

REVELATION

Chapter 4

The Throne in Heaven

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. 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. 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, 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!” 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.”

4:1–5:14 These two chapters constitute an introduction to chs. 6–20. In the throne room of heaven, the Lamb assumes the responsibility of initiating the great final conflict with the forces of evil, the end of which will see the Lamb triumphant and the devil consigned to the lake of fire. (CSB)

The Inaugural Vision of Heaven (4:1-5:14) - Excursus

Chapters 4 and 5 together present a vision of God’s heavenly glory. God on his throne is surrounded by his court, the heavenly host of saints and angels. While the focus of the heavenly majesty and glory is on God the Father, the purpose of the vision is to demonstrate the enthronement and exaltation of Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain. (CC pp. 107-109)

Indeed, there is no break between chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 4 John’s attention is focused on the throne and the holy presence on it, that is, the heavenly glory of Yahweh, the almighty Creator. Around the throne are the hosts of heaven: the saints, represented by the twenty-four elders; the four winged creatures; and countless angels. While John’s eyes are fixed on the throne and the heavenly court, he hears with his ears the opening refrain and first stanza of the *Te Deum* (4:8, 11) which voices the praises of God the Creator. God is worthy of such adulation from his creatures, for because of him they exist and were created. *And while John is still looking at this wondrous scene of God’s heavenly glory and while his ears are being filled with the beautiful words of the Te Deum* (which continues in 5:9–10, 12–14), *he also witnesses the elevation and the enthronement of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.* One sees the fullness of God’s glory only

when one sees also the enthroned Lamb who was slain. One praises God's glory rightly only when one also acclaims the enthronement of the crucified and risen Son of God. (CC pp. 107-109)

Visions of God's Glory

The Bible contains four extended descriptive visions of God's enthroned heavenly glory: Ezek 1:4–28 (cf. 8:1–3; 9:3; 10:1–22); Is 6:1–8; Dan 7:9–10, 13–14; and Rev 4:1–5:14. At various other times, an individual sees God's glory in heaven, but no extended description is given (1 Ki 22:19–23; Acts 7:55–56). There are also many references to God's enthroned heavenly glory that lack a report or description of how it was *seen*. (CC pp. 107-109)

When these four biblical descriptions of God's heavenly glory are compared, there are both similarities and differences among the OT visions and Revelation. In the OT scenes the saints of God do not appear, though angels do. In Revelation's vision not only do the saints appear, but they are *prominently* represented by the twenty-four elders. Another major difference is that the Son of God is not mentioned in the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel. However, he does appear as the Son of Man in Daniel (7:13–14). In Revelation the Son of God appears as the Lamb of God, and he is worshiped equally with God the Father (5:6–14). (In Rev 2:18 the Son of Man identifies himself as the Son of God, the only time in Revelation that he is called "the Son of God.") (CC pp. 107-109)

Revelation's throne scene is explicitly Christological, while those of the OT center on God the Father. This is not surprising, since in the OT the Christ, the Son of Man, had not as yet come into his messianic glory, though in Daniel's vision it is prophetically displayed. But what is surprising is the absence of any mention of the saints in the OT visions. The angels are present (as also in Revelation's vision), but not the saints of God. Is this due to the fact that Christ had not yet accomplished in earthly history the redemption of God's people? While the OT saints certainly were present with God in his heavenly glory (see Zech 3:1–5; cf. Lk 9:30–31), they were there because Christ *would* die for them. But because Christ had not yet died for them (at the time of those OT visions; cf. Heb 11:39–40), God (evidently) did not yet put them on public display. At any rate, in Revelation God's saints are on public display as a part of his heavenly presence and glory. (CC pp. 107-109)

Thus the vision of God's heavenly glory and the exalted enthronement of Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain, in Revelation 4 and 5 introduces and ushers in the prophetic message; the prophecy begins with chapter 6. The purpose of this inaugural vision of God's heavenly court is to show to the church the coronation and enthronement of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, as her Lord. Since his ascension to the right hand of God, the victorious Lamb of God, in his exalted status as the Son of Man, rules everything on behalf of his church and for the sake of her mission on earth. Not only does this vision of God's glory and the reign of the crucified and exalted Christ introduce the prophetic message of Revelation, it also dominates it and shows the direction and conclusion of it. (CC pp. 107-109)

The second scene of John's vision gives a glimpse into the heavenly realities. The scene includes the ascension/coronation of Christ at the right hand of the heavenly Father. It shows that the overall purpose of Revelation is to comfort the Church as it faces persecution and awaits Christ's return. It is the heart of the revelation. (TLSB)

Translation between scenes and visions often, though not necessarily, refer to sights or openings in heaven, from which the visions appear (cf. 8:1-2; 12:1; 15:1; 19:11; 20:1). (TLSB)

4:1 *after this* – The opening words of 4:1, the formula μετὰ ταῦτα (“after these things”), introduce a new section and a new vision. The phrase “these things” refers to the first vision, in which John was commissioned by the exalted Christ to write the revelation (1:9–20). It also includes the first three chapters. After John had seen the exalted Christ and had received his commission and the seven letters to the churches, John then experienced the vision—the sight—of the opened door of heaven through which he saw God’s heavenly glory. (CC p. 113)

door was standing open – In the case of the church at Philadelphia it meant opportunity for Christian service. Here it is used to envision a solid-like firmament separating the earth from the heavens. It represents the idea that John was given the special grace of looking into heaven, which is ordinarily closed and forbidden to the human eye, to view the heavenly glory of God. The opened door thus signifies a particular divine revelation. (CC pp. 110-111)

John not only saw through the door into heaven, he probably entered heaven through it, for the trumpet-like voice summoned him to “Come up here” (4:1). John was called to leave his place on earth to view the throne scene of God’s glory. The *trumpet-like* voice, which John recognizes as the “first voice which I heard” (4:1), identifies the voice of the exalted Son of Man, for he spoke with such a voice in the commissioning vision (1:10). *The exalted Christ is thus the mediator of the vision of God’s heavenly glory, and he will be such until 8:1, when angels will take over the mediation.* The second μετὰ ταῦτα (“after these things,” at the conclusion of 4:1) emphasizes that the purpose of the exalted Christ’s mediation is not only to warn and encourage his church by the seven letters, but to reveal to his saints on earth “what things are necessary to come about quickly” (1:1; cf. 1:19). (CC p. 113)

