

REVELATION CHAPTER 4

GOD ON HIS THRONE RULES THE WHOLE UNIVERSE FROM ETERNITY TO ETERNITY

PART 1. Revelation 4:1. THE OPEN DOOR.

(1) Explanation of the symbols

4:1 After these things I saw (*Greek: horao, opsomai, eidon, eoraka*)(*aorist*), and behold. This expresses that John saw this second vision “in time after” the first vision (1:12), “next” in the order of his visions. It does not say that the events seen in the second vision are chronologically after the events described in the first vision! The phrase, “after this”, is used to introduce a new vision (7:1; 18:1; 19:1).

and there before me was a door (*Greek: thura*) standing open (*Greek: anoigo*)(*perfect*) in heaven. John saw a door standing open in heaven (4:1). By opening the door to heaven, God authorises the revelation of heavenly realities. *God reveals things as they really are and as he views them.* John sees the glory of God on his heavenly throne in heaven (4:1) and hears what the inhabitants of heaven say about God!

Only a few people have seen an open door in heaven: **Jacob** in his dream saw a stairway with God standing at the top revealing and renewing the great covenant to him. Jakob experienced this as the house of God, the gate of heaven (Genesis 28:12-18). **Ezekiel** in his vision saw the heavens open so that he could see visions of God (Ezekiel 1:1). **John the Baptist** saw heaven opening and the Spirit descending onto Christ. He heard a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (Matthew 3:16-17). Jesus promised that **the disciples** would see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. They would see that *Jesus Christ is the Mediator between God the Father in heaven and the people on earth* (John 1:51). **Stephen** saw heaven open and the glory of Christ at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55-56). The apostle **Peter** saw heaven opening and God revealing to him why he should not despise the non-Jews, but proclaim the gospel to everyone (Acts 10:11-16). The apostle **Paul** saw heaven open. He was caught up to heaven, to paradise, and heard inexpressible things (2 Corinthians 12:1-5). Now the apostle **John** saw heaven opened. God says, “Come up here (4:1)!” The door to heaven is open. And John was led into the heavenly sanctuary by the hand of Christ whose death on the cross had made atonement for all his sins. From now on God can and may be approached with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). John stood face to face with God. He does not describe God, but describes God’s radiance.

This is the third time Christ speaks of “a door” in Revelation: Christ first gives an open door to the missionary congregation of Philadelphia to enter and penetrate the lost world (3:8). Then he stands at the door of the nominal congregation of Laodicea ready to enter whenever anyone repents (3:20). And now he opens a door in heaven.

The message of the open door in heaven is to enable Christians to see things as they really are (4:1). They may see the invisible, eternal, divine reality as God sees it. The visible things and events on earth are not as they seem to be. The Church in the world (as she appears in the world) is not what she really is (as she is in the eyes of God)! The invisible reality is the reality which God planned for us and his creation for eternity. Therefore Christians fix their eyes not on what is seen in creation and in human history, but on what is unseen and revealed by Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18; cf. 4:7)!

And the voice (*Greek: phone*) I had first heard (*aorist*) speaking (*present*) to me like a trumpet (*Greek: salpiggos*) said (*present*), ‘Come up (*Greek: anabaino*)(*imperative, aorist*) here (*Greek: ode*), and I will show (*Greek: deiknumi*)(*future*) you. The voice must be the voice of Christ (cf. 1:8,12), the King. He is the Creator, but also the Mediator between the eternal reality and the created reality. He is God that left the eternal reality (Philippians 2:6-8), entered creation and time, died and was resurrected in human history, and then re-entered the eternal reality (John 17:5).

what must (*Greek: dei*)(*present*) take place (*Greek: ginomai*)(*aorist*) after these things. On the authority of Christ, the angel shows John:

- not what had already happened and existed - a historical description of 1st century events, as *the historicist view* does
- also not what will happen after a long period of time somewhere far in the future - after the so-called removal (rapture) of the Church from the earth, as *the futurist view* does
- but what will take place from the near future onwards - in John’s future as in Revelation 1:19 (cf. 1:1-3). It *must* take place because it will be according to God’s sovereign plan and eternal purpose.

(2) Different views about the open door (4:1)

A futurist view. The open door is *literally* an open door into heaven through which John and the whole Church is taken up into heaven. The rapture of John is *a type* of the so-called rapture of the Church (the removal of the Church from the earth) (Larkin)¹.

The correct explanation. The open door is *a symbol* of God authorising John to see the revelation of *the realities* in heaven and to hear the revelation of God's plan for salvation and judgement!

(3) Different views about the words "what must take place after this" (4:1)

A futurist view. "What must take place afterwards" (chapter 4 to 22) refers to events after the removal of the Church ("the rapture" or the *first* return of Christ) and predicts events shortly before and after the "revelation" of Christ (the *second* return of Christ). Besides information about the future (which inspires *fear*), there is no message (of *encouragement*) for the Church between the first and the second coming of Christ, besides the message that the Church would immanently be removed from the earth and not pass through the coming great tribulation (the dominion of the final antichrist)!

The correct explanation. "What must take place afterwards" refers to events after Christ's revelation given to John (1:1,3; 4:1) and therefore refers to events between Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming. The message of the whole book of Revelation is meant for all Christians living in all the centuries between Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming.

