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God's Program Of World Redemption

The difficulty of identifying the 24 elders in Rev 4-19 has been felt by every serious exegete. In 1977 Walvoord noted, “This is an issue that most scholars agree cannot be finally determined.”¹ At that time Walvoord reduced the problem to the textual issue of Rev 5:9. He said that if the Majority Text and Textus Receptus are correct in maintaining “us” (*h`ma/j; hemas*) then the 24 elders are without question representative of the Church for they have been redeemed. However, if the Critical Text is correct in leaving out “us” then the question remains open as to whether the 24 elders are *angels* or *redeemed men*.

Further, if it could be shown that the 24 elders do represent the Church then the rapture would have to occur before the day of the Lord described in Rev 6-19 because they remain in heaven throughout the entire day of the Lord (cf 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4).

So do the 24 elders refer to men or angels? First, there is the textual issue that has to be resolved. What is the textual issue? There are two texts with four different readings in all. The two texts that we usually discuss are called the Critical Text and the Majority Text. The bottom line is that the Critical Text does not contain the pronoun “us” in verse 9 but the Majority text does. This causes division because if “us” was original it would disagree with the pronoun “they” used in verse 10. Who are “us” and “they.”

Therefore, the Critical Text leaves out “us” and translates everything as “they”,

¹ John F. Walvoord, *Posttribulationsism Today: Part XI: The Rapture in Relation to Endtime Events* (Bibliotheca Sacra 134:535, July 1977), 210.

And they sing a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the scroll and to break the seals; because You were slain and You redeemed for God by Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And you have made them kings and priests to our God and they shall reign upon the earth. (Author's translation)

What the Critical Text then says is that the four living creatures and the 24 elders make up a choir of 28 angels who "sing a new song" about the redemption of humans by the blood of the Lamb. They sing about "them," not themselves.

However, the Majority Text includes "us" causing an apparent discrepancy between "us" and "them,"

And they sing a new song saying "Worthy are You to take the scroll and to break the seals; because You were slain and You redeemed us to God by Your blood from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And you have made them kings and priests to our God and they shall reign upon the earth. (Author's translation)

What the Majority Text is saying is that you have two groups involved in the 28 member chorale. Some are not personally redeemed and some of them are. This reading would indicate that some of the 28 are angels and some are men. So what does the manuscript evidence indicate?

Manuscript evidence for the exclusion of *hemas* is very weak. It is omitted only in the Ethiopic version and Codex Alexandrinus, claimed by some to be the most reliable uncial in Revelation.² Yet this is highly doubtful, Sinaiticus being a strong manuscript of the Apocalypse. Seiss said,

Some critics and expositors have rejected this h`ma/j [hēmas] (us), for the reason that it is omitted in the Codex Alexandrinus, and in the Ethiopic version; though the latter is not much more than a loose paraphrase. The Codex Sinaiticus, however, which was discovered in 1860, and which is of equal antiquity and authority with the Codex Alexandrinus, contains it. The

² Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 410.

Codex Basilianus, in the Vatican, contains it. The Latin, Coptic or Memphitic, and Armenian, which are of great value, contain it. And so do *all other manuscripts and versions*. And to discredit it simply and only because it does not appear in that one single Codex of Alexandria, is most unreasonable and unjust to the weight of authority for its retention.³

To my knowledge this reading still rests solely on Codex Alexandrinus and the “loose” Ethiopic version. If we are going to build an argument on the basis of the Critical Text these arguments will indeed “hang by a thread”.