Symbolizes John’s being granted access into God’s heavenly throne room. Along with the expression “in the Spirit” (v. 2), this makes clear that John is experiencing a divinely given vision. On the false interpretation that refers to a “rapture.” (TLSB)

in heaven – Transitions between scenes and visions often, though not necessarily, refer to sights or openings in heaven, from which the visions appear (cf 8:1–2; 12:1; 15:1; 19:11; 20:1; see note, Mt 3:16). (TLSB)

voice...like a trumpet – With a loud sound, like the blast of a trumpet, the Lord gives John a signal to look and listen. (Stoeckhardt p. 18)

The exalted Christ, first heard in Revelation 1:10, speaks again. (TLSB)

Come up here.† Similarly, Moses was called up on Mount Sinai to receive divine direction (Ex 19:20, 24). Cf. also the heavenly ascent of the two witnesses (11:12). Some interpreters find the rapture of the church in this verse. John, however, is not describing an event in the distant future, but what happened on a particular Sunday in the first century on the island of Patmos. “After this” (v. 1) refers to the dictation of the seven letters. (CSB)

what must take place after this. See 1:1, 19; Da 2:28–29, 45. (CSB)

4:2 *in the Spirit.* In a state of heightened spiritual awareness. (CSB)

The Holy Spirit’s work is to reveal God’s Word (cf. John 14:26; 16:12-13; 2 Peter 1:21). (TLSB)

John could not by his own strength obey the call of Christ to come up to the door of heaven and stand at its entrance and/or to enter it. Immediately he was ἐν πνεύματι (“in the Spirit,” 4:2). This seems to have a different sense than ἐν πνεύματι in 1:10, which suggests that John was worshiping “in the Spirit”—a holy experience in which all Christians participate by means of God’s Word and Sacraments (E.g., Rom. 8:14-17, 26-27; 1 Cor. 6:19; 12:1-3; 13:2; 2 Cor. 4:13; Eph. 2:18). Here in 4:2 ἐν πνεύματι bears a sense of some kind of a mystical sensation by which the person experiences something above and beyond the ordinary capability and understanding of human reality. Possibly John experienced what Paul testifies to in 2 Cor 12:1–4. There the apostle declares that he was “snatched up” (ἠρπάγη, the aorist passive of ἀρπάζω) into paradise and heard things that were not proper for a human being to repeat. Paul could not tell whether he was in the body or out of it when he had that revelatory experience (cf. ἀποκαλύψεις, “revelations,” 2 Cor 12:1). The prophet Ezekiel seems to have had a similar experience (Ezek 8:1–3; see also 11:1). Ezekiel states that the Spirit lifted him up so that he was between earth and heaven and was taken from Babylon to Jerusalem in order to see visions of God. However all this may have been, it certainly is different from the way in which all Christians are ἐν πνεύματι (“in the Spirit”) by virtue of their Baptism and the indwelling of the Spirit (Acts 2:38; Rom 8:9, 11; 1 Cor 12:3). Perhaps like Paul, John could not tell whether he was in the body or out of it. Nevertheless, by the Spirit and in the Spirit, he was lifted up so that he could receive the visions of God which he was to share with the church (cf. Rev 21:10). (CC pp. 113-114)

throne in heaven. The depiction of God ruling from his throne in heaven is a regular feature of the OT (e.g., Ps 47:8). (CSB)

John first sees the throne of God and the One sitting on it. He is God, the God of Israel, enthroned; he is the object of worship and he is addressed as κύριος (the LXX’s translation of יהוה, “Yahweh”), God Almighty (4:8). In his description of God, John gives no facial or bodily characteristics. (CC p. 114)

The throne is not a physical piece of furniture, etc. Rather God here condescends to the forms and terms of this present world in order to convey to us, as far as possible, some idea of the realities of heaven, which, in their full glory and splendor, are inconceivable to us now. (Poellot p. 74)

4:3 jasper ... carnelian ... emerald. Since God dwells in “unapproachable light” and is one “whom no one has seen or can see” (1Ti 6:16), he is described in terms of the reflected brilliance of precious stones—an emerald rainbow around the throne (cf. Eze 1:26–28). (CSB)

Precious gems highlight the splendor of the divine presence. Just as the breastplate of the OT high priest was similarly adorned (Ex. 28:17-20; 39:10-14). (TLSB)

These gems were the best available images in the first century to describe tremendous beauty and value. (Joy in our Weakness – Marva Dawn)

Rather, he says that the majestic person on the throne was in appearance like the precious stones of jasper and sardius. Though the identification of these precious stones with modern equivalents is somewhat uncertain, the impression which they connote and reflect is unmistakable: even as light flashes through and from them with beauty and brilliance, so do the majesty and glory of God flash forth from the appearance of the One seated on the throne. John does not mean to say

that God in his glory looked like the essence of these stones. Rather, the appearance of God’s glory reflects the brilliance of God’s presence and person in the same way that precious stones reflect the rays of the sun. One cannot look directly at the sun, but one can, by way of the reflection of its rays through precious stones, catch a glimpse of the beauty of the sun’s light. (Otherwise, unreflected, the sun would appear only in its brilliant, blinding brightness.) (CC p. 114)

So John describes the glory of God’s presence as it is seen reflected in his appearance like the appearance of these precious stones. Isaiah in his vision of Yahweh sitting on his heavenly throne gives no description. But he does say that Yahweh’s robes (יְשׁוּבֵי, Is 6:1) filled the temple. The LXX translates יְשׁוּבֵי as τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ (“his glory”). The throne in Ezekiel was like sapphire (רֹפֶיֶת; LXX: σάπφειρος; Ezek 1:26), and the One sitting on the throne was like the visible form or outward appearance of a man (רִמְוִית כְּמַרְאֵה אָדָם; LXX: ὁμοίωμα ὡς εἶδος ἀνθρώπου). From his waist upward the One on the throne looked like glowing metal, in appearance like fire. In addition Ezekiel says that a brilliant light (הַגִּיָּה; LXX: φέγγος; Ezek 1:27) surrounded him, which looked like a rainbow (רַקְעָה הַקְּלָיִם; LXX: ὡς ὄρασις τόξου; Ezek 1:28). (CC p. 114)

The three precious stones—jasper, sardius, and emerald—were also part of the breastplate of Israel’s high priest (Ex 28:15–21). There were twelve stones in all, representing the twelve sons of Israel. Wearing these stones, the high priest represented Israel before God as he offered sacrifice for atonement (Ex 28:29; 1Chr 6:49). Thus like the rainbow, the references to these stones suggest God’s mercy toward his people. In the ancient world, especially among the Greeks but among others also, jasper and sardius and the emerald were especially prized. (CC p. 116)