PART 2. Revelation 4:2-3 THE THRONE AND ITS OCCUPANT

(1) Explanation of the symbols.

4:2 At once (*Greek: eutheos*) I was (*Greek: ginomai*)(*aorist*)(often takes functions of *aimi*) in the Spirit. This describes an ecstatic state. John no longer sees with his physical eyes nor hears with his physical ears. John sees and hears in a visionary way. His soul is drawn away from all surrounding objects and is wholly fixed on the things that are shown to him in the vision. After his first vision, John must have returned to his normal state for some time, and could have recorded his first vision and could have written down the seven letters which Christ had dictated to him. How long this interval lasted, we do not know. When a person has a vision, he may still be sensible to his surrounding. For example, Stephen was at the same time aware that people were stoning him and that he was seeing Christ in a vision (Acts 7:54-60; Matthew 3:16).

What John saw was *a vision* and not a literal material or physical reality. If it were not a vision, then he saw a material throne surrounded by twenty-four literal and physical thrones and a literal lamb (animal) which had literally and physically seven horns and seven eyes (a kind of monster)(5:6)! But although the various objects which John beholds do not exist in that physical, material form, they nevertheless really exist and express an important, spiritual truth and spiritual reality. For example, Jesus Christ ("the Lamb" is a symbol) exists as a literal reality! The symbols express a reality that far surpasses the literal reality of the mere symbol! Christ often explains the meaning of the symbols. If he does not, we should not ascribe a literal, material reality to it.

and there before me stood (*Greek: keimai*)(*imperfect*) a throne (*Greek: thronos*) in heaven. John saw a throne in heaven (4:2). God does not have several different thrones, nor can God's throne be separated into different functions (Matthew 25:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:11). God's reigning throne (4:2) is also God's judgement throne (20:11). God's one and only throne is the centre of the universe! The universe of the Bible is not geocentric (earth centred), heliocentric (sun centred), sagittario-centric (the archer star constellation centred), but Theo-centric (God centred)! The stars only enhance the greatness and power of God (Isaiah 40:25-26). A universe with God in the centre is also the true foundation for astronomy, cosmology and science!

The throne in the centre of the whole universe pictures the true philosophy of history. Not the events reported on the mass media determine and shape this present world, but the will of God on his throne! Nothing is excluded from his dominion. The throne is definitely based on biblical symbolism (Isaiah 6:1; Jeremiah 3:16-17; Jeremiah 14:21; Ezekiel 1:26; Ezekiel 43:7).

and on the throne One sitting (on it)(*Greek: kathizo*)(*present*). The word "sitting" indicates continuous rest and majesty. There is no haste, no exertion and no panic in heaven. Although the evil powers are seeking to conquer his throne, the final victory of the God of the Bible is absolutely sure. The scene in heaven is one of complete rest. With God on the throne everything is under control from eternity to eternity. He knows all the secrets hidden behind history and nothing ever surprises him. He never lets go of the works of his hands (Psalm 138:8).

4:3 And the one who sat (*present*) there like (*Greek: homaios*) the appearance of (*Greek: orasis*) jasper and carnelian/sardius. A rainbow (*Greek: iris*) like the appearance of (resembling) an emerald (*Greek: smaragdinos*) encircled (*Greek: kuklothen*) the throne. John saw God's radiance (4:3), not God himself. What

¹ Larkin, Revelation pp. 33-34

follows is not a description of God, but a description of God's appearance! What John sees is God's radiance (Hebrew 1:3). As commanded in the Bible, John makes no visible representation of the invisible God (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 4:15-24; Isaiah 6:1-7; Ezekiel 1). God is Spirit (John 4:24) and cannot be seen and also cannot be described. But God's appearance, however, can be seen and can be described!

John uses precious stones (cf. Exodus 28:17-20; Ezekiel 28:13) to describe the glorious radiance of God's being: "The white colour of the jasper", a kind of transparent diamond (21:11), represents the radiance of God's indescribable glory and holiness. "The red colour of the carnelian", the colour of blood, represents God's righteous judgement. "The green colour", the colour of life, represents the radiance of God's merciful salvation. "The many-coloured rainbow" symbolises the beautiful characteristics of God's being in salvation, the many-coloured wisdom of his salvation plan (Ephesians 3:10) and his loving faithfulness towards those who believe in him and obey him (Genesis 9:12-17).

The message of the colours of the precious stones is that in God's glorious and holy character (the transparent jasper) God's holy and righteous indignation to judge evildoers (the red of the carnelian) and God's glorious loving faithfulness to save and bestow new life to those who trust him (the green of emerald) can never be separated from each other!

For believers in the Old Testament period and the New Testament period the storm of God's judgement has already passed! "There is now no condemnation (doom) for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1)! The rainbow of God's faithful promise with regard to perfect justification through faith in the completed work of salvation of Christ shines forever (Romans 5:1)! These three characteristics of God's being radiate from God's throne. God reigns forever in glorious holiness, with righteous judgement and faithful salvation.

(2) The message of God's throne (4:2b-3).