Interestingly, the Committee for the NA27 3rd edition assigned their reading a {C} rating meaning there was a “considerable degree of doubt” but in the NA27 4th edition that rating jumps to an {A} meaning “virtual certainty”. Yet, to my surprise, there was not one shred of extra MS evidence in the 4th edition apparatus to justify such a leap in certainty. Might we doubt the objectivity of the canons of textual criticism? Even if we were to apply these canons the harder reading would insist that “us” be included not excluded. We might conclude this textual omission by saying, “It rests upon such weak MS evidence...that it is not worthy of serious consideration.”⁴

Since this is the case we will proceed on the conclusion that “us” is original and try to explain the shift to “they” as one of a distinction in the 28 between angels who are not redeemed (us) and men who are (they). It is my proposal that the four living creatures are angels that represent nature and sing on behalf of nature and the 24 elders are men that represent redeemed humanity and sing on their behalf. But who are the 24 redeemed men? Are they representatives of redeemed OT Israel? Are they representative of the redeemed NT Church? Or a combination of OT Israel and the NT Church?

Here is where things can get difficult and they show you how difficult the Book of Revelation is. For example, we could argue that we find the number 24 used of the priestly house of Aaron which was divided into 24 orders. Then we could conclude that the 24 elders being representative of OT Israel. However, most bible students believe that Israel will not be resurrected and rewarded until after the day of the Lord. How then could they be representing Israel before it? On the other hand if the Church has already been resurrected then they could be the 24. But the number 24 has no

³ Joseph Seiss, *The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, 108.

⁴ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 411.

relationship to the Church but to Israel. Or perhaps we could consider that the New Jerusalem has 12 gates on which are the names of the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 foundation stones on which are the names of the 12 apostles of the Church. From this we might conclude that the 24 are a combination of 12 representatives of OT Israel and 12 representatives of the NT Church? If this be an everlasting memorial to the 24 elders then 12 are redeemed human representatives of Israel and 12 are redeemed human representatives of the Church. As early as Victorinus, recognition was made that the 24 elders were “duodecim Apostoli, duodecim Patriarchae”⁵ (12 Apostles, 12 Patriarchs). Darby⁶ also saw and advanced this interpretation as did Thiessen.⁷ But then we still have the bothersome problem of OT Israel saints not being resurrected until later? Can these problems be resolved? And can a final designation of the 24 elders be established?

Proposal

The question of the strange grammatical shift from “us” to “they” and the Church’s presence or absence in Rev 5 really boils down to what is going on in Rev 4-5. Why would we have four angels representing creation and 24 humans representing all redeemed humans? What is John’s purpose in Rev 4-5?

Context

By way of context let’s read Rev 4-5 and then we’ll make some observations. ¹After 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.” ²Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. ³And 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. ⁴Around 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. ⁵Out from the

⁵ Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1977), 69.

⁶ John Nelson Darby, *Collected Writings of Prophecy: Vol 11*, p. 22.

⁷ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation: Part 3* (Bibliotheca Sacra 92:367 (Jul 35)).

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; ⁶and 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. ⁷The 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.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." ⁹And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the 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, 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." ¹I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals. ²And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?" ³And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the book or to look into it. ⁴Then I *began* to weep greatly because no one was found worthy to open the book or to look into it; ⁵and one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals." ⁶And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. ⁷And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. ⁸When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. ¹⁰"You have made them *to be* a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth." ¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, ¹²saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is

the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.”¹³ And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, *be* blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.”¹⁴ And the four living creatures kept saying, “Amen.” And the elders fell down and worshiped.”

In Rev 4 we are introduced to 24 elders and 4 living creatures. The 4 living creatures initiate worship and the 24 elders respond to their worship with their own. The chapter ends with the 24 elders worshipping the Father for His creation of “all things,” a grand and cosmic reminder of God’s worthiness to be worshipped. Chapter 5 begins with the universal search for someone worthy to open the seven sealed scroll which rests upon the palm of the Father’s right hand. After no one is found who is worthy John begins to “weep loudly” because he understands that the scroll contains information of cosmic significance. Finally, one of the 24 elders reveals to John that the Lamb, the root of David, the Lion of the tribe of Judah has overcome so that He is able to open the scroll and reveal its contents. This discovery results in a new song of worship for Christ’s redemption. So, the context is concerned with “creation”, “the scroll”, and “redemption.” We want to look at the scroll, since it is central to linking together the themes of creation and redemption. Somehow, whatever secret information is held in the scroll is vitally linked to creation and redemption. When this is understood we will have a grand picture of God’s purpose for the future day of the Lord.