A jasper, a dark-red transparent stone, carnelian, also of a dark-red brilliancy. The dark-red color should remind us of his wrath. The emerald, which is of a rich green color, which is the symbol of hope. That brilliancy of green pictures God’s loving kindness and gives hope to sinners. (Stoekhardt pp 18-19)

a rainbow – ἶρις—In classical Greek ἶρις was a common word for the rainbow (e.g., Homer, Iliad 17:547). Literally the word means “a circle of light, a fiery-like ring.” It was used to refer to a “halo,” and for the “iris” of the human eye. The ancient Greeks called the rainbow an ἶρις because they imagined that the rainbow encircled the entire earth. Though only half of the ἶρις could be seen, they still called the rainbow a “circle.” The visible part of the rainbow was called the τόξον (“bow”). The LXX uses τόξον for the rainbow in Gen 9:13–16 and Ezek 1:28, translating רַקְעָה (“bow,” either the weapon or the rainbow). Because the ἶρις here in Rev 4:3 *encircles* the throne it is understood to be a complete circle, a halo or a rainbow-like halo. (CC p. 111)

John also mentions that a rainbow-like halo (ἶρις, Rev 4:3b) surrounded the throne. However, the rainbow-like halo in 4:3 looked like an emerald, green in color. In Ezek 1:27–28 the brilliant light (הַגִּיָּה) like a rainbow (רַקְעָה) was fiery. Despite the differences in wording (Ezek 1:28: רַקְעָה; LXX: τόξον; Rev 4:3: ἶρις) and in appearance, it seems that the bright rainbow in Ezekiel and the rainbow-like halo in Revelation fulfill the same function, that of a token of God’s heavenly glory and majesty. The only other place in the Bible besides Rev 10:1 where a rainbow is mentioned is in Gen 9:13–16, where it functions as the sign given to Noah that God would not again destroy the world with a flood. The rainbow was also a visible sign or proof that God would bless the earth so that it would never cease to sustain life with its bounty and fruits (Gen 8:20–22; 9:12–17). Thus the rainbow is a visible guarantee to the human race that as long as the earth endures it

will never again be destroyed by a flood of water, and that the earth will yield its bounty for the physical sustenance of humanity and all life. (CC pp. 114-116)

Yet the rainbow was more than a sign of God's promise of the physical well-being of the earth and human life. It was also a sign of God's salvation by grace for humankind. In Is 54:8–9 the promise and covenant made to Noah reminded the prophet of God's *saving mercy*. Though God in his anger destroyed the human race with a flood, Isaiah is reminded of God's oath that he would never again destroy the world with water. Though God was angry at Israel (his wife) and had hid his face from her for a time, he would again have compassion on her. God's *covenant to Noah* became then for Isaiah an assurance that God's *saving mercy* would now cover Israel's sins and that God's mercy would never cease, because Yahweh was Israel's Redeemer (אֱמַרְתִּי אֶל־יְהוָה וְיָצַדְתִּי; LXX: εἶπεν ὁ ῥυσάμενός σε κύριος; Is 54:8). Thus the rainbow promised to Noah was a sign (πῖς; LXX: σημεῖον; Gen 9:12, 13, 17) of God's covenant with his entire creation. In particular it became a sign that reminded God's people of his mercy, which covered their sins. (CC pp. 114-116)

In Jewish theology the rainbow was a reflection of God's glory and was holy and sacred. Whenever the rainbow appeared, God's people should be moved to praise him as their Creator (Sirach 43:11–12). Since the rainbow was a reflection and a reminder of God's creative glory, one should not attempt to look upon it, just as one would also not attempt to look at the glory and face of God.¹² Rather, one should fall down upon one's face as did Ezekiel when the glory of God, together with its rainbow, appeared (Ezek 1:28). If one did attempt to look at the rainbow, one could be blinded. And in rabbinic theology, the rainbow was thought to have been created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight. The rainbow, then, also reminded God's people of the everlasting rest and peace to which the Sabbath pointed. (CC pp. 114-116)

Because the rainbow-like halo surrounds the throne of God's heavenly glory, it certainly is a part of that glory as it reflects the majesty of God's position as the Supreme Being. He is the Creator of all that exists (Rev 4:11), and as such is to be worshiped by all creation. But with this majesty of God as reflected by the rainbow, John is reminded by the same rainbow of God's mercy toward his creation. *It is thus God's majestic mercy that the rainbow-like halo signifies.* God is the almighty Creator, but his almighty creative power is controlled and motivated by his love and mercy toward his creation.

(CC pp. 114-116)

The rainbow is the symbol of peace. The surrounding radiance of the bow represents the benignant grace of God. (Stoeckhardt p. 19)

4:4 *twenty-four elders.*† Some believe they are representative of either the whole company of believers in heaven or an exalted angelic order worshiping and serving God there (see vv. 9–11; 5:5–14; 7:11–17; 11:16–18; 14:3; 19:4). The number 24 is best understood to reflect the 12 Israelite tribes of the OT and the 12 apostles of the NT. (CSB)

Representatives of the 12 tribes of Israel plus the 12 apostles of Jesus. Together, they represent all God's people from both OT and NT times. (TLSB)

The twenty-four elders on twenty-four thrones were positioned around the throne of God. There is no consensus by commentators as to the identification of these elders. Some take them to be an

“exalted angelic order.” Others identify them with the saints of God now glorified, that is, the twenty-four elders are not angels, but human saints who represent all of God’s people before his heavenly presence. Oecumenius (sixth century), in his Greek commentary, ventures to name the twenty-four. He begins with Abel, and after a string of well known patriarchs and prophets he names Zechariah, who could be the last OT martyr, as Jesus says in Mt 23:35, or the father of John the Baptist, since John is the next name. After John, Oecumenius adds James the son of Joseph (Jesus’ half-brother) and Stephen, who are “martyrs of the new testament.” Oecumenius says that the twenty-four do *not* include the apostles, because in Mt 19:28 Jesus promised that the apostles would sit on twelve thrones *in the future resurrection, not now*. Andreas (sixth century), in his Greek commentary, mentions the possibility (among other interpretations) that the twenty-four elders are the twelve patriarchs of the tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. The earliest extant commentary, the Latin commentary of Victorinus (third century), also interprets them as the twelve apostles and the twelve patriarchs. A number of other interpreters concur. The elders represent the saints of the OT and the NT before the heavenly throne of God. (CC pp. 116-120)

