church in its totality. We remember that this is a vision, not of what yet is, but

of what shall be; and the twenty-four elders stand as representatives of the whole Church which one day in glory will worship in the presence of God himself.

AROUND THE THRONE

Revelation 4:5-6a

And flashes of lightning and voices and peals of thunder were coming forth from the throne. There were seven torches of fire burning before the throne, and these are the seven Spirits of God. And in front of the throne there was what I can only call a sea of glass like crystal.

John adds more details to his mysterious and awe-inspiring picture of heaven. The voices are the voices of the thunder; and thunder and lightning are often connected with the manifestation of God. In the vision of Ezekiel lightning comes out of the fiery haze around the throne (Ezekiel 1:13). The Psalmist tells how the voice of the thunder of God was heard in the heavens, and the lightnings lightened the world (Psalm 77:18). God sends his lightning to the ends of the earth (Jb.37:4). But what is primarily in the mind of John is the description of Mount Sinai as the people waited for the giving of the Law: "There were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast" (Exodus 19:16). John is using imagery which is regularly connected with the presence of God.

The seven torches are the seven Spirits of God. We have already met the seven Spirits before the throne (Revelation 1:4; Revelation 3:1). There are scholars who see Babylonian influence here also. For the Babylonians the seven planets were also divine and within the presence of God; it would be natural to liken the planets to torches and it has been suggested that this imagery is Babylonian in origin.

The "glassy sea" has exercised a strange fascination over the minds of many people, including hymn-writers. The Greek does not say that there was a sea of glass but "as it were a sea of glass." There was something which was beyond all description, but which could be likened only to a great sea of glass. Where did the seer get this picture?

(i) He may have got it from a conception in the most primitive thought of the Old Testament. We have already seen that the firmament is conceived of as a great solid dome arching over the earth. Beneath it is the earth, and above it the heaven. The creation story speaks of the waters under the firmament and the waters above the firmament (Genesis 1:7). The Psalmist calls upon the waters that are above the heavens to praise the Lord (Psalm 148:4). The belief was that above the firmament, perhaps as the kind of floor of heaven, there was a great sea. Further, it was on that sea that God had set his throne. The Psalmist says of God that he set the beams of his chambers upon the waters (Psalm 104:3).

(ii) It may be that John's time in Patmos gave him the idea of this picture. Swete suggests that he saw a vast surface which flashed back the light, "like the Aegan Sea, when on summer days John looked upon it from the heights of Patmos." John had often seen the sea like a sea of molten glass and maybe his picture was born from that.

(iii) There is a further possibility. According to the Koran (Sura 27) Solomon had in his palace a floor of glass so like a sea that, when the Queen of Sheba came to visit him, she picked up her skirts thinking she had to wade through water. It may be that John is thinking of the throne of God set in a glass-floored palace.

(iv) There is one other remote possibility. John says that the glassy sea was like crystal (krustallon, GSN2930); but krustallon could mean ice; and then the idea would be an expanse which shimmered like an ice-field. It is a magnificent picture, but it can hardly be the real picture because neither John nor his people would ever have seen such a scene, and it would have meant nothing to them.

There are three things that this sea like shining glass does symbolize.

(i) It symbolizes preciousness. In the ancient world glass was usually dull and semi-opaque, and glass as clear as crystal was as precious as gold. In Jb.28:17 gold and glass are mentioned together as examples of precious things.

(ii) It symbolizes dazzling purity. The blinding light reflected from the glassy sea would be too much for the eyes to look upon, like the purity of God.

(iii) It symbolizes immense distance. The throne of God was in the immense distance, as if at the other side of a great sea. Swete writes of "the vast distance which, even in the case of one who stood in the door of heaven, intervened between himself and the throne of God."

One of the greatest characteristics of the writing of the seer is the reverence which, even in the heavenly places, never dares to be familiar with God, but paints its picture in terms of light and distance.

THE FOUR LIVING CREATURES (1)

Revelation 4:6b-8

And, between the throne and the elders, in a circle round the throne, were four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind. The first living creature was like a lion; the second living creature was like an ox; the third living creature had what appeared to be a man's face; the fourth living creature was like an eagle in flight. The four living creatures had each of them six wings; and around and within they were full of eyes. Night and day they never rested from saying:

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

Here we come to another of the symbolic problems of the Revelation. The four living creatures appear frequently in the heavenly scene: so let us begin by collecting what the Revelation itself says about them. They are always found near the throne and the Lamb (Revelation 4:6; Revelation 5:6; Revelation 14:4). They have six wings and they are full of eyes (Revelation 4:6,8). They are constantly engaged in praising and in worshipping God (Revelation 4:8; Revelation 5:9; Revelation 5:14; Revelation 7:11; Revelation 19:4). They have certain functions to perform. They invite the dreadful manifestations of the wrath of God to appear upon the scene (Revelation 6:1; Revelation 6:7). One of them hands over the vials of the wrath of God (Revelation 15:7).