On earth we see God's footstool (chapter 6), but let us not forget God's throne in heaven (chapter 4)! Not only will Christians be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12), but also all things that happen on earth will work together for the good of Christians (Romans 8:28)! In the midst of persecutions and trials the gaze of Christians should remain riveted on God who sits on his throne. The God of the Bible is the King of kings and the Lord of lords! The universe (including the present earth) is not governed by any human being, by any government, by any evil spirit or by blind fate. No, it is governed by the God of the Bible who sits on his heavenly throne (Psalm 99:1; cf. Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:20-22)!

The message of the throne is that God on his throne in heaven is the centre of everything and he rules over everyone and everything through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:8). God on his throne should be the focal point of all Christians on earth (Colossians 3:1-4). The centre of the Christian worldview is not man or anything in creation, but God himself. God's throne stands immovable! Only at the second coming of Christ will the heavens and the earth be shaken once more, but the kingdom of God will never be shaken (Hebrews 12:26-29)!

(3) Different views about the throne (4:2)

A futurist view. The throne is the throne of judgement and not the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16)², because out of it proceeded lightning and thundering and voices, that remind us of Mt. Sinai. "The throne is the source of judgement" (Larkin, Tenney)³.

The correct explanation. The throne is God's one and only throne, from which he reigns, saves and judges. It is the centre of the universe at all times. God's throne is always where God is. And God is present everywhere (Psalm 139:6-12).

The Old Testament description of God's throne when he reigns is the following: God sits on his throne with all the heavenly beings standing around him (1 Kings 22:19). The angels came to present themselves before the LORD (Job 1:6). The LORD says to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" (Psalm 110:1). The LORD Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before its elders, gloriously (Isaiah 24:23).

The Old Testament description of God's throne when he exercises justice and judgement is the following: Thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. ... Thousands upon thousands attended him. ... The court was seated and the books were opened (Daniel 7:9-10). The One enthroned in heaven laughs and scoffs at the godless and wicked nations and their kings who gather against the LORD and his Anointed One. Christ inherits the nations and the ends of the earth and will judge them by dashing them to pieces like pottery (Psalm 2).

PART 3. Revelation 4:4-8a. SURROUNDING THE THRONE

THE THRONE IS SURROUNDED BY SEVEN CONCENTRIC CIRCLES (chapter 4 and 5).

The throne Occupant (God the Father)(1:4b) shares his throne with God the Spirit(1:4c; 4:2,5) and God the Son (1:5; 5:6). The throne Occupant is surrounded by seven concentric circles. The first three circles describe the radiance of God and the last four circles describe the creatures that encircle the throne.

- First circle. The jasper symbolises God's essence expressed in glory or *holiness*.

² Larkin, Revelation p. 35

³ Tenney, Interpreting Revelation, p. 171

- Second circle. The carnelian symbolises God’s character as it expresses itself in *judgement*.
- Third circle. The emerald rainbow symbolises God’s character as it expresses itself in his faithfulness and *salvation*.
- Fourth circle. The four living creatures symbolise heavenly beings that *represent God’s whole creation* before God’s throne and that worship God who reigns over all history and especially the history of salvation (4:8).
- Fifth circle. The twenty-four elders symbolise heavenly beings that *represent God’s Church of the Old and the New Testaments in heaven* and that worship God as the God of creation and nature (4:11).
- Sixth circle. The innumerable angels praise Christ’s enthronement in heaven and his perfect attributes (5:12).
- Seventh circle. All the other creatures in the universe praise God’s reign through Christ (5:13).

Thus the picture is of the throne in the centre of the whole created universe and its history. All creatures, saints and angels without any exception praise God! This responsive singing between the living creatures, the elders, the angels and all God’s other creatures will continue forever into all eternity! They praise God for his multicoloured virtues revealed in creation and in salvation and for the salvation merited and carried out by the Lamb!

THE TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS

(1) Explanation of the symbols.

4:4 Surrounding (*Greek: kuklothen*) the throne were twenty-four (*Greek: eikosi tessares*) thrones, and seated (*Greek: kathizo*)(*present*) on them were twenty-four elders (4:10; 5:6,8,11; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). John saw 24 elders, sitting on 24 thrones surrounding God’s throne (4:4). This picture points to Old Testament descriptions of God’s throne when he reigns or exercises justice and judgement. In the Old Testament, God’s throne is surrounded by heavenly beings and elders or leaders of the people.

The name elders (*Greek: presbyters*) points to them as being the *representatives* of the people of God (the Church) and not the people of God themselves. The number 24 points to the twenty-four divisions of priests (1 Chronicles 24:1-19) and the twenty-four divisions of Levites (1 Chronicles 25) in the Old Testament who served in the temple on earth and who thanked and praised God every day (1 Chronicles 23:30-31). The number 24 (2x12) points especially to the people of God in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The twelve tribes of Israel represent God’s Old Testament people and the twelve apostles represent God’s New Testament people (21:12-14). Thus the number 24 represents the full number of God’s chosen people throughout world history.