How the number twenty-four came about is not clear. However, it may have been derived from or patterned after the twenty-four priestly orders which were organized during the reign of David (1 Chr 24:7–19). The number twenty-four was also used earlier as the number of oxen that were sacrificed at the dedication of the tabernacle and its furnishings (Num 7:88). Sirach refers to more than twenty heroes of faith, including patriarchs, prophets, and kings. In Revelation the number twenty-four appears only in reference to these twenty-four elders or their thrones (Rev. 4:4 {twice}, 10; 5:8; 11:16; 19:4), and the number appears nowhere else in the NT. (CC pp. 116-120)

The word “elder” (πρεσβύτερος) is not used elsewhere in the LXX or NT for an angel, that is, a heavenly figure or spirit. Rather, it designates a human being on earth. What is unique about the use of the word in Revelation is that it refers to *personages in heaven*. (CC pp. 116-120)

The elders *dressed in white garments* are similar to the appearances of angels on earth, who sometimes are pictured as arrayed in white. However, the fact that they are *sitting on thrones* and *wearing crowns* indicates that these elders are *not* angels, but rather elevated saints of God. Nowhere in biblical or extracanonical literature do angels ever sit on thrones or wear crowns. Usually it is the Father, Jesus, or God’s saints who are pictured sitting on thrones and/or wearing crowns. In Rev 19:12 Jesus Christ, as the exalted Son of Man, coming at the End in judgment, wears a many-faceted crown (διαδήματα πολλά). Similarly in 14:14, at the harvest in the End, the exalted Son of Man wears a golden crown (στέφανος χρυσός). The crown that the Lord Christ wears signifies *victory*, and because of that victory the merited glory of godly *royalty*. Likewise God’s saints, when elevated, will wear crowns which signify the victory that the Lord Christ won for them and shares with them. Each Christian is promised the crown of life (2:10). In 12:1 the woman with Child wears a crown of twelve stars signifying that though she (that is, the church) suffers, she will be victorious because of the victory of the Christ Child. (CC pp. 116-120)

Both Christ and the saints of God sit on thrones. While the heavenly throne in Revelation usually refers to God the Father’s throne, there is one instance where the throne of God the Father is also spoken of as the throne of God the Son, “the Lamb” (22:3). In the new heaven and earth God the Father and the exalted Christ will share the same throne. Similarly in Mt 25:31, when the Lord Christ comes at the End, he will sit on his throne of glory. Also God’s saints will sit on thrones because of the enthronement of Christ. When the Son of Man will take his seat on his throne of glory, those who follow him will also sit on thrones (cf. Mt 19:28; Lk 22:30). (CC pp. 116-120)

Not only do angels wear white, also God’s elevated saints are pictured frequently in Revelation wearing white robes or garments. In the great scene of God’s saints in heaven in Rev 7:9–17, they

wear robes that have been made white by the blood of the Lamb (7:14). The wearing of white garments by God's people, both on earth and in glory, is a common theme throughout Revelation. These robes of Christ's "blood and righteousness" are the Christians' "glorious dress," reminiscent of the wedding garment in the parable in Mt 22:11–12 (cf. 1 Jn 1:7). The exalted Christ also wears or is enveloped in white. In the transfiguration Jesus appeared in white (Mt 17:2; Mk 9:3; Lk 9:29). In Revelation the Christ in glory has a head of white hair (1:14). He comes in judgment on a white cloud (14:14) and on a white horse (19:11), and in judgment he will sit on a white throne (20:11). (CC pp. 116-120)

If, then, the elders are elevated saints of God, why the number twenty-four? John would *not* have understood the significance of the presence of *twenty-four* elders *only* in relationship to the twelve tribes of Israel. Rather, he would have understood them to be representatives of the believing people of God from *both* OT Israel and NT saints. From this perspective, the number twenty-four is best explained as *the elders (patriarchs) of the twelve tribes of Israel, who represent before God's heavenly throne saints from the Israel of old, and the twelve apostles, who represent saints from the Israel of the NT period.* In the OT the number twelve was often used to represent Israel before God and Moses. Examples include the twelve spies, one from each tribe (Num 13:1–16; Deut 1:23); the twelve stones in the high priest's breastplate (Ex 28:21; 39:14); the twelve cakes or loaves (Lev 24:5); and the twelve leaders, one from each tribe (Num 1:1–16; Josh 4:1–3). These instances of the number twelve are based on the actual twelve sons of Jacob, the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen 35:22–26). (CC pp. 116-120)

This use of the number twelve to represent Israel of the OT is carried over into the NT. Jesus tells the twelve apostles that in the new age they will sit on twelve thrones as judges of the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28). "The new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven" (Rev 3:12), has twelve gates with the twelve names of the sons of Israel written on them, and there are twelve foundation stones upon which the names of the twelve apostles are written (21:12–14). There the twelve representatives of the tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of Christ circumscribe the holy city as its gatekeepers and as its foundation. *These twenty-four elders thus pictorially represent the heavenly Jerusalem.* (CC pp. 116-120)

The twenty-four elders before God's heavenly throne in Revelation 4 are, therefore, the twelve elders of OT Israel and the twelve apostles of Christ. *Together* they represent before God's heavenly glory *the totality of God's people*, both of the OT (קְהִלַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל, "assembly of the congregation of Israel," Ex 12:6) and of the NT (ἐκκλησία θεοῦ ζῶντος, "church of the living God," 1 Tim 3:15). They sit on thrones because they reign with Christ (Rev 3:21; 20:6; 22:3–5). They wear crowns because in the victory of Christ they are victorious (1:5–6; 3:5, 21; 12:11). And they are dressed in white robes because the blood of Christ has cleansed them and made them righteous and holy (7:14). They are in the presence of God in his heavenly glory because that is where they, by grace, belong. They now reign with Christ as heirs of his eternal glory. As the exalted Christ's rightful place is with God the Father (22:3), so his bride (the church), as represented by the twenty-four elders, has her rightful place in God's holy presence. (CC pp. 116-120)

What is unique about the use of the word in Revelation is that it refers to personages in heaven. The fact that they are sitting on thrones and wearing crowns indicates that these elders are not angels, but rather elevated saints of God. – As blessed conquerors they sit upon thrones. And what is seen in these also applies to all the saints of God. (Stoekhardt p. 19) – Crowns of gold were symbols of victory and perhaps royalty.

