
Heaven's Throne

Revelation 4:1-10

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Grandeur, awe, heart stopping beauty, frightening power, deep thrumming, heart melting...

We know little of the heart lifting and soul singing greatness of a King's throne room. And frankly, neither did most of the ordinary believers to whom this was written. This is why the descriptions here will be filled with Scriptural allusions and bright shifting images. It is to convey an other-worldly, spiritual yet piercingly existing reality.

The focus here is on the throne and iridescent glory of the Father.

We will face the first interpretative challenge that permeates the book: what do we do with these numbers?

Not a mathematical puzzle for only extremely sophisticated interpreters. The book was meant to be understood by the ordinary person. Our interpretation should not involve complicated and arbitrary multiplication and addition of sequences of numbers.

Usually have some correspondence to Old Testament texts and numbers. We must not impose a western use of numbers into the Bible's language and culture. Numbers are usually meant to point to something generally and rarely count something specifically. Yet, when the value of numbers is important when it is used in reference to time.

Some numbers have typical significance that would be obvious to any reader:

The number 40 is closely associated with testing and judgment.

The number 7 is closely associated with creation and completion. So you have the earthly cycles representing and culminating in completion in the seventh age.

The number 12 is closely associated with God's people. So you have 12 tribes, 12 apostles all comprising the 24 elders

What Jesus and the apostles taught about the order of future things is brought to the book of Revelation; we do not get it from the book of Revelation. We already at this point, have an understanding of what is going to happen *that we map over the book of Revelation*. This is fundamental to the way that I will handle this book. We do not try to make our understanding of those earlier texts fit in with some framework we have derived from Revelation. I will illustrate this in just a moment.

So, we will wrestle with these interpretative problems as we work through the book.

The Source

Daniel 7; Ezekiel 1

This text is deeply rooted in two Old Testament texts.

The Imagery

Ezekiel 1:4-28 (NLT)

⁴ As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. ⁵ And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, ⁶ but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. ⁷ Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. ⁸ Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: ⁹ their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. ¹⁰ As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. ¹¹ Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. ¹² And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. ¹³ As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. ¹⁴ And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

¹⁵ Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. ¹⁶ As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl. And the four had the same likeness, their appearance and construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel. ¹⁷ When they went, they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went. ¹⁸ And their rims were tall and awesome, and the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. ¹⁹ And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. ²⁰ Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. ²¹ When those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; and when those rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

²² Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads. ²³ And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. ²⁴ And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. ²⁵ And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

²⁶ And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. ²⁷ And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the

appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. ²⁸ Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

The Structure

Daniel 7:8-14 (ESV)

⁸ I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.

⁹ “As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. ¹⁰ A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

¹¹ “I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.

¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

¹³ “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Taking Revelation 4-5 together comparing them to Daniel 7, D.A. Carson and G.K. Beale have given us striking resemblances.⁵

1. Introductory vision phraseology (Dan. 7:9 [cf. 7:2, 6-7]; Rev. 4:1)
2. The setting of a throne(s) in heaven (Dan. 7:9a; Rev. 4:2a [cf. 4:4a])
3. God sitting on a throne (Dan. 7:9b; Rev. 4:2b)
4. The description of God’s appearance on the throne (Dan. 7:9c; Rev. 4:3a)
5. Fire before the throne (Dan. 7:9d-10a; Rev. 4:5)
6. Heavenly servants surrounding the throne (Dan. 7:10b; Rev. 4:4b, 6b-10; 5:8, 11, 14)
7. Book(s) before the throne (Dan. 7:10c; Rev. 5:1-7)
8. The “opening” of the book(s) (Dan. 7:10d; Rev. 5:2-5, 9)
9. A divine (messianic) figure approaches God’s throne in order to receive authority to reign forever over a “kingdom” (Dan. 7:13-14a; Rev. 5:5b-7, 9a, 12-13)
10. This “kingdom” includes “all peoples, nations, and tongues” (Dan. 7:14a MT; Rev. 5:9b)
11. The seer’s emotional distress on account of the vision (Dan. 7:15; Rev. 5:4)
12. The seer’s reception of heavenly counsel concerning the vision from one among the heavenly throne servants (Dan. 7:16; Rev. 5:5a)