The Seven Sealed Scroll

Many authors agree that the background of the scroll is found in God’s program of land redemption for Israel in the Old Testament.⁸ God’s program of land redemption consisted of five major points. First, God owned the land not Israel (Lev 25:32). Second, tenant possession of the land was given to Israel. Third, no Israelite was allowed to sell the land because it was not his to sell (Lev 25:23). However, if he mismanaged the property he could sell

⁸ James Kelly, *The Apocalypse Interpreted in the Light of "The Day of the Lord"* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1849), Vol I. Alfred Jenour, *Rationale Apocalypticum* (London: Thomas Hatchard, 1852), Vol I. Joseph Seiss, *The Apocalypse*. Gottfried Fitzer, "sphragis", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol VII. Renald Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come!* Henry Morris, *The Revelation Record*.

tenant possession of the land. To make sure the sale of the tenant possession was not permanent God established the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:28). Every 50th year (Lev 25:8-10) the land would be returned to the original tenant or his heir (Lev 25:10, 13, 28; 27:24). Fourth, in Numbers 36:9 God expressly forbade transferring one's inheritance from one tribe to another tribe. Fifth, if an Israelite had to sell his tenant possession because of poverty he could redeem the land at any time before the year of Jubilee if he had means to do so. In the meantime, his nearest kinsman had the right and duty to redeem the land for him before the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:25-26). The redemption price was the prospective rent due for the number of years left until the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:27). The kinsman-redeemer would then have the right to administer the land until the year of Jubilee when it would be returned to the original tenant or his heir. When the redemption price was paid two copies of the deed of purchase were made to protect the right of tenant possession to that piece of land. These were legal documents, typically scrolls that had the terms of the contract written on both sides (as in Rev 5:1). Both were signed by the purchaser and a witness. A sealed copy was especially important if the purchaser did not take immediate possession of the land due to circumstances which removed him for many years to another location far from the land. When this happened, usurpers would often come in and use the land for their own purposes. When the kinsman-redeemer returned he would have to prove that the land was his and not theirs so the sealed scroll deed would have to be opened before he could take possession. If that scroll could not be found then he would lose access to the land. Once it was found and opened and proven to be his land then he had full rights to evict the usurpers, by force if necessary, to reclaim the land.

This program for land redemption for Israel is analogous to God's program for earth's redemption outlined in Rev 6-19. Rev 4-5 is a discussion of just such a scroll that is a title deed to the earth. The one who is able to open it is the Kinsman-Redeemer who paid the redemption price. So let's look at five analogues between these redemption programs. First, just as the land of Israel belonged to God so the whole earth and everything in it is His. Because God created it He is its owner and sovereign King. As Henry Morris wrote, "The earth is permanently God's possession by right of creation."⁹ Second, just as God gave His land to Israel as an inheritance forever and set

⁹ Henry Morris, *The Revelation Record* (San Diego, CA: Creation-Life Publishers, 1983), 96.