4:5 *flashes of lightning ... rumblings and peals of thunder.* Symbolic of the awesome majesty and power of God (cf. the manifestation of God at Sinai, Ex 19:16–19; cf. also the conventional OT depiction of God’s coming in mighty power to deliver his people, Ps 18:12–15; 77:18). In Revelation, thunder and lightning always mark an important event connected with the heavenly temple (8:5; 11:19; 16:18). (CSB)

The “*lightning flashes and noises and thunders*” (4:5a) that come out of God’s throne are reminiscent of the thunder and lightning that accompanied God when he met Moses and the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai (Ex 19:16). These demonstrations of natural forces are symbolic of and a part of God’s majestic and creative power. Although he does not explicitly mention these natural forces, Isaiah became fearful when he was in the presence of God’s heavenly glory and the temple was shaken and filled with smoke (Is 6:4–5). Ezekiel saw lightning flashes in his vision of God’s heavenly glory (Ezek 1:13). Elsewhere in the OT God reveals his awesome creative power and majesty through the natural forces of his creation (Pss 18:12–15; 77:16–19 [MT 18:13–16; 77:17–20]). In Revelation these theophany-like indicators of God’s creative power and majesty appear at various places in the prophecy as a reminder of God’s awesome and fearful presence (8:5; 11:19; 16:18). (CC p. 120)

The great divine Majesty is ready to hold the Judgment. (Stoekhardt p. 19)

seven spirits.† Revelation’s description of the Holy Spirit. “Seven” symbolizes fullness, completeness or perfection. “Seven” probably also symbolizes the covenant. (CSB)

The presence of the Holy Spirit is signified in visible form by the “*seven lamps of fire*” (4:5b) which are burning before the throne of God. The seven lamps are identified with “the seven Spirits” first mentioned in the trinitarian imprimatur of 1:4–5. In the tabernacle of Moses, the lampstand with its seven lamps (Ex 25:31–40; Num 8:1–4) stood before the place where God was present (Num 7:89–8:2). In the vision of God’s heavenly presence here in Revelation 4, the lamps are present to remind John of the Spirit of Yahweh. In Zech 4:1–10 the lampstand with its seven lamps reminds the prophet that it is by the Spirit of Yahweh that God is active for his people, and the seven eyes illustrate the truth of God’s omnipresence by his Spirit. In Revelation the Spirit of God is symbolized by both the seven lamps (4:5) and the seven eyes (5:6). (CC pp. 120-121)

The seven lamps or torches, which are the seven spirits of God, symbolize warmth and God’s desire to communicate in love with man. (Stuenkel)

4:6 *sea of glass.* See 15:2. The source of the imagery may be Eze 1:22 (cf. Ex 24:10), but it is also possible that it is the basin in the heavenly temple (cf. 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5–6, 8; 16:1, 17), whose counterpart in the earthly temple was referred to as the Sea (1Ki 7:23–25; 2Ki 16:17; 2Ch 4:2, 4, 15, 19; Jer 27:19). Other features of the temple in heaven are: the lamps (v. 5), the altar (6:9), the altar of incense (8:3) and the ark of the covenant (11:19). (CSB)

Normally, the sea is a symbol of chaos and evil (cf. 13:1). Here however, the sea is portrayed as tame and beautiful, thus nonthreatening. (TLSB)

Before God’s throne there was “something like a glassy sea, like crystal” (4:6). Whatever else this may represent, “it suggests the vast distance which ... intervened between himself [John] and the Throne of God.” In Ex 24:9–10, when Moses and the elders of Israel went up Mt. Sinai and appeared before God, they saw under his feet something that looked like a firmament or pavement made of sapphire and clear as the sky. In the pseudepigrapha, a celestial sea is found in heaven. These waters above the firmament are referred to in 1 Enoch 54:8 as the masculine

waters in contrast to the seas on earth, which are the feminine waters. In the Book of Jubilees the firmament divided the waters into two equal parts (2:4). According to Jewish thought it was the waters above the firmament that joined the waters on earth to cause the flood of Noah (1 Enoch 54:7–10), which interpretation is based on Gen 7:11–12. Thus the waters could be interpreted to be a reminder of God’s judgment over his creation. (CC pp. 121-122)

The “glassy sea” in Rev 4:6 is, then, a reminder of the separation between God and his creation. In particular *it reminded John that while he and God’s people were still on earth, they were separated from that eternal glory which in faith they longed to inherit* (see Rom 8:23–25; 2Cor 5:1–10; 1 Pet 1:3–9). Since sin is the cause of this separation, the sea could be said to symbolize separation from God because of his judgment over against sin. In the OT the sea monster Leviathan inhabited the sea and caused it to churn into a boiling rage (Job 41:31–32 [MT 41:23–24]; cf. Ps 104:26), and nothing on earth was his equal; humanity was helpless before him (Job 41:8–10, 33–34 [MT 40:32–41:2, 25–26]). Rahab appears to be another name for this sea monster who inhabits the boiling rage of the sea (Ps 89:9–10 [MT 89:10–11]). Only God himself can conquer and control this sea monster (Pss 74:13–14; 89:10 [MT 89:11]; Is 51:9–10). In Is 27:1 Leviathan, the sea monster, is called the “serpent” which on a particular day, “that day” of judgment and deliverance, Yahweh will slay. (CC pp. 121-122)

The connection between this sea monster and the serpent leads one to identify it as the devil. In Rev 12:1–9 the dragon (δράκων) is identified with the ancient serpent, the one called “devil” and “Satan.” The sea in its boiling rage—as it is inhabited by this sea monster—is a symbol of the fury of human sin as it is stirred up by Satan. Neither the sea nor the monster who stirs it up can be controlled by sinful humanity. Only God can slay Leviathan. Only God can control and quiet the sea (Pss 65:7 [MT 65:8]; 89:9 [MT 89:10]; 107:29; Mt 8:26). So also only God can control and conquer the enemy and finally quiet the fury of human sin and its resulting ruin and destruction (Ps. 65:7 {MT 65:8}; Jn. 14:27; 16:33; Col. 1:20). (CC pp. 121-122)

But the glassy sea in Rev 4:6 was like crystal, that is, transparent and quiet, quite the opposite from the usual raging sea of chaos and evil in the OT. The sea that is before God’s heavenly throne has been tamed, conquered, and stilled. *Its crystal-like stillness reminded John that what had separated him from the glory of God’s presence, the turmoil of his sin and God’s judgment, is now stilled and quiet.* Though the sea reminds John of his separation from God, he is no longer afraid, for the sea is quiet; he knows that Christ has conquered Satan and taken away the raging torment of his (John’s) guilt and the fearsome wrath of God’s judgment (cf. Mt 8:26–27; 14:25–29). Now all is peaceful between himself and God, despite the fact that the sea reminds him he is not yet in that glory while still on earth. (CC pp. 121-122)