Although there are definite differences, there can be little doubt that we find the ancestors of these living creatures in the visions of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel's vision the four living creatures each have four faces--the faces of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle; and they uphold the firmament (Ezekiel 1:6,10; Ezekiel 1:22,26); the felloes of the wheels are full of eyes (Ezekiel 1:18). In Ezekiel we have all the details of the picture in the Revelation, although the details are differently allocated and arranged. In spite of the differences the family resemblance is clear.

In Ezekiel the four living creatures are definitely identified with the cherubim. (It is to be noted that -im is the Hebrew plural ending; cherubim is simply cherubs and seraphim is simply seraphs.) The identification is made in Ezekiel 10:20,22. The cherubim were part of the decoration of Solomon's Temple, in the place of prayer and on the walls (1 Kings 6:23-30; 2Chr.3:7). They were represented on the hanging veil which shut off the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place (Exodus 26:31). There were two cherubim on the lid of the ark, called the mercy-seat; and they were so placed that they faced each other and their wings swept over to form a kind of canopy over the mercy-seat (Exodus 25:18-21). One of the commonest pictures of God is sitting between the cherubim, and it is thus that he is often addressed in prayer (2Kgs.19:15; Psalm 80:1; Psalm 99:1; Isaiah 37:16). God is represented as flying on the cherubim and on the wings of the wind (Psalm 18:10). It is the cherubim who guard the way to the Garden when Adam and Eve have been banished from it (Genesis 3:24). In the later books

written between the Testaments, such as Enoch, the cherubim are the guardians of the throne of God (Enoch 71:7).

From all this one thing emerges clearly--the cherubim are angelic beings who are close to God and the guardians of his throne.

THE FOUR LIVING CREATURES (2)

Revelation 4:6b-8 (continued)

What do these four living creatures symbolize?

(i) They are clearly part of the imagery of heaven; and they are not figures whom the writer of the Revelation did not create, but whom he inherited from previous pictures. They may originally have come from Babylonian sources, and they may have stood for the four principal signs of the Zodiac and for the four winds coming from the four quarters of heaven. But the John who wrote the Revelation was not aware of that, and he used them simply as part of the imagery of heaven in which he had been brought up.

(ii) How did John himself think of the symbolism of these living creatures? We think that Swete offers the right explanation. The four living creatures stand for everything that is noblest, strongest, wisest and swiftest in nature. Each has the preeminence in his own particular sphere. The lion is supreme among beasts; the ox is supreme among cattle; the eagle is supreme among birds; and man is supreme among all creatures. The beasts represent all the greatness and the strength and the beauty of nature; here we see nature praising God. In the verses to follow we see the twenty-four elders praising God; and when we put the two pictures together we get the picture of both nature and man engaged in constant adoration of God. "The ceaseless activity of nature under the hand of God is a ceaseless tribute of praise."

The idea of nature praising God is one which occurs in the Old Testament more than once. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge" (Psalm 19:1-2). "Bless the Lord all his works in all places of his dominion" (Psalm 103:22). Psalm 148 is a magnificent summons to the whole of nature to join in praising God.

There is a tremendous truth here. The basic idea behind this is that anything which is fulfilling the function for which it was created is praising God. One of the basic conceptions of Stoicism was that in everything there was a spark of God, scintilla. "God," said Seneca, "is near you, with you, within you; a holy spirit sits within us." As Gilbert Murray points out, the sceptics laughed at this and sought to make a fool of the whole idea. "What," said the sceptic, "God in worms? God in dung beetles?" "Why not?" demanded the Stoic.

Cannot an earthworm serve God? Do you suppose that it is only a general who is a good soldier? Cannot the lowest private fight his best? Happy are you, if you are serving God and carrying out his purpose as faithfully as an earthworm. Whatever carries out the function for which it was created is thereby worshipping God.

This is a thought which opens out the most magnificent vistas. The humblest and the most unseen activity in the world can be the true worship of God. Work and worship literally become one. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever; and man carries out that function when he does what God sent him into the world to do. Work well done rises like a hymn of praise to God.

This means that the doctor on his rounds, the scientist in his laboratory, the teacher in his classroom, the musician at his music, the artist at his canvas, the shop assistant at his counter, the typist at her typewriter, the housewife in her kitchen--all who are doing the work of the world as it should be done are joining in a great act of worship.

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE LIVING CREATURES

Revelation 4:6b-8 (continued)

It was not long before the early church found certain symbolisms in the living creatures, in particular of the four Gospels--a representation which is often to be found in stained-glass windows in churches.

The earliest and the fullest identification was made by Irenaeus about A.D. 170. He held that the four living creatures represented four aspects of the work of Jesus Christ, which in turn are represented in the four Gospels.

The lion symbolizes the powerful and effective working of the Son of God, his leadership and his royal power. The ox signifies the priestly side of his work, for it is the animal of sacrifice. The man symbolizes his incarnation. The eagle represents the gift of the Holy Spirit, hovering with his wings over the Church. John represents "the original, effective and glorious generation of the Son from the Father," and tells how all things were made by him; and is, therefore, symbolized by the lion. Luke begins with the picture of Zacharias the priest, and tells the story of the fatted calf killed for the finding of the younger son; and is, therefore, symbolized by the ox. Matthew begins by giving us the human descent of Jesus and "The character of a humble and meek man is kept up throughout the whole gospel," and is, therefore, symbolized by the man. Mark begins with a reference to the Spirit of prophecy coming down from on high upon men which "points to the winged aspect of the Gospel"; and, therefore, is symbolized by the eagle.