In Revelation 5:8-10 the elders are clearly distinguished from the people from every nation that have been purchased with the blood of Christ. And in Revelation 7:11 the elders are clearly distinguished from the uncountable multitude of God’s people (7:9,14). Therefore the twenty-four elders are not symbolic of the chosen people of God themselves elevated to this high position, but are *the representatives* of these chosen people before God’s throne in heaven. They are probably heavenly beings who represent the Church directly before God’s throne.

Of all the creatures surrounding God’s throne in heaven, the twenty-four elders are mentioned first, because they represent the most important creatures in the universe: man (Genesis 1:26; Hebrews 2:8). The tasks of the twenty-four elders are to enhance God’s glory in his work of creation (4:11) and in his work of salvation within creation (Hebrews 1:14) and to bring the prayers of the saints (the Christians in the Militant Church) before God’s throne (5:8-10). They are depicted as worship leaders in heaven.

They were *permanently* dressed (*Greek: periballo*)(*perfect*) in white clothes (*Greek: himation*) and had golden (*Greek: chrusous*) victory wreaths (*Greek: stephanos*) on their heads. The elders as *representatives* of the Church are dressed in a way that symbolises how God has treated the people they represent (the Church). “The white dress” is a symbol of God’s people having been cleansed by the blood of Christ. They do not wear “crowns” of kings, but “wreaths of victory”. “The crown” or diadem was the sign of royalty among the Persians, a blue band trimmed with white on the tiara. “The wreath of victory” is a symbol of God’s people being certain of victory. The clothes and service of the elders show that they stand in a close relationship to God’s redeemed people.

Conclusion. The twenty-four elders are probably *heavenly beings* (cf. *Hebrews 1:14*) that *represent the Church* of the Old and the New Testaments directly before God’s throne in heaven throughout the history of the Bible. God gathers his Church throughout salvation history in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Church is lifted out above the creation and history and is directly represented in heaven with God. The twenty-four elders represent God’s Church, but worship God as the Creator, “who created all things by his will” and keeps them in existence (4:11).

The function of the twenty-four elders is to enhance the glory of God’s throne and his work as Creator (4:9-11) and Redeemer (5:9-10). The message of the twenty-four elders is that the whole Church (the result of God’s history of redemption and salvation) worships God as the God of creation and nature.

(2) Different views about the twenty-four elders (4:4)

A futurist view. The twenty-four elders *figuratively represent* redeemed mankind, all the saints from both the Old Testament period and the New Testament period.

The correct explanation. The twenty-four elders are not a symbol of the Church itself, but are heavenly beings that represent the Church of the Old and the New Testaments in heaven.⁴

THE LIGHTNING AND THUNDER

(1) Explanation of the symbols.

4:5 From the throne came (*Greek: ekporeuomai*)(*present*) flashes of lightning (*Greek: astrape*), rumblings (literally: voices)(*Greek: phone*) and peals of thunder (*Greek: bronte*).

These signs in nature occurred in the following situations in the history of the Bible:

- During the revelation of God's Law (the Ten Commandments) (Exodus 19:16; 20:18)
- During the revelation of God's grace through events in nature (Job 37:2-7,13b)
- During the revelation of God's judgements in world history (8:5; 11:19; 16:18; cf. Job 37:8-13a; Isaiah 29:6).
- During the revelation of God's reign in the universe (Revelation 4:5a).

His reign is a reign of grace (cf. 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 6:1-2; John 1:14,16-17) and a reign of judgement (cf. 2:5,16; 3:3; chapter 8-9). These signs in nature drive terror and awe into people. They are expressions of God's greatness, power and majesty when he reveals his will. Here they occur during the revelation of God's reign in the universe. Whenever God *reveals his* grace or judgements it is accompanied by awesome phenomena in nature! These phenomena announce that great things are about to happen in world history.

(2) The message of the lightning, rumblings and thunder⁵

The first sign of the coming things in God's history of salvation are:

- the lightning and thunder (4:5a)
- the sevenfold Holy Spirit coming into action (4:5b)
- the four living creatures
- and the twenty-four elders (4:6b-11).

Things in God's universe could no longer continue as they did, because the contrast between the serene rest of heaven and the restless struggle on earth was too great. The unravelling of history must follow; the events in history must come to their final goal, namely, the goal that God has planned for history (cf. Ephesians 1:10)! The events in God's history of salvation must begin to move and the great events in "the ends of the ages" must begin. Like the lightning and thunder have their origin in heaven but take place on earth, likewise the events on earth also have their beginning (i.e. planned destination) in the heaven at God's throne! God is on the throne and everything that happens is under his sovereign control and for the good of those who have put their trust in him (Romans 8:28)!

The message of the flashes of lightning, the rumblings and the thunder is that a unique historical event was about to take place – namely: the first coming of Christ (chapter 5)!

THE SEVEN LAMPS OF FIRE

(1) Explanation of the symbols.

