

Part 5

In Regard to Rev 19a

Chapter 14

What Exactly Does John See In Rev 4-5?

We have talked about where the events of Rev 4-5 occur and also when they occur, but have not discussed the events themselves. When the four living creatures praise God and the twenty-four elders lay their crowns before the throne, what does that mean? What are the twenty-four elders doing in Rev 4 and why do they do it? Yes they are praising God, but what more can we learn from their actions?

Why Do the Twenty-Four Elders Praise God?

There are clues in the text of the passage. John describes the elders as being seated on thrones. They also prostrate themselves before God, but their predominant posture is one of being seated. "Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders" (Rev 4:4a). Next, they have crowns on their heads. It is true that they place these crowns on the floor. And yet once they do this the crowns do not remain there. "They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads" (Rev 4:4b).

So how can both sets of facts be true? Simultaneously they cannot both be true. But if these things happen at different times there is no conflict. For the most part the elders are seated and their crowns are on their heads. But from time to time they bow before God and place their crowns on the floor before Him. Thus the activity of the twenty-four elders is cyclic. They do not lay their crowns down before God once - permanently -and remain prostrate forever more. Instead they do this many times in an ongoing sequence of repeated actions.

This is one part of the cycle. The elders bow low and remove their crowns. But what happens when they are not doing these things? What does the rest of the cycle consist of? I am talking here about the times when the elders are seated on their thrones with crowns in place on their heads. What do they do while they are seated? And at what intervals do they leave this posture? To answer this last question we will have to know what is happening on the throne around which they are gathered.

Whenever the living creatures praise God the elders bow down. So how often do the living creatures praise God? On one reading they never stop. And yet each time they praise God the elders bow down. At issue is what it means to repeat an action. What it

does not mean is that the action is performed obsessively without any pause. It could just as easily mean that the action occurs many times.⁷⁰

And why do they praise God? Granting that He always deserves praise, why do those closest to the throne - surrounded by innumerable angels all listening intently - praise Him at intervals in the manner described here? There is not an unrelenting din of grateful confusion before the throne. If there is order in any court we would expect to find it in that one (see 1 Cor 14:40). One part of the answer is provided by the act of raising the question. Something happens which causes these beings to praise. Otherwise what they say is pointless. What they say is a response to something. What causes that response?

Again there are clues within the text. One is so obvious that it might be overlooked. Consider the location of the twenty-four elders. They are seated on thrones but not randomly. These other thrones are arranged in a circle around the throne of God (see Rev 4:4; 5:6). And at the center of that throne is "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain" (Rev 5:6). Everyone's focus is on the throne. This in itself is not a complete answer, though. There is more.

God is saying something in Rev 4 and I submit that what the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders respond to is what they hear God say. Whatever that is forms an extended series of separate pronouncements. This follows from the fact that there is an extended series of responses. When God speaks everyone listens attentively and when He finishes speaking they all praise Him for what He has said. Then He says something more. Just as the response is repeated, what causes it must also be repeated. This process may be assumed to have a beginning and an end. But within a certain window of time it continues without a break.

One reason for saying that the proceedings must end is because Jesus is still in the middle of the throne when John sees these things (see Rev 5:6). This fact implies that the process must end because Jesus has promised, "I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3). Michael must stand up (Dan 12:1). The Rider of Rev 19:11 must mount the horse that He rides at the head of all the angel armies of heaven. Christ must leave heaven if He is to come back to earth. So