them as tenants over it so He gave His earth to Adam and his offspring to possess as an everlasting inheritance (Gen 1:26-28). God was the landlord; mankind was the tenant. Third, just as the Israelites were forbidden to lose their tenant possession inheritance forever to foreigners, so mankind was forbidden to forfeit forever his tenant possession of the earth to non-humans. Fourth, in the same way that an individual Israelite might mismanage his property and have to sell the tenant possession because of poverty, giving up the enjoyment of his inheritance, so mankind mismanaged God's earth by rebelling against Him and forfeited his tenant possession to Satan, a non-human, a fallen angel (Gen 3:1-7). This is why Satan is called "the god of this age" (2 Cor 4:4), the "prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and "the whole world lies under the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). Because man rebelled against God He cursed nature (Gen 3:17-19) to demonstrate what rebellion against Him is like. Because nature is cursed it groans awaiting the day of redemption when it will be released from this curse and all the defilement in it (Rom 8:19-23). Fifth, just as God established a land redemption program for Israelites so they would not lose permanent possession of their inheritance, God also established a world redemption program for mankind so that man's forfeiture of the earth to Satan would not be permanent. Just as the Israelites kinsman had to be a relative from the same tribe so the Redeemer of mankind had to be a kinsman from mankind. Whoever the Kinsman-Redeemer is He must be a man, He cannot be an angel. We know the program involved Him paying a redemption price on the cross (Rom 3:24-26; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; 1 Pt 1:18-19; Rev 5:9). However, He did not take possession of the earth at that time but He ascended and is now seated in a land far, far away at the right hand of the Father. During this time Satan and his minions have usurped Christ's earth and continued to spoil it. In the meantime a scroll is sitting in the Father's hand awaiting the time when Christ will take it out of His hand, break the seals, expose that He has paid the redemption price in full and carries out a program of forced eviction of Satan and his followers through the seal, trumpet and bowl judgments.

In light of the many parallels between these two programs (land redemption and world redemption) it seems obvious that the sealed scroll is a deed of purchase for mankind's tenant possession of the earth in fulfillment of man's original purpose, to rule and have dominion over the earth. The first Adam failed, the Second Adam succeeded.

Therefore, we can conclude by saying that when Christ died on the cross He purchased the earth. A title deed to the earth was drawn up and sealed with seven seals to protect the irrefutable evidence. It was stored safely in the palm of the Father's right hand. Then Christ ascended to heaven and sat down at the Father's right hand. In the meantime Satan and his forces have acted as usurpers reigning upon the earth. In Rev 4-5 Jesus Christ is standing up off the Father's throne and preparing to open the seven sealed scroll and reclaim what is rightfully His, the whole earth. In the process He will be serving an eviction notice to all who are allied with Satan in their quest to usurp total domination of the world. The 21 telescopic judgments of Revelation are His forced eviction plan that results in His final reclamation of the world and establishment of His kingdom.

This background to our passage provides the framework in which we can properly identify the 24 creatures who sing of God's worthiness of worship because of creation and the 28 singing a song of worship for the Lamb's "redemption" of man and nature in the kingdom. I think it also explains the grammatical shift from us to they in Rev 5:9-10. For the most part, attempts to identify the 28 beings have ignored this greater purpose of God in Rev 4-5.

The Four Living Creatures

Traditionally, expositors have rightly identified these four living creatures as angels, not humans. They are living creatures (*zoon*), a word that is often used of domestic or wild beasts. But here they are not animals but angelic beings depicted as animals. For example, the first creature was like a lion. The lion is known as "the king of the jungle" and generally represents that which is most noble among animate creation. The second creature was like an ox. The ox is known for its great strength in the animate creation. The third creature had a face like that of a man. Man is the most intelligent and wise of the animate creation. The fourth creature was like a flying eagle. The eagle is the swiftest in animate creation. "Together, then, the four living beings picture all animal life from the perspectives of greatest nobility, strength, wisdom, and speed."¹⁰ Newell says, "God's designation of them gives only the number four and the fact that they are (as their four generic forms reveal) the

¹⁰ Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 360.

very embodiment of created life.”¹¹ Thus, the four living creatures are angelic beings that represent all of nature.

As a conclusion then, it is safe to say that these four angelic beings are involved in singing the song of redemption *on behalf of* nature that cannot sing for itself (Rom 8:20-22; Rev 5:9-10).

The 24 Elders

If the church is represented at all in Rev 5 then they could only be represented by the 24 elders. The title “elders” suggests they represent redeemed men since angels are never referred to as elders. But representatives of men of OT Israel and the NT Church are referred to as “elders” 207 times.¹² In light of the greater context of Revelation involving the New Jerusalem with 12 gates harboring the names of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 foundation stones harboring the names of the 12 apostles of the Church it seems obvious that the 24 elders are redeemed humans that represent Israel and the Church.