Before the throne seven lamps (*Greek: lampas*) of fire were *continually* burning (*Greek: kaio*)(*present*). These are (*present*) the seven spirits of God. John saw seven lamps of fire burning before God's throne (4:5). God's heavenly palace is represented as the Old Testament tabernacle or temple (7:15). The tabernacle and temple had three divisions: the Holy of Holies, the Holy Place and the Court. The seat of the ark in the Holy of Holies behind the curtain pointed to the fact that God is exalted and unapproachable for ordinary people. The seven-armed candlestick in the Holy Place pointed to the fact that the Holy Spirit is spreading the light of salvation everywhere. And the altar of burnt offering in the Court pointed to the fact that without the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ no-one could approach God. The order of these three divisions of the tabernacle and temple is reflected in the order of the Trinity in Revelation 1:4 and in Revelation 4:2,5 and 5:6 – God, the Spirit and Jesus Christ. The Old Testament tabernacle or temple was only an earthly shadow of the heavenly reality (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). The One Divine Being revealed himself to people in three Modes-of-being or Modes of existence (cf. Revelation 1:4-5). He revealed himself as God the Father who made the eternal decisions. He revealed himself as God the Son who besides his divine nature took on the human nature and entered into his own creation and human history and carried out God's eternal decisions with respect to revelation, salvation, judgement and recreation. And he revealed himself as God the Spirit who lives in Christians and applies Gods eternal decisions by means of the Christian Church in individual lives. This One Divine being sits on the throne in heaven!

⁴ W. Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 1960, pp. 104-105;
S. Greijdanus, *De Openbaring des Heren aan Johannes*, 1965, p. 94;
E.P. Groenewald, *Die Openbaring van Johannes*, 1986, p. 76

⁵ cf. J.H. Bavinck, *En voort wentelen de eeuwen*, 1952, pp. 125-127

In the Old Testament earthly tabernacle (temple) stood one lampstand with three branches extended from its side to the left and to the right (Exodus 25:31-32). These seven lights had to be kept burning day and night (Exodus 27:20-21). This was a symbol of the Holy Spirit during the Old Testament.

In the New Testament heavenly temple are seven burning lamps before God's throne. This represents "the seven spirits" in the heavenly sanctuary (4:5b). It is a symbol of the fullness and divine perfection of the one Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works in the seven congregations on earth and is a symbol that the eternal God lives in his Church on earth through the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:22; cf. John 14:16-18).

(2) The message of the seven lamps of fire

This is an example where a symbol is clearly identified (cf. 1:20) – the symbol "lamps" represent spirits. It shows that the book of Revelation should not be explained literally, but symbolically. The number "seven" is also a symbol and represents divine completion and perfection. In chapter 1 to 3 the seven historical congregations (churches) represent all the congregations on the whole earth and in history!

In chapter 4 the seven spirits represent the divine fullness of the Holy Spirit that functions on the basis of the completed salvation work of Christ.

The message of the seven burning lamps is that the divine fullness of the Holy Spirit radiates his functions, gifts and fruit to all congregations and Christians in the world. Even as the sun, the seven lamps radiate light and warmth. The Holy Spirit is full of "consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29) against the ungodly and wicked, but a regenerating and sanctifying power ("a washing of rebirth and renewal") for all believers (Titus 3:5).

THE SEA OF GLASS

(1) Explanation of the symbols.

4:6 Also before the throne there (was) what looked like a sea (*Greek: thalassa*) (made) of glass (*Greek: hualinos*), like (homoiōs) (clear as) crystal (*Greek: krustallos*).

The "sea" has three possible meanings in the Bible.

- The sea symbolises the nations.

In the Old Testament, *the sea* represents the unruly nations on earth that are controlled by demonic powers (13:1; 17:15; cf. Psalm 89:7-10; Psalm 93:2-4; Psalm 144:6-7; Isaiah 8:7; Isaiah 17:12-14; Daniel 7:17,23; Zechariah 10:11). These unruly nations make the earth an unsafe place and threaten to destroy God's sanctuary (God's people) on earth.

It is possible to say that in Revelation 4:6a the sea in heaven is as smooth and quiet as glass, representing the Christians from all the nations on earth that are living in perfect peace and harmony with God in heaven (of course after atonement had been made for their sins).

- The sea of glass clear as crystal (4:6) symbolises God's salvation.

In the Old Testament *the brazen sea* was a basin of water that stood between the altar of burnt offering and the temple in which the Old Testament priests washed their hands and feet before they approached the altar or before they entered the temple (Exodus 30:18-21; 1 Kings 7:23-26).

In the New Testament the sea of glass clear as crystal (4:6a) symbolises the blood of Christ in which Christians symbolically wash their clothes and make them white (7:14). It thus symbolises the just and transparent salvation of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by which people may approach him and enter his New Testament community (temple). The sea of glass has this meaning in Revelation 4:6a.

- The sea of glass mixed with fire (15:2) symbolises God's judgement.

"And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty, just and true are your ways, King of the nations (NIV: ages)'" (15:2-3).

In the Old Testament Moses stood with the Israelites besides the red Sea after God had drowned Pharaoh and his mighty army with their war chariots in the Red Sea (Exodus 13:21-22; Exodus 14:19,24-28). God had confused the Egyptian army and had swept them into the Sea. The water of the Sea fell on them as a tsunami. "Not one of them survived" (verse 28)!