For here on earth the sea is still in its boiling rage as it is stirred up by the dragon. John himself is suffering, as are God’s people. In Rev 13:1 the dragon conjures up *from the sea* a beast that wars against the woman, the church. So fearful is this warfare between God’s people and the forces of evil that the battlefield is likened to “*a glassy sea mixed with fire*” (15:2). But in the End, when the dragon and his evil forces have been defeated and cast into “the lake of fire” (20:10), in the new heaven and earth there no longer will be the sea. For in the new heaven and earth, in the presence of God, the sea is not only quiet and at peace, it is forever gone (21:1). No longer will there be this reminder that God’s people were once separated from him. (CC pp. 121-122)

clear as crystal.† Symbolic of the peace which exists in God’s presence and also of the absence of pollution or blemish in his presence. (CSB)

4:6b-8a “In the midst of the throne and around the throne,” John sees “four winged creatures [זְּרָאִים]” (4:6). Though strange looking and awesome, these heavenly creatures are closer to God than any of the other angels and saints (elders), for they are “in the midst of the throne and around [it].” The designated location “in the midst” most likely means “in the immediate vicinity.” They thus form an immediate and inner circle around the throne of God. (CC pp. 122-127)

John does not identify these winged creatures as angels, nor does he call them cherubim or seraphim. He refers to them simply as “winged creatures.” But it is quite apparent they are similar to or identical with the winged creatures that both Isaiah (6:1–3) and Ezekiel (1:5–26; 10:3–22) saw in their visions of God’s heavenly glory. Isaiah calls them “seraphim” (Is 6:2) and Ezekiel “cherubim” (Ezek 10:3–5, 11, 15). In Isaiah they are above or before God and his throne (Is 6:2). In Ezekiel they seem to bear the throne of God (Ezek 1:22–26; 10:3–5, 18–19). According to Ezekiel, the cherubim move in whatever direction the Spirit wills to go (Ezek 1:15–21; 10:9–22). Evidently whenever and wherever God moves, the cherubim move; hence the wheels within wheels in the vision enable the throne to move straight in any direction (Ezek 1:15–21). While in Ezekiel’s vision the winged creatures move together with God and his throne, in the visions of both Isaiah and John, they seem to be positioned in one place, stationary with God’s throne and presence. (CC pp. 122-127)

In comparing the three visions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John, one notes similarities and dissimilarities in the appearances of the winged creatures. John mentions that each winged creature had one particular appearance or *face*, that of a lion, an ox, a man, or an eagle. Isaiah does not mention facial appearances. Ezekiel says that *each creature* had four faces, the face of a man, on the right side the face of a lion, on the left side the face of an ox, and then also each had the face of an eagle (רָשָׁף; LXX ἀετός [Ezek 1:10]). In the second appearance of the winged creatures to Ezekiel, in Ezek 10:14, each creature again had the four faces, but with one difference. The face of a cherub (כְּרֻב; LXX Vaticanus: χερούβ) has taken the place of that of the ox. Perhaps John saw only one face for each winged creature because they were stationary, while Ezekiel saw each with four faces because they were moving—hence also the wheels that each creature had (Ezek 1:19–24; 10:15–17), which John does not mention. (CC pp. 122-127)

In the three visions each creature has *wings*. In Isaiah (6:2) and Revelation the winged creatures have six wings each, but in Ezekiel each has four wings (Ezek 1:11; 10:21). Isaiah says that with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew (Is 6:2). Ezekiel says that with two wings they touched the wings of another creature, and with two they covered their bodies (Ezek 1:11). John does not mention the function of the wings. (CC pp. 122-127)

In John’s vision the winged creatures are *full of eyes*, both “in front and in back” (Rev 4:6b) and “around and within” their wings (4:8a). Isaiah does not mention eyes. Ezekiel in his first vision perceives that the wheels have eyes (Ezek 1:18), and in his second vision, he sees that the bodies and the wings of the creatures are full of eyes (Ezek 10:12). (CC pp. 122-127)

Both Isaiah and John hear the winged creatures *singing a hymn of praise*, a Te Deum. Ezekiel hears no hymn, but he does hear a loud rumbling-like sound or voice (לִרְעָרְעָה וְלִשְׁמֵרָה; LXX: φωνήν σεισμοῦ μεγάλου), which says, “Blessed is the glory of Yahweh from his place” (בְּרֵכָה הוֹדָה וְתְהִלָּה וְקִרְבָּן וְיִשְׁמֵרָה וְלִרְעָרְעָה; LXX: εὐλογημένη ἡ δόξα κυρίου ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτοῦ [Ezek 3:12–13]). Ezekiel hears this blessing in connection with the sound of the winged creatures. (CC pp. 122-127)

Who or what are these winged creatures? In Ex 25:17–22 Moses was commanded to fashion two cherubim out of hammered gold. One was placed at each end of the lid of the ark; they faced each other with their wings outstretched over the lid. God promised to meet with Moses between the

cherubim over the ark and speak with him (Ex 25:22; Num 7:89). Cherubim were also woven into curtains for the tabernacle and later the temple (Ex 26:1, 31; 2Chr 3:14). For the temple, Solomon had two cherubim made of olive wood and overlaid with gold, ten cubits in height. They were placed in the temple's Holy of Holies, and their wings overshadowed the ark, which was moved there when the temple was finished (1 Ki 6:23–28; 8:6–7; 2 Chr 3:10–13; 5:7–8). Solomon's temple also had cherubim carved on the walls of both the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, and also on the doors (1 Ki 6:29–35). Cherubim adorned the stands for the moveable bronze basins used in the courtyard of the temple (1Ki 7:27–29, 36). And cherubim were carved all around the eschatological temple Ezekiel saw in a vision (Ezek 41:17–20, 25). (CC pp. 122-127)

The cherubim in the Holy of Holies over the ark served as God's throne, the place of his majestic presence (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; Ps. 80:1 {MT 80:2}; 99:1; Is. 37:16). In addition, the cherubim David planned for Solomon to build for the temple, whose wings were "for spreading and covering the ark of the covenant of Yahweh," are said to be God's chariot (1Chr 28:18). Therefore Yahweh is said to ride upon the cherubim (Ps 18:10 [MT 18:11]; cf. Ezek 9:3). (CC pp. 122-127)

The other cherubim mentioned in the OT are those which God placed to the east of the Garden of Eden to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:24). With these cherubim was the flaming sword, flashing back and forth. (CC pp. 122-127)

The picture, then, that the OT presents is that wherever God's heavenly throne and majesty are revealed or described in detail, the cherubim always attend him. They either are the throne of his majestic presence, as in the Holy of Holies, or they attend his presence to serve and enhance that glorious presence and to sing his praises. (CC pp. 122-127)