⁷⁰ The grammatical category of aspect deals with the shape of an action rather than the time when it is performed. By "shape" I mean whether an action occupies a moment of time or a period of time, and, if it is repeated, whether the resulting series of actions is perceived as occupying a period of time rather than a succession of single and unrelated moments. This is not everything there is to say about aspect but it is the part that concerns us here. I maintain that the momentary act of taking off a crown and laying it before the throne, as it is repeated many times, forms a sequence of actions that is perceived as being ongoing. But this sequence, like every other, is made up of smaller parts. In any event, what we see in Rev 4 is a single act repeated over an extended period of time. It is the idea of repetition that I am trying to capture here. This fact about John's account will be immediately obvious to anyone who has studied aspect extensively. For an accessible introduction to the topic of grammatical aspect see Bernard Comrie, *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Those wishing to pursue the matter further can see also Frank W. Hardy, "Navajo Aspectual Verb Stem Variation" (University of New Mexico, Ph.D. dissertation, 1979), abstracted in *Dissertation Abstracts International* 40 (February 1980): 4572-A; JDK80-03087.

the court scene of Rev 4-5 must one day come to an end precisely because Jesus occupies so central a role in it.

What Does God Say that Would Call Forth Such Praise?

When God speaks from the throne in Rev 4 what He says has to do with those whose lives come in review before Him. He is the Judge of all the earth because He is the Creator of all the earth.

"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being." (Rev 4:11)

God needs no deliberation to reach the decisions that He has known from eternity He would have to announce. And yet He stoops to explain. In every case God shows Himself to be more than fair. It is His decisions in the judgment that cause the twenty-four elders to marvel at His wisdom and to express themselves as they do. And when we learn what His decisions are we will marvel at His wisdom too. As each new case is heard His decisions are ratified by His creatures gladly and with a full heart. The praise of the onlookers is their response to God's wise and gracious decisions in the judgment. This is the context for Rev 4-5.

Just here there is special insight into the meaning of Dan 8:14 when it says. "then shall the sanctuary be cleansed." In the context of Dan 7:27 judgment is given to the saints (they are acquitted) but in Dan 8:14 the saints are not mentioned. Instead the text says that in the judgment the heavenly court itself is what gets "cleansed" or "vindicated" (*nišdaq*). If the question is what is cleansed in the judgment, the answer is, "Unto two thousand three hundred days, then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (Dan 8:14, KJV).

In every case that comes before Him God illustrates His earlier description to Moses: "'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness'" (Exod 34:6). By laying out innumerable specific examples of His dealings with mankind (see Rev 7:9) the principles of His government are revealed, and in revealing those principles they are vindicated. For God to reveal the principles of His government in this way is for Him to reveal the principles of His character because the two are the same. The judgment is not a venue for revealing human weakness to the universe but for revealing God's goodness. The judgment is an act of self-revelation on God's part.

This is where Jesus was taking the discussion when He said, "'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them'" (Matt 5:17). In the judgment, as in His life on earth, it is Christ's purpose to "magnify the law [the constitution of His Father's government, the transcript of His own character], and make it honorable" (Isa 42:21, KJV). In this way Jesus gives us the ultimate fulfillment of the fifth commandment, to honor His Father. One contribution of

Dan 8:14 is to predict that He would be universally and undeniably successful in this endeavor.

One contribution of Rev 4-5 is to show us the manner in which God's loyal creatures respond as the above process unfolds. When God gets through, every knee will bow, "in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11). It is an impressive scene that the four living creatures and twenty-four elders witness and that we are invited to view with them. It would be an even greater cause for wonder if they were to remain silent with all of this happening before them. And so they do not remain silent. They express their praise repeatedly, from the depths of their hearts, and in more than one way.

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being." (Rev 4:9-11)

Chapter 15

The Parallels with Rev 19a

*J*ohn returns to the throneroom of Rev 4-5 in Rev 7, 11,14, and 19a. Of these five descriptions, Rev 4-5 and 11 shows how the judgment begins and Rev 7,14, and 19a shows how it ends. The two groups of passages are clearly similar, but also distinct in regard to which part of the process they describe.

If Rev 4-5 is the first passage to deal with the beginning of the judgment and if Rev 19a is the last to deal with its close, then these chapters form a natural inclusio around any similar references between them, placing the entire book of Revelation in the context of the judgment, i.e. in the context of the sanctuary.