In Revelation 15:2-3 we must think of the red Sea where Pharaoh and his soldiers drowned (Exodus 15:1b). "The sea of glass" symbolises God's final and decisive judgements (chapter 16) that will be completely just and transparent. "The fire" symbolises God's holy and righteous indignation by which he carries out his judgement over sins. The enemies of Christians (believers) perish in it. "The glass" symbolises that his holy and righteous wrath and punishment will be completely transparent. God sees through everything and everyone (Hebrews 4:13). After the last judgement nothing sinful and worthy of rejection will remain in God's sight (21:8,27).

After God had executed his final judgement over the godless and unrighteous people on the earth, his holiness and righteousness in the last judgement will remain completely untainted and everyone will see that his judgement is just,

unblemished. None of God's motives, words or deeds will be questionable or dubious! "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known" (Matthew 10:26)! Everyone will say, "Just and true are your ways ... your righteous acts have been revealed" (15:3-4)! The sea has this meaning in Revelation 15:2.

(2) The message of the sea of glass

The message of the sea of glass is that the reign of God leads to salvation for Christians from all nations, so that they may live in perfect rest, peace and harmony with God, first on the earth (Romans 5:1), then in heaven (John 14:3) and finally on the new earth (21:3).

THE FOUR LIVING CREATURES

(1) Explanation of the symbols.

In the centre (*Greek: meson*), encircling (*Greek: kuklos*) the throne, (were) four living creatures (*Greek: zoon*) and they were covered (to be full of) (*Greek: gemo*) (*present*) with eyes, in front (*Greek: emprosthen*) and in back (*Greek: opisthen*). John saw 4 living beings standing around the throne (4:6b-8a). Sometimes the Bible makes use of material derived from ancient cultures, but gives them a new meaning! The four living creatures (4:6b-8a) are probably associated with the known star constellation: the ox, the lion, the scorpion and the waterman. The eagle is used instead of the scorpion because it lies close to the waterman. Because these constellations mark the course the sun moves every year and point to the four seasons on earth, they received much attention in ancient history.

In the Old Testament (Ezekiel chapter 1) the four living creatures are angels of a high order, cherubim that carry and protect God's throne. They are related to "the wings of the wind" (Psalm 18:10) and "the four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth (preventing them from blowing)(7:1). But in Revelation chapter 4 there is no evidence that they are the same creatures as in Ezekiel. The symbols are related, but not the same.

In the New Testament the four living creatures are heavenly beings that *represent God's whole creation* before God's throne and that worship God who reigns over all history and especially the history of salvation. The whole creation is as it were the theatre of God's salvation history.

The word 'living creature' is different than the word "beast" in Revelation 11:7 and 13:1,11. The living creatures served God, but the beasts served Satan. The position of the living creatures is in the centre around the throne, as it were in the middle of the steps leading up to the throne on each side. The fact that they were covered with eyes is symbolic and means that they see everything that is happening in creation. Nothing is excluded.

4:7 The first (*Greek: proton*) living creature was like a lion (*Greek: leon*), the second (*Greek: deuteron*) was like an ox (*Greek: moschos*), the third (*Greek: triton*) had (*present*) a face (*Greek: prosopon*) like a man (*Greek: anthropos*), the fourth (*Greek: tetarton*) was like an eagle (*Greek: aetos*) flying (*Greek: petomai*) (*present*). The number "four" is the number of the earth and the world – the creation. The living creatures in Revelation (4:6-8) are described in a similar but not the same way as the living creatures in Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:5,6,10,18). Both are closely associated with God's throne, but they are nevertheless not the same. In some passages the living creatures are distinguished from the angels (5:11; 7:11) and thus they are not the seraphim of Isaiah 6:2 ff. or the cherubim of Ezekiel 10:20-21, but resemble them. Possibly, just as the twenty-four elders are symbolic heavenly beings that represent God's whole Church before God's throne, so the four living creatures are symbolic heavenly beings that represent God's whole creation with all its creatures before God's throne (4:8; 5:14). Both enhance the significance of God's throne in the centre of the universe!

The living creatures are not identified with four earthly beings, but are like or resemble earthly beings. "The lion" represents the wild animals on earth and courage. "The ox" represents the domestic animals on earth and strength. "The face of man" represents all mankind on earth and intelligence. And "the eagle" represents the birds on earth and speed or observance. Whoever is the most courageous, the strongest, the most intelligent (wisest) and the swiftest among God's heavenly beings are called to praise God continually.

In the Bible the whole animate (4:8; 5:8,14; 7:11; 19:4; Psalm 148 1-2,7a,9-14; Isaiah 43:7) and inanimate (Psalm 19:1-6; Psalm 148:3-6,7b-9; Isaiah 55:12; Romans 1:19-20) creation was created by Christ and for Christ (Colossians 1:16).

Thus, the four living creatures are heavenly beings that represent God's whole creation with all creatures before God's throne and that worship God who reigns over all history and especially the history of salvation.⁶ The four living creatures represent the stars, the winds, the seasons, the plants, the animals and man – in short, all of creation that forms the background of history with all its bloody wars and glorious discoveries (and God's salvation history in which God carries out his plan of salvation)! Thus, the four living creatures symbolise God's creation as the backdrop for God's history of salvation.