Finally, how can 12 of them represent Israel if Israel is not resurrected until later when Christ returns on the day of the Second Coming? How can you have resurrected, seated Israeli saints, victorious and sitting on thrones? Turn to Matt 27:52. This is a debated passage. If you look in verse 51 what are we talking about? The crucifixion of Christ was attended by these physical phenomena, “And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. 52”The tombs were opened,” when is all this physical phenomena taking place? Verse 50, when Jesus died on the cross, when He gave up His spirit, His human spirit and breathed his last then these physical phenomena occurred, then it says in verse 52,”and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy

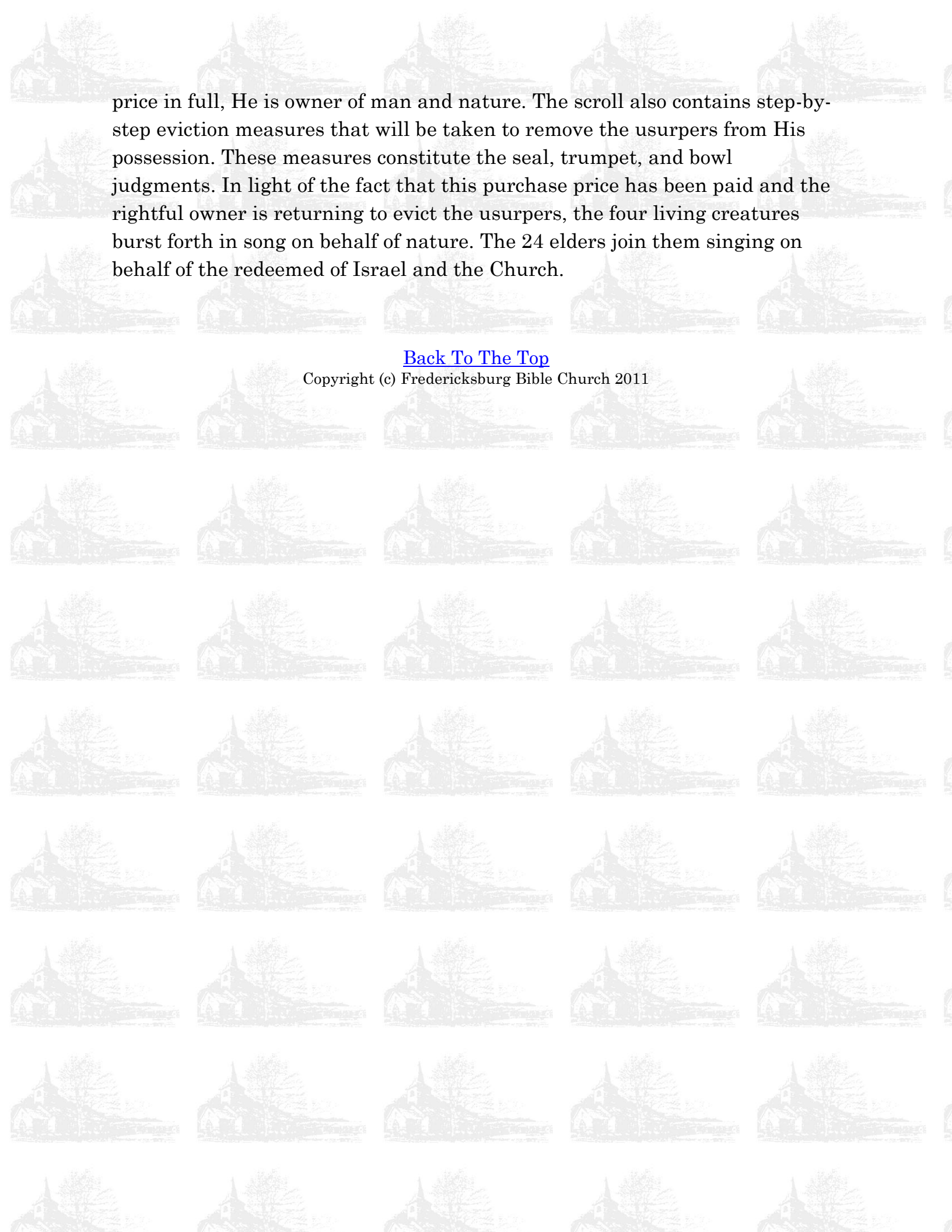
¹¹ William, R. Newell, *The Book of the Revelation* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1935), 89.