In some passages of Jewish literature, winged creatures play an important role as they accompany God's majestic presence. *They are viewed as among the highest orders of angels.* For example, they are described as a part of God's governance as they and the "Elect One" (the Messiah) praise God, and they are referred to as the cherubim, seraphim, and ophanim (1 Enoch 61:10–11). They encircle the heavenly throne of God as they guard it, and they are the closest angels to God among the millions of angels in his heavenly court (1 Enoch 71:7–8). As God sits on his heavenly throne, none of the angels can approach him, but the cherubim are present at the throne (1 Enoch 14:14–25). The cherubim and seraphim around the heavenly throne each have six wings, and with their wings they cover the throne (as the cherubim overshadowed the ark), and the cherubim and seraphim sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, LORD Sabaoth, Heaven and earth are full of his glory" (2 Enoch 21:1). In later Jewish writings, where a more fully developed angelology is present, the winged creatures take on more attributes. They become gigantic in size and thus fill the whole earth. Their faces look like the sunrise. Each has four wings and each wing covers the earth (3 Enoch 21:1–4). It is not clear whether John related his vision of the four winged creatures to this Jewish tradition, but he probably was aware of it. But more to the point, he certainly would relate and compare what he saw in the vision to that which Isaiah and Ezekiel saw. (CC pp. 122-127)

The four winged creatures that John saw are, then, *a particular order of angels.* In his vision of God's heavenly glory and throne, they are closer to God than any other creature, angelic or saintly. As such they form an "exalted order of angelic beings,"⁶⁰ whose glorious task is to lead the heavenly host in the praise and adoration of God. They could be thought of as the choir masters of the heavenly choir, whose joy and thanksgiving it is to sing the praises of their Lord and Creator. They initiate the worship (Rev 4:9), and the saints and angels in heaven follow their lead (4:10–11; 5:11–12). (CC pp. 122-127)

Since these four winged creatures have different faces, which are likenesses from the animate part of God's creation, commentators throughout the Christian centuries have ascribed various symbolical meanings to the faces. Victorinus, the earliest Latin commentator (third century), says that the four creatures are *the four gospels*. The lion is Mark; the man is Matthew; the ox is Luke; and the eagle is John. Irenaeus associated the four winged creatures with *four aspects of Christ's work*. The lion represents Christ's royal office, the ox his priestly office or character, the face of a man Christ's human nature, and the flying eagle the gift of the Spirit, which he gives to his church. According to Irenaeus, the four evangelists reflect these four characteristics of Christ's ministry. The eagle thus symbolizes Mark, the man Matthew, the ox Luke, and the lion John. Irenaeus also states that because there are four zones or directions of the earth and four winds, it is fitting that the church with the Gospel should have "four pillars," that is, a Gospel with or under four aspects. Pseudo-Athanasius suggested that the man was Matthew, the ox Mark, the lion Luke, and the eagle John. Augustine has the lion as Matthew, the man as Mark, the ox as Luke, and the eagle as John.⁶⁵ Oecumenius' Greek commentary on Revelation (sixth century) identified the four creatures with *the four elements*. The lion represents fire, the ox earth, the man air, and the eagle water. Another example of such symbolical interpretation is that of Honorius Augustodunensis, a twelfth-century scholastic hermit philosopher who probably lived near Regensburg. He suggested that the four winged creatures represented *the four stages in Christ's life*. The man represents the birth of Christ, the ox the death of Christ, the lion the resurrection, and the eagle the ascension of Christ. (CC pp. 122-127)

While Scripture does not explicitly affirm those interpretations of the faces, there is biblical evidence that the *number* of the winged creatures is symbolic. Four suggests the totality of God's animate creation, "the four corners of the earth" (Rev 7:1; 20:8). The man could represent the human race, the lion the animal kingdom, the ox domesticated animals, and the eagle the birds of the air. Yet ascribing such symbolic meanings does not deny the existence of these heavenly, angelic spirits; for, apart from any symbolism, they exist in their own right. *The winged creatures are, properly, representatives of God's total creation in worship before his heavenly throne* (see 5:13-14). The fact that they are full of eyes suggests that God in his "ceaseless vigilance" oversees his creation as it is represented by the four winged creatures. The four would represent the entire creation of God as it was before the fall and/or as it will be when restored (see Rom 8:18-25; Rev 21:1). The four could then also symbolize the four gospels because through the gospels the message of the Lord Christ is sent out into "the four corners of the earth" (7:1), and as a result of Christ's victory, all creation will be restored at the End. However the four creatures are interpreted, symbolically and/or as representatives, *they fulfill the godly role of attending God in his heavenly majesty*. In particular they lead the heavenly host, angelic and saintly, in singing the praises of God. (CC pp. 122-127)

four living creatures. An exalted order of angelic beings whose task is to guard the heavenly throne and lead in worship and adoration of God, distinct from the numerous other angels in 5:11. (CSB)

These angelic creatures with both human and animal features are probably cherubim, since Ezekiel similarly describes such living creatures. (TLSB)

full of eyes. † (Also in v. 8) Nothing escapes their attention. In the OT God's eyes suggested his knowledge or his concern for his people. (CSB)

4:7 Ezekiel in a vision also saw four living creatures, each of which had four faces—human in front, lion on the right, ox on the left, and eagle behind (Eze 1:6, 10). In John's vision the

creatures were in the form of a lion, an ox, and a flying eagle, and one had a face like that of a man. (CSB)

If we regard the four living ones as agencies of God's universal providence, we may take the lion as representing the wild places of the earth, the ox as representing the cultivated parts, the human countenance as representing the cities and towns, and the eagle as representing the whole expanse of air and sky. (Poellot p. 78)

The lion is an example of fortitude and power, the ox an example of strength, the man represents intelligence, and the eagle perfect marksmanship. These four living being excel in all these qualities. They are dauntless, mighty, and wise. Excelling in power and wisdom as they do, they are superior to man. They never fail in their missions. As cherubims they occupy the superior rank among angels. These God uses to carry out his counsels on earth. (Stoeckhardt p. 20)

4:8 *six wings.* † Also in the vision of Isa 6:2. (CSB)

These were symbols of speed in the doing the providential will of God. Perhaps the number six finds its proper explanation in Is. 6:2, two to cover the face in reverence, two to cover the feet in modesty, and two for flying. (Poellot p. 78)

Fitted out with swiftness of wings, these angels unfailingly carry out God's commands on earth everywhere. (Stoeckhardt p. 20)

eyes – Symbolizes the unending vigilance of the “watchers.” (TLSB)