⁶ Bavinck, pp. 127-131, Greijdanus pp. 96-97

4:8 And the four living creatures, each of them (*Greek: hen kath hen auton*) had (*present*) in the midst (*Greek: ana*) six (*Greek: hex*) wings (*Greek: pterux*). “Wings” symbolise mobility and quick movement in every direction (Ezekiel 1:12,17). There is nowhere in creation they cannot fly (cf. Psalm 139:5-10).

encircling (*Greek: kuklothen*) and inside (*Greek: esothern*) they were covered with (*full of*)(*Greek: gemo*)(*present*) eyes. This is possibly a picture of the night sky with its innumerable shining stars, which here signifies that the living creatures (and thus the whole creation) observe everything (cf. Psalm 148:3). Nothing escapes their notice, even when they move about in the universe (cf. Psalm 139:1-4; Hebrews 4:13).

(2) The message of the four living creatures (4:6b-8)⁷

In the Old Testament (Ezekiel chapter 1) the four living creatures are angels of a high order, cherubim that carry and protect God’s throne. The cherubim around God’s throne praise the holiness of God and say that the whole earth is full of God’s glory (Isaiah 6:3).

In the New Testament (4:6b-8a) the four living creatures are heavenly beings that represent God’s creation in all its fullness directly before God’s throne throughout history. They represent *God’s creation*, but worship God as the *God of history*. God’s creation is the backdrop for God’s history of salvation. And the creation or nature is much more interested in the events of history than we might think.

- A star points the way to the Saviour born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:9)
- The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed (Romans 8:19)!
- Not only the uncountable number of angels in heaven, but the mountains and trees in creation (Isaiah 55:12) and every creature on earth (5:11-14) joins in and gives equal praise to God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb who was slain (cf. John 5:23)!

The whole creation worships the God who reigns over all history and especially the history of salvation within creation. The living creatures look at God and worship God who sits on the throne while he is realising (carrying out) his history of salvation in the past, present and future!

The message of the four living creatures is that the whole creation worships God as the God who controls history and the history of salvation and judgement. God “who was, and is, and is to come” was before creation and before the beginning of history. Now he controls creation and history, and he will bring everything in creation and history to the goal he purposed for it! He will bring creation and history to a meaningful end!

(3) Different views about the four living creatures (4:6b-8a)

First view. The four living creatures are *a high order of angels* guarding and enhancing **God’s holiness**⁸. In other passages the living creatures in heaven are distinguished from all the creatures on earth (5:13-14) and thus they are to be identified with the cherubim of Ezekiel 1 and 10:20, or the seraphim of Isaiah 6:1-4. They are one of the highest orders of angels guarding the holy things of God (Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:20). They stand ready to serve God in any of the four directions of the compass, that is, in any part of the universe. They have courage, strength, intelligence and swiftness, which in the Bible are ascribed to *angels* (Psalm 103:20-21; Hebrews 1:14; Daniel 9:21; Luke 12:8; Luke 15:10). They speak and sing and serve. Like the twenty-four elders, they enhance the significance of God’s throne in the centre of the universe! Their task is to promote God’s glory in his reign on earth and especially in his work of salvation and judgement.

Second view. The four living creatures are *angel-like beings* that represent the totality of God’s creation⁹. They are very important created beings and represent whatever is the noblest, strongest, wisest and swiftest in animate nature. Their task is to lead the praising of God (4:8; 5:8,14; 7:11; 19:4) and to execute God’s will, also in judgement (6:1-7; 15:7).

Third view. (The best explanation) See the explanation of the symbols above. The four living creatures are *heavenly beings that represent God’s whole creation before God’s throne* and that worship God who reigns over all history and especially the history of salvation¹⁰.

PART 4. Revelation 4:8b-11. WORSHIP IN HEAVEN.

THE WORSHIP OF THE FOUR LIVING CREATURES

Day and night they had (*present*) no pause (*Greek: anapausis*) saying (*present*): The whole creation stands in service of God, is ready to do his will and praise his glorious reality. They praise God’s glory, day and night. In earthly terms “day and night” means continually or forever. God’s unending worthiness must be praised and worshipped by all beings and by all creation!

The worship of the God of the Bible is not a religious event for an hour a week or even through religious ceremonies a couple of times a day. It is a never-ending attitude of awe, adoration, submission and dedication to God, which is expressed in different kinds of prayer and in daily life and life-style.

⁷ cf. Bavinck, En voort wentelen de eeuwen, pp. 127-131

⁸ Hendriksen pp. 105-108

⁹ Groenewald p. 78

¹⁰ Bavinck, pp. 127-131, Greijden pp. 96-97

Holy (*Greek: hagios*), holy, holy (is) the Lord God Almighty (*Greek: pantokrator*)(Isa 6:3). Because the whole creation was created before the creation of man, the four living creatures take the lead in praising God on his throne. They proclaim with awe his majesty, greatness, holiness. The word “holy” has two important aspects: it means “separation” from what is wrong and worldly and “dedication” to what is right and heavenly. The God of the Bible is opposed to all sin and evil. He burns in holy and righteous anger against every form of sin and is determined to punish sin and root out all evil. But the God of the Bible is at the same time perfectly dedicated to his love and mercy and his holiness and righteousness. His heart yearns to bestow his mercy and love on everyone that repents and turns to him (Exodus 34:6-7; cf. Matthew 11:28-30). Three times means in superlative degree, the highest degree: God’s holiness has its origin in eternity, is carried through the ages, and points to the coming judgement and eternity.

who was (*imperfect*), and is (*present*), and is to come (*present*). God existed from all eternity (John 1:1) and is the Creator of everything. God is real in the present and is the Ruler of everything in the present. God has come to us in creation through Christ, is coming to us continually through Christ’s Spirit and will come to us in Christ’s second coming. The four living creatures proclaim without stopping not only the existence and reality of God, but also that he is coming and that we should expect his coming!