¹² The 24 elders are mentioned 12 times in the Bible, all of which are in the Book of Revelation (4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). Five times they are referred to as the “24 elders”, five times they are referred to as a group of “elders”, and twice one of the “elders” comes forth from the others. It is implied that all 12 uses of the word “elders” in Rev 4-19 refer to the same group of 24 elders and not to a second group of elders. The “24 elders” are described in chapter 4 as beings “clothed in white garments” and wearing “golden crowns on their heads” (4:4). Their location is in the heavenly throne room of God (4:2). They are in close proximity to the Lamb’s throne seated on 24 thrones (4:4; 11:16). They also have a close association with the “four living creatures” yet are distinct from them (4:6, 9-10; 5:6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11; 14:3; 19:4). Their functions are “to fall down” before the One sitting on the throne (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4), “to worship” the One sitting on the throne (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4), to inform John the Apostle during his visions (5:5; 7:13ff), and to sing a momentous “new song” (5:9).

city and appeared to many.” *egeiro*, that’s resurrection, many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, that’s Jewish saints bodies being raised from the dead. You can try to argue this was a resuscitation, that they came back in the same body they died in and they would die later again, but the problem if you say that is that in verse 53 it speaks of Christ’s *egeiro*, Christ’s resurrection and the same word is used. Bodies of Jewish saints were *egeiro* and the body of Christ was *egeiro*, there’s no distinction of terminology and the author could have distinguished if he wanted to, there are other words he could have used to signal a distinction. But he didn’t do that. Plus, what is Matthew very careful to do in verse 53? Note the timing. “after His resurrection. If this was just a resuscitation it wouldn’t matter if it was before or after, resuscitations had happened several times; Lazarus, the son of the widow of Zarephath, if this was resuscitation why make sure and say this occurred “after” Christ’s resurrection. It seems he’s making sure we know that Christ was raised first, He’s the firstborn from the dead, and after that there was this token of Jewish saints that were raised. And what we think Matthew is doing is going back to the Jewish Feast day of First fruits. The feast of first fruits was when you would have the first fruits of your harvest and you would take a sample down to the priest and he would wave it at the Temple and this was a thanksgiving to God because the first fruits meant that the full harvest was to follow. So what is going on with these resurrections is that these are a first fruits of Jewish saints resurrected, a guarantee that the full harvest of resurrected Jewish saints is to follow. So this is a token to the fact that later the resurrection of Jewish saints would occur. But here we do have a subset of the future harvest already resurrected and they are fully fit to sit on 12 of those thrones and represent OT Israel before the full harvest of resurrected Jews takes place. So, I think that’s the explanation for how you can get 12 OT Israel saints on 12 of the thrones.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if the 24 are representative then the four are also representative. The four living creatures represent nature and the 24 elders represent the redeemed men of Israel and the Church. The previous context is “creation” (4:11), the following context is “redemption” (5:9-10). The “seven sealed scroll” sits in the midst of these themes and relates to both “creation” and “redemption”. The scroll is a title deed drawn up when Christ died on the cross that proves that Christ, who created all things, has paid the redemption



price in full, He is owner of man and nature. The scroll also contains step-by-step eviction measures that will be taken to remove the usurpers from His possession. These measures constitute the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments. In light of the fact that this purchase price has been paid and the rightful owner is returning to evict the usurpers, the four living creatures burst forth in song on behalf of nature. The 24 elders join them singing on behalf of the redeemed of Israel and the Church.

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