13. The saints are also given divine authority to reign over a kingdom (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27a; Rev. 5:10)
14. A concluding mention of God's eternal reign (Dan. 7:27b; Rev. 5:13-14)

Both visions also contain the image of a sea (Dan. 7:2-3; Rev. 4:6). From the comparison it can be seen that Rev. 4-5 repeats the same fourteen elements from Dan. 7:9-28 in the same basic order, but with small variations that result from the expansion of images.

From the seven churches on earth we now move to heaven's throne.

The Scene

(v. 1-8)

Now I have started in a bit of a technical way - now I want to move away from that as much as possible. As we work through this:

Relish the beautiful imagery, don't try to delineate it. A butterfly is beautiful and breathtaking creature fluttering through the sunlight air. But lying in pieces on a dissection block? Yes, it is still a butterfly; yes, you have all the scientific knowledge and pieces but where the sunlit glinting off the stained glass fluttering of heaven dappled wings?

Remember our core motif: we live in the age in which the future is intruded into the present through the resurrection of Christ and the regeneration of believers. The new creation began with Christ and is expanding as hearts are conquered by the risen King. So, we will feel this in the book right up until the very end. So the "when" question is answered by "then, present in the now."

Its Arena

(v. 1-2a)

We are in the midst of a vision - John has seen Christ in resurrected glory and has received the dictation of these seven letters. He has just been told that Jesus has conquered and is seated on His Father's throne with the promise that we will too. Now you are not to think of this as a dream - it is a vision. Often prophets and apostles see their visions as something "out there" that they can interact with - so think, a giant screen.

¹ After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne

We will find John often saying, "After this..." or something like it. This is "what happened or what I saw next" not "this is the next prophetic event." After listening and writing, he looks and sees. And wow, there is an open door in heaven. So a loud voice commands him to come up here. This tells us then that John now is taken to and can see into the heaven of heavens where the throne of God is and where Jesus is in his glorified body. He is "in the Spirit". This can only mean that he is now in the unseen, but real realm that is not the flesh yet is part of this created order. He is now, as Paul referred to in Ephesians 1, "in the heavenlies."

Some say this is meant to portray the rapture. That is not possible. Daniel, Matthew, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Peter and Jude all place the catching up, the rapture, of the saints after the middle of Daniel's 70th week, just before Jesus returns and pours out His wrath in the Day of the Lord. So, this scene is not "the rapture". It is the transition for John from seeing what is going on the earth to seeing what is going on the heavenlies.

Its Appearance

(v. 2b-6a)

Let's look at what John sees as he describes it for us.

² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³ And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, ⁶ and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

We are to behold, to look AT THE THRONE. Unlike Paul's going into the heavenlies where he could not say what he saw, John is called and we are invited to gaze on the glory.

There is the One who is seated ON THE THRONE. In luminous glory full of sovereign splendor sits in light unapproachable the one and only God of the Universe.

Twenty-four lesser thrones or chairs are set up AROUND THE THRONE. What a solemn scene of majestic aspect - twenty-four thrones ring the central throne all facing the Sovereign.

FROM THE THRONE come bright slashes of lightening and rumblings of thunder. Like the rumbling power of a dam's generators, the dynamo of heaven's throne thunders and flashes.

BEFORE THE THRONE lays a sea of glass. It is as though the heaven's throne were an island of sovereign supremacy surrounded by an azure sea. On the ring of sea the twenty-seats draw a circumference of worship.

Its Attendants

(v. 6b-8a)

What a sight these mighty beings attending the throne.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within...

