

Thoughts on Revelation 4-5: Where Is the Throne?

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Like the earthly sanctuary built by Moses according to the pattern shown him in the mount, Solomon's temple, with all its services, was "a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices;" its two holy places were "patterns of things in the heavens;" Christ, our great High Priest, is "a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man." As in vision the apostle John was granted a view of the temple of God in heaven, he beheld there "seven lamps of fire burning before the throne." He saw an angel "having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne." Here the prophet was permitted to behold the first apartment of the sanctuary in heaven; and he saw there the "seven lamps of fire" and the "golden altar," represented by the golden candlestick and the altar of incense in the sanctuary on earth. Again, "the temple of God was opened," and he looked within the inner veil, upon the holy of holies. Here he beheld, "the ark of His testament," represented by the sacred chest constructed by Moses to contain the law of God. {RH, November 9, 1905 par. 9}

Introduction

In the above quotation Ellen White quotes from Rev 4-5 in regard to the lampstands and the golden altar and states that, in seeing these things, John was permitted to see the first apartment of the sanctuary in heaven.¹ It is true that the candlesticks and golden altar were in the first apartment. A throne is also mentioned in Rev 4-5. Where is it? She doesn't say. Is there any way of finding out? We could study the text.

Structure of the Sanctuary

What is there in the text of Rev 4-5 that would tell us where its throne is located? To answer this question we need some background. In the ancient sanctuary there were two apartments, or rooms. The first contained three pieces of furniture, i.e., the table for the consecrated bread, the candlesticks, and the golden incense altar. These were located against the north wall, the south wall, and the curtain at the west end of the room respectively. What was at the center of the first apartment? Nothing. The organizing principle for items of furniture in the first apartment was outward – away from the center.

¹ In AA 582-83 she says, "John was strengthened to live in the presence of his glorified Lord. Then before his wondering vision were [583] opened the glories of heaven. He was permitted to see the throne of God and, looking beyond the conflicts of earth, to behold the white-robed throng of the redeemed." She refers to the throne, but here there is no mention of the first apartment.

The second apartment contained the ark of the covenant. Inside this were the stone tablets of the law, a pot of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded. Beside it was a scroll of Deuteronomy, which contains a record of the covenant blessings and curses that would follow from keeping or rejecting the covenant stored inside the ark. Covering the ark, or box, was a slab of pure gold called the mercy seat, or atonement cover. Over the mercy seat were two golden angels, facing and looking downward toward the center of the box.

This might sound all very complicated, but if you were to look inside the second apartment this impression would vanish, because inside the room was only one piece of furniture – the ark of the covenant. This had the objects in it, the angels on it, the scroll beside it, but there was only one item of furniture in the second apartment. Where was it? At the center of the room. The organizing principle for furniture in the second apartment was inward – toward the center.

With this much as background, we now return to our question. Where is the throne that is mentioned in Rev 4-5? Is it in the first apartment, where the organizing principle is outward, away from the center? Or is it in the second apartment, where the organizing principle is inward, toward the center?

Linguistic Clues

There are a number of linguistic clues that can help us decide. "A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled [*kuklothen*] the throne" (4:3). "Surrounding [*kuklothen*] the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders" (4:4). "In the center [*en mesō*], around [*kuklō*] the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back" (4:6). "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center [*en mesō*] of the throne, encircled [*en mesō*] by the four living creatures and the elders" (5:6). Earlier in 4:5 and 6 we find *enōpion tou thronou* "before the throne," which implies directionality, and yet in the verses cited we have *kuklothen* "surrounding" twice, *kuklō* "around" once, and *en mesō* "in the middle, at the center" three times.

First apartment empty (type)

There is a heavy atmosphere of centrality here. I submit that, while the candlesticks and golden altar were always in the first apartment, the throne described here is in the second. This fact is consistent with God's instruction to Moses that

No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel. (Lev 16:17)²

One reason for this restriction was that, to minister in the second room, Aaron had to open the curtain separating the apartments. God didn't want prying human eyes curiously watching what pertained only to Aaron as he ministered in the second apartment.

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Second apartment packed (antitype)

In the heavenly antitype this does not imply that no one would be present when the events would finally take place. The two angels above the mercy seat represented innumerable heavenly beings who would witness the proceedings as they took place.³

Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. (Dan 7:10)

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. (Rev 5:11)

But my point is that human beings on earth can only be present at the judgment as they follow Christ there by faith. Here is the significance of the bells on the hem of Aaron's garment (Exod 28:33- 35; 39:25, 26). The sound they made would allow the people outside to know, in some degree, what Aaron was doing. But in the type, as in the antitype, they could only be present in the second apartment by faith. People from earth can't go there. Heavenly beings, however, pack every available seat in the vast hall.

Conclusion

The concept of centrality in Rev 4-5 is marked by six occurrences of Greek words with this type of meaning (*kuklothen* [4:3, 4]; *kuklō* [4:6]; *en mesō* [4:6; 5:6, 6]). Some things about the scene fit equally well in either an inauguration or a judgment model, but this does not. If we want the scene to take place in the first apartment, this bit of textual evidence does not fit, and cannot be made to fit. There was nothing at the center of the first apartment. All its furniture was pushed out to the edges. In these two chapters, however, the throne at the center is the focus of everything that takes place. In the context of the sanctuary being at the center of a room can only mean being at the center of the second apartment. That's where the throne is in Rev 4-5.

³ There is only one investigative judgment, but there have been many sessions of the heavenly court. See William H. Shea, "Biblical Parallels for the Investigative Judgment" (*Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol 1: Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982]), pp. 1-24.