Irenaeus goes on to say that the fourfold form of the beasts represents the four principal covenants which God made with the human race. The first was made with Adam, prior to the flood. The second was made with Noah, after the flood. The third consisted of the giving of the Law to Moses. The fourth is that which renovates man in Christ, "raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom."

But, as we have said, there was a variety of different identifications.

The scheme of Athanasius was: Matthew = the man Mark = the ox Luke = the lion John = the eagle,

The scheme of Victorinus was: Matthew = the man Mark = the lion Luke = the ox John = the eagle

The scheme of Augustine was: Matthew = the lion Mark = the man Luke = the ox John = the eagle.

It may be said that on the whole Augustine's identifications became the most commonly accepted, because they fit the facts. Matthew is best represented by the lion, because in it Jesus is depicted as the Lion of Judah, the One in whom all the expectations of the prophets came true. Mark is best represented by the man, because it is the nearest approach to a factual report of the human life of Jesus. Luke is best represented by the ox, because it depicts Jesus as the sacrifice for all classes and conditions of men and women everywhere. John is best represented by the eagle, because of all birds it flies highest and is said to be the only living creature which can look straight into the sun; and John of all the gospels reaches the highest heights of thought.

THE SONG OF PRAISE

Revelation 4:6b-8 (continued)

Night and day the living creatures never rested from their doxology of praise:
Holy, holy, holy is the Lord, the Almighty, Who was, and Who is, and Who is to come.

Here is set out the sleepless praise of nature. "Man rests on the Sabbath, and in sleep, and in the end in death, but the course of nature is unbroken and unbroken in praise." There is never any time when the world God made is not praising him.

As o'er each continent and island
The dawn leads on another day,
The voice of prayer is never silent,
Nor dies the strain of praise away.

The doxology seizes on three aspects of God.

(i) It praises him for his holiness (compare Isaiah 6:3). Again and again we have seen that the basic idea of holiness is difference. That is supremely true of God. He is different from men. Precisely there is the reason that we are moved to adoration of God. If he were simply a glorified human person, we could not praise. As the poet had it: "How could I praise, if such as I could understand" The very mystery of God moves us to awed admiration in his presence and to amazed love that that greatness should stoop so low for us men and for our salvation.

(ii) It praises his omnipotence. God is the Almighty. The people to whom the Revelation was written are under the threat of the Roman Empire, a power which no person or nation had ever successfully withstood. Think what it must have meant to be sure that behind them stood the Almighty. The very giving of that name to God affirms the certainty of the safety of the Christian; not a safety which meant release from trouble but which made a man secure in life and in death.

(iii) It praises his everlastingness. Empires might come and empires might go; God lasts for ever. Here is the triumphant affirmation that God endures unchanging amidst the enmity and the rebellion of men.

GOD, THE LORD AND CREATOR

Revelation 4:9-11

When the living creatures shall give glory and honour and thanksgiving to him who is seated on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders shall fall down before him who is seated on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, and say:

It is right, our Lord and God, that you should receive the glory and the honour and the power, for you have created all things, and through your will all things exist and have been created.

Here is the other section of the choir of thanksgiving. We have seen that the living creatures stand for nature in all its greatness and the twenty-four elders for the great united Church in Jesus Christ. So when the living creatures and the elders unite in praise, it symbolizes nature and the Church both praising God. There are commentators who have made difficulty here. In Revelation 4:8 the praise of the living creatures is unceasing by day and night; in this passage the picture is of separate bursts of praise at each of which the elders fall down and worship. But surely to say that there is an inconsistency is unimaginative criticism; we do not look for a strict logic in the poetry of adoration.

John uses a picture which the ancient world would know well. The elders cast their crowns before the throne of God. In the ancient world that was the sign of complete submission. When one king surrendered to another, he cast his crown at the victor's feet. Sometimes the Romans carried with them an image of their emperor and, when they had reduced a monarch to submission, there was a ceremony in which the vanquished one had to cast his crown before the emperor's image. The picture looks on God as the conqueror of the souls of men; and on the Church as the body of people who have surrendered to him. There can be no Christianity without submission.

The doxology of the elders praises God on two counts.

(i) He is Lord and God. Here is something which would be even more meaningful to John's people than it is to us. The phrase for Lord and God is: kurios (GSN2962) kai (2532) theos (GSN2316); and that was the official title of Domitian, the Roman Emperor. It was, indeed, because the Christians would not acknowledge that claim that they were persecuted and killed. Simply to call God Lord and God was a triumphant confession of faith, an assertion that he holds first place in all the universe.

(ii) God is Creator. It is through his will and purpose that all things existed even before creation and were in the end brought into actual being. Man has acquired many powers, but he does not possess the power to create. He can alter and rearrange; he can make things out of already existing materials; but only God can create something out of nothing. That great truth means that in the realest sense everything in the world belongs to God, and there is nothing a man can handle which God has not given to him.