In saying this I specifically deny that every part of Revelation has to be applied in the timeframe of the judgment. Much of the book does not apply during the end time. The first five churches, for example, the first five seals, and all seven trumpets all apply to 1798 and the time of the end. Instead these middle chapters apply to history just as Seventh-day Adventists have always taught.

The reason why they apply to so much history is that the judgment takes the full sweep of history into account. If people from "every nation, tribe, language and people" (Rev 14:6) are saved, then people from every nation, tribe, language and people must first be judged. And to do this the background for their lives must be introduced into evidence. "For we will all stand before God's judgment seat" (Rom 14:8).

If God is to be shown fair in His dealings with all men, He must reveal what His dealings with all men have been - in every age. Old Testament history will be considered in the judgment as well as what we are reading about here. But when all has been said and done, i.e. when all the evidence has been reviewed, then all in attendance at the hearings will have an opportunity to express themselves. They do this starting from the outer parts of the hall.

After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting:

"Hallelujah!
Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,
for true and just are his judgments.
He has condemned the great prostitute
who corrupted the earth by her adulteries.
He has avenged on her the blood of his servants."

And again they shouted:

"Hallelujah!

The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever," (Rev 19:1-3)

Next we hear from the twenty-four elders surrounding the throne and the four living creatures who are closer still.

The twenty-four eiders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried:

"Amen. Hallelujah!" (Rev 19:4).

Finally there is a voice from the throne itself at the center of the throne which in turn is at the center of the great judgment hall.

Then a voice came from the throne, saying:

"Praise our God,

all you his servants,

you who fear him,

both small and great!" (Rev 19:5)

Only one Being in our vast universe can speak from the throne and call God "our God" (vs. 5). This is Christ. Why does He say what He does at just this point in the proceedings? The audience has given their verdict as it were on the decisions handed down by the heavenly court and they gladly accept what has been said and done. Moving closer in, the twenty-four elders are next, along with the four living creatures, and they show that they too are in full agreement. No one in heaven or on earth, lost or saved, can fault God for any of His decisions. In each case brought before the court He has been more than fair.

But there is one more factor to consider. When Jesus came to this world He was treated as a transgressor though He deserved none of it. There was nothing even remotely fair about the treatment He received on the cross. In being treated as He was Jesus established God's justice in saving us, but He Himself did not deserve to be shamefully treated by men and excluded from the Father's presence during His dying agonies.

Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. "With His stripes we are healed."⁷¹

At issue, recall, is the fairness of God's government. So has God really been perfectly fair? Is there not something that Jesus might wish to say in this regard? There is. What He says is, "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both small and great!" (Rev 19:5). It is an affirmation of personal loyalty and also a direct order from heaven's Commander.

⁷¹ Ellen White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940), p. 25.

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

"Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready,

Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear." (Rev 19:6-8)

Here we see the great contrast between Christ's character and that of Lucifer. Lucifer had been excluded from councils between the Father and the Son which were none of his business and he started going about telling the angels how He had been treated unfairly. Christ, on the other hand, came to our earth and lived a life made all the harder by constant contact with sin and died in our place, as though He Himself had personally committed every sin that anyone was or would ever be guilty of, and when asked about the treatment He had received in the process bypassed the whole matter, telling His subjects to give praise to God instead of dwelling on such matters,

This sort of response is one reason why God's law deserves to be vindicated. We can be very glad that we have the God we do instead of some other (see Exod 20:2-3) and that He seeks to protect us from worshipping a selfish enemy who would harm us (see Exod 20:4-6). As His subjects we can be glad He has the sort of law or character that He does. We can also be glad that He has taken the trouble to reveal what He is like to mankind in the person of His Son.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb 12:2-3)

The final moments of the judgment bring the focus of all heaven's attention to the Son of God at the center of the throne. Having done this the work of judgment is over. It only remains for the Son to lay aside His priestly to the rescue of those He has acquitted. This happens immediately afterward in the second part of the chapter (Rev 19b).