What a majestic sight. On each side of the throne stand a majestic being. These are similar to but yet described differently the attendants who were carrying the throne in Ezekiel 1. Those attendants carried the portable throne of God from place to place. Here these are now standing at sentinel attention beside the throne at rest in its glorious heavenly home. These are the six-winged seraphim of Isaiah 6.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Each of these beings has a different face yet they are the same faces as throne-bearers of Ezekiel. Everywhere we see the throne of God, it is like this. The camp of Israel in the desert was organized around the tabernacle. On each of the four sides three tribes were assigned to march and to camp. The standard of each of the center tribe of the three was to be facing outward. What was on the standard of each of those 4 tribes? A lion, a calf, a man and eagle. From the massive camp of Israel, from the portable throne in Babylon, to the great throne in heaven, the place of God’s rule is surrounded by His people and His attendants showing these 4 mighty banners: a lion, a calf, a man and an eagle.

Its Announcement

(v. 8b)

⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

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

This confirms that these are seraphim. They announce to those who come into God’s presence the holiness and eternalness of God. Here are those attributes that are unique to His being God, His incommunicable attributes. God is an eternal “present” - He was, is and is to come yet always and ever the “I am”. Here are those attributes of God that He gives to His creatures, His communicable attributes. He is holy. Because He is holy, we should be holy. His holiness He grants by grace to His people.

He is trinity. Here is an implication that the thrice holy God is not merely a multiplied holiness, but rather is three persons each of whom are fully God and each One *holy*.

What an amazing, awesome and awful scene. A great throne, the brightness of glory, a courtyard of azure glass, mighty six-winged, four faced creatures chanting the communicable and incommunicable attributes of the thrice holy Trinity. What ever your mind imagines is assuredly less than what this reality truly is.

The Song**(v. 9-11)**

Over the low thrumming power emanating from the throne accompanied the flashes of light and the rolling chant of the seraphim rings, a song.

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

¹¹ “Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”

Its Participants**(v. 9)**

The 24 elders are the ones who are saying this. The complete assembled of enthroned leaders of God’s people raise their voices to ring out this praise. The baton that conducts is the regular beat of the seraphic voice. This is a call and response. This is antiphonal. Make no mistake – heaven’s throne room is a place of spine tingling, body rocking, loud praise. You cannot imagine this as hushed whispers. Glorified ears are unharmed by loud worship that tunes our hearts to praise.

Its Posture**(v. 10)**

Their posture is one of humble adoration. The elders fall on their faces in worship. They are prostrate before the King. John’s readers would recognize the common expression of submission to a king. Sitting on thrones in the presence of the Divine Majesty is neither the place nor the posture of worship. Lowliness and humbleness are fitting even for those given to rule and reign with Christ.

Its Proclamation**(v. 11)**

¹¹ “Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”

Here are the categories of God-exalting worship focused on God, the Trinity.

His Praise - We worship God as One who is worthy. We sing to exult in Him.

His Primacy - We worship God as One to whom we submit and who owns us. We sing to submit to Him.

His Prestige - We worship God in ascribing to Him all He is due. We sing to exalt Him over all.

His Preeminence - We worship God as the source and sustainer of our being and existence. We sing to the creator of all

His Providence - We worship God as the One who determines all that comes into existence and comes to pass. We sing of His good and great will.

Reflect and Respond

This is the theme of the book. On earth there may be sin, chaos, judgment and dreadful events. But in heaven, there sits a sovereign potentate admired and acclaimed by His people who is moving in majesty to carry out His purposes and plans.

Does your view of God resonate with a text like this? Does your heart both agree and soar with spiritual imagery filling a submissive imagination?

Genuine worship humbles the worshipper in the presence of an awesome and holy God.

These are the kind of scenes that will lift sagging souls under persecution and pain, in trials and troubles.

May heaven's praise fill the church's people.

⁵ Beale, G. K. and D. A. Carson. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007.p.1098.