The four living creatures are heavenly beings that represent God’s creation in all its fullness directly before God’s throne throughout the history. They represent God’s creation, but worship Gods reign in history and in salvation history. God has created everything and everyone and has set history into motion. God now controls everyone and everything in creation and in history, And God will bring everyone and everything in creation and history to the goal he purposed for it! He will bring everyone and everything in creation and history to a meaningful end!

THE WORSHIP OF THE TWENTY FOUR ELDERS

4:9 Whenever (*Greek: hotan*) the living creatures give (*future*) glory, honour and thanks (*Greek: eucharistia*) to him who sits (*present*) on the throne, who lives (*Greek: zao*)(*present*) for ever and ever. God has always been sitting on the throne in the universe (including the earth) and he is forever the Living One. The words: “to give glory” means to adore God’s reality, presence and attributes. The words: “to give honour” means to feel awe and a deep reverence for God. The words: “to give thanks” means to gratefully appreciate that God is the Origin, Source and Destiny of everyone and everything (Romans 11:36).

4:10 the twenty-four elders fall down (*Greek: pipto*)(*future*) before him who sits (*present*) on the throne, and worship (*Greek: proskuneo*)(*future*) him who lives (*present*) for ever and ever and threw (*Greek: ballo*)(*future*) their victory wreaths before the throne: God’s glory is praised then by one group, then by another group: they sing alternatively or in response to one another. The representatives of the creation and the representatives of the Church take turns to glorify, honour, thank and worship God in his greatness and glory!

The picture of the elders falling down in prostration in the sight of God on the throne, casting their wreaths of victory before him symbolises that the entire host of the redeemed acknowledge that they owe everything to God – their existence, salvation and ultimate victory are only by God’s grace!

From Revelation 1:4-5 and 5:9-14 it is clear that they worship the Triune God. As in Revelation 1:4-5, Revelation 4:3,5 and 5:6 the description of the Triune God is in terms of the tabernacle or temple symbolism: the Most Holy Place, the Holy Place and the Court.

4:11 saying (*present*): You are (*present*) worthy (*Greek: axios*), our Lord (*Greek: kurios*) and God, to receive (*aorist*) glory and honour and power (*Greek: dunamis*). That is what the emperor Domitian demanded when he entered a city triumphantly. The people had to shout, “You are worthy. Caesar is dominus et deus” (You are worthy. Caesar is lord and god!) But Christ reveals in the book of Revelation that the emperors, kings and governors of this present world (represented by “the beast out of the sea”) are all the time trying to usurp God’s throne and its glory. The whole creation and the Church give glory to no other (Isaiah 42:8) and call out that only the God of the Bibl is worthy to receive glory, honour and power and that he only is “Lord” and “God” (1 Corinthians 12:3)!

“Glory” is the radiation of God’s majestic attributes; the glory which results when the splendour of God’s attributes (sovereignty, righteousness, love, grace, etc.) is revealed (made present) and recognised. “Honour” is the acknowledgement of his greatness and power with awe and reverence. “Thanksgiving” is the grateful appreciation of his goodness and gracious mercy towards all the works of his hands. “Power” is God’s inner ability. He alone is truly almighty, the Source of all abilities outside himself as is shown in creation and salvation history.

for you *once for all* created (*Greek: ktizo*)(*aorist*) all things, and by your will (*Greek: thelema*) they *continually* have their being (*Greek: eimi*)(*imperfect*) and were created (*Greek: ktizo*)(*aorist*). This reveals that everything in creation, their origin in God’s eternal plan, their coming into being through creation and their destination in history, are founded on God’s will! What still has to come into being in creation and must still happen in history are already a reality in God’s mind! They will come into existence in creation and will happen in history as part of God’s decision or permission! This is another way of saying, “The God of the Bibl sits on the throne and he reigns. He has the whole wide world in his hands!”

While the four living creatures that represent creation look at God's history of salvation that results in the Church (4:8; cf. Romans 8:19), the twenty-four elders that represent the Church look at God's creation as the reality within which God realises his plan within the history of salvation (4:11). They worship God as the One who willed everything (including the Church) he created (4:11).

The Church throughout the history of salvation responds to the praises of creation, praising God that he realises his purpose, plan and will within creation and one day will bring it to perfect completion! Through its representatives the Church is as if lifted out above creation because her God is the Almighty Ruler of the whole creation. When the Church is brought to final completion she will no longer feel the struggle and misery of the present earth. But in anticipation of her final perfection she feels her priceless calling to worshipfully dedicate everything she received from God to God. She falls down to worship God and casts her victory wreaths before God's throne.