And they see everything that is going on, as is indicated by their eyes, placed in front and in the rear. They are busy at all times and everywhere. (Stoeckhardt p. 20)

day and night – There is no night in heaven. It simply refers to an unbroken round of activity. (Poellot p. 78)

never cease to say – In heaven, God's praise never ends. Even now it is ongoing. (TLSB)

Whatever else they may do as they attend and serve God in his heavenly glory, the four winged creatures are the choir masters of the heavenly host. John sees and hears them praising God day and night. He hears the same Trisagion (ἅγιος ἅγιος ἅγιος; *Ter Sanctus*) that Isaiah heard (Is 6:3). While Isaiah's verse next speaks of God's glory filling the whole earth, that of John speaks of God's almighty power as the Eternal One, though in Rev 4:11 (cf. Is 6:3) God's creative power is acknowledged in praise of God's glory. (CC pp. 128-129)

The One who is worshiped, the One who sits on the throne, is identified as κύριος ὁ θεός, “Yahweh, the only God,” and as ὁ παντοκράτωρ, ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος, “the Almighty, the One Who Was and Who Is and Who Is Coming” (Rev 4:8). These same designations and descriptive titles are used in 1:4 and 1:8 to refer to the first person of the triune God, the Father. Here in 4:8, “the Almighty, the One Who Was ...” could be interpreted as in apposition to “Yahweh, the only God,” thus meaning, “Yahweh, the only God, that is, the Almighty, the One Who Was...” However one takes it, this compound title for the first person of the Trinity emphasizes God's eternal holiness as it is expressed in his creative power. Thus, because he is the holy Creator, God is to be recognized and worshiped as the Almighty, the All-Powerful One. (CC pp. 128-129)

The Trisagion (ἅγιος ἅγιος ἅγιος; *Ter Sanctus*) can be understood as the opening *refrain* of this great Te Deum. Throughout Revelation this heavenly Te Deum continues to be sung, with stanzas being added at various points. Some of the stanzas are sung by angels (4:8; 5:12; 16:5–7); some by the twenty-four elders (4:11; 5:9–10; 11:17–18); some by all creation (5:13); some by all the saints in heaven (7:10); some by the whole heavenly host (7:12); some by the church on earth in warfare (15:3–4); and some by the church triumphant, the bride of Christ (19:1–8). It could be suggested that no greater Te Deum has ever been sung. But perhaps it is more correct to say simply that *this is the hymn by which all the heavenly host praises God*. The church on earth, even in suffering, also sings this hymn—triumphantly so in faith. And especially the bride of Christ, in heavenly triumph, sings and will continue to sing this great hymn of praise. (CC pp. 128-129)

If “holy, holy, holy” (ἅγιος ἅγιος ἅγιος, 4:8) is the refrain which begins this heavenly Te Deum and is also the refrain sung at intervals throughout the hymn, then 4:11 can be seen as the first stanza of this great hymn. As the winged creatures continually (or at intervals) sing this refrain, the twenty-four elders, representing the entire people of God, sing a stanza which praises God as their Creator. The song of the winged creatures moves and directs the elders to fall down before God on his throne and worship him. As an act of worship the twenty-four elders cast before God’s throne their golden crowns, indicating that they share in Christ’s victory only because of God’s mercy and grace. And then the twenty-four elders sing their hymn of praise, by which they worship God as their Creator.⁷³ In this stanza of praise they worship God not only as their Creator, but also as the Creator of everything. And they can sing this hymn of praise because in Christ’s victory they have been restored before God’s holy presence. All glory and honor and power is attributed and given to God because he has created them and has now restored them through Christ. (CC pp. 128-129)

The church fathers were correct when, in the ancient creeds of faith, they put as the First Article that which confesses God the Father and his work of creation. This was followed immediately by the Second Article, concerning Christ’s redemptive work. For creation came first and then, after its fall, the redemption wrought by Christ. The first could not remain without the second. So also John *first* sees and hears and reports the praise of God the Creator and *then*, as he continues to relate this inaugural vision of God’s heavenly glory (in chapter 5), he describes the enthronement of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. (CC pp. 128-129)

The fact that the four living creatures do not cease to sing the hymn suggests that we can’t ever sufficiently praise God for who He is, nor can we ever comprehend the meaning of His infinity. (Joy in our Weakness – Marva Dawn)

Holy, holy, holy. This echoes the worship Isaiah beheld in the heavenly temple. This threefold acclamation points to the three persons in the Holy Trinity. This vision of heavenly worship is the basis for the Sanctus of the Communion liturgy. (TLSB)

was ... is ... is to come. An expansion of the divine name in Ex 3:14–15. God’s power and holiness extend from eternity past to eternity yet to come (cf. Isa 41:4). (CSB)

It could be suggested that no greater Te Deum has even been sung. But perhaps it is more correct to say that this is the hymn by which all the heavenly host praises God. The church on earth, even in suffering, also sings this hymn – triumphantly so in faith. And especially the bride of Christ, in heavenly triumph, sings and will continue to sing this great hymn of praise. (CC p. 128)

4:9 – Implies ongoing, rather than sporadic, activity. (TLSB)

4:10 *fall down* – Lying prostrate before someone was a common posture for worship in the ancient world (cf. 19:10; 22:8-9). (TLSB)

cast their crowns. Acknowledgment that God alone is worthy of ultimate praise and worship. (CSB)

As an act of worship the twenty-four elders cast before God's throne their golden crowns, indicating that they share in Christ's victory only because of God's mercy and grace. (CC p. 129)

These elders are the representatives of the Church Triumphant. (Stoeckhardt p. 20)

4:11 *worthy are you* – Here, the One on the throne is praised for creating all things. Later, the triune God will be praised in similar terms for Christ's redemptive work (5:9-13). Creation is one of "the chief articles of our Christian faith" (FC SD I 34). (TLSB)

you created all things. See Gen 1. (CSB)

The meaning is not that creation was intended to give God pleasure, or make him happy, but rather that all things came into existence by the will of God. (Poellot p. 80)

Ch 4 John describes the heavenly worship he saw in the Lord's throne room, where all the saints and angels adore the Lord. Regular worship is a serious matter, required by one of the Ten Commandments and described as the activity of heaven. Sadly, many people do not even feel a twinge of conscience while skipping divine services. Even while present, they may fail to focus on the promised blessing in such services. Yet, Jesus continues to call us back to His presence. In fact, His forgiveness and promise of eternal life is the first order of business in the Divine Service. • Lord, move us to love the habitation of Your house and the place where Your glory dwells, for therein we receive Your gifts of life and salvation. Amen.