

CHAPTER 4

"After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, 'Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this'" (4:1).

John is taken up to heaven. If he is to see what is happening in heaven, isn't heaven itself the best place to be in order to see it? There is no indication whatsoever that John himself is a symbol of anything pertaining to the content of the revelation that he is given or a representative of a raptured church. According to Archer,

It is John personally who is exalted to behold this heavenly scene, rather than the raptured Church (as some have suggested). It is true that ekklesia is not referred to again until Rev. 22, but Revelation never uses ekklesia in any other sense than a local congregation, even in 22:16. Therefore its non-appearance after 4:1 furnishes no evidence as to the timing of the Rapture foretold in 1 Thess. 4:17.¹

Some remarks by Robert Gundry should be taken note of:

Prima facie, the tribulational events delineated in the major portion of Revelation are meant to be signs for the Church; otherwise Revelation loses most of its significance as a document addressed "to the seven churches that are in Asia" . . . If the second coming could not have been imminent for those originally commanded to watch at the time they were so commanded, then the commanded expectancy could not have implied imminence of the event looked for. It then becomes unnecessary for us to regard Jesus' coming as imminent, for we have received no further and no different exhortations. In other words, if a delay in the Parousia of at least several years was compatible with expectancy in apostolic times, a delay for the several years of the tribulation is compatible with expectancy in current times.²

We may think at first that 4:1b, "what must take place after these things," denotes a transition from the Church age to the tribulation. But in 4:1a John writes, "After these things I looked and behold" Clearly John means that after receiving the vision of Christ and the dictation of the letters, he saw another vision. The phrase expresses, not transition from the Church age to the tribulation, but sequence in the personal experience of John. It is only natural that the second occurrence should conform to this meaning. Accordingly, "what must take place after these things" takes place after John's experience in chapters 1-3, not after the prophetic fulfillment of those chapters (if they are predictive--granted here only for the sake of argument). All that 4:1 means is that after receiving his first vision on earth, John was caught up to see another vision in heaven. "What must take place" does so after the *reception* of the previous vision, for *μετα ταυτα*, as used in Revelation, refers to time after the giving of a vision,

1 Archer, unpublished class notes.

2 Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 36-37. See Matt 28:18, Acts 23:11, John 21:18,19, and 2 Pet. 1:14 for examples.

*not to time after the fulfillment of a vision.*³

Here is what Edmund Shackleton writes:

It has been stated that Rev. iv. v. confirm the secret rapture view. It is said that in these chapters we see the Church in heaven represented by the elders and living creatures; and as these visions precede those of the time of the Antichrist, it is insisted that these visions corroborate the view that the Church is removed to heaven before that time. This conclusion is not a safe one. In the prophetic books the visions are not given in the sequence of time, and the Revelation is no exception to the rule. For instance, in chap. xvi. we have the pouring out of the vial upon the seat of the beast, and upon his kingdom; while in the following chapter we see the beast and his kingdom at the height of their power, evidently before the vial judgment had been inflicted. Many other visions run on to a point of time in advance of the time of the event portrayed by the vision that follows. This principle will account for the vision of redeemed ones before the throne in chapters vii. and xiv., though, according to Rev. xx. 4, the first resurrection does not take place till after the persecution of the Antichrist.⁴

A final comment on this subject will come from Frost:

Most premillennial commentators upon the Revelation put the resurrection of the dead saints and the translation of the living ones at the beginning of the fourth chapter. They base their conclusion principally upon two facts. First, that the voice of the trumpet said to John, "Come up hither" (4:1), this indicating to them that the command was symbolic in meaning, to the effect that John represents the church, past and present, and that his being caught up to heaven was the sign of all the saints, then and there, being taken thither; and second, that from this time onward in the record, as they say, the church entirely disappears from the earthly scene, there being no further mention of her, except as in heaven, to the end of the book. We shall not now speak of the last part of this statement, as we shall do this somewhat later. But we would comment upon the first part of it, pointing out several facts which seem to oppose and contradict it. First, it is to be observed that the phrase "Come up hither" is a small foundation upon which to build so large a superstructure as that of resurrection and rapture. Second, John later in the record is found again on earth (11:1; 13:1; 17:1), again in heaven (10:1, 5), and again on "a great and high mountain" (21:10), which, if he is made the sign of the movements of the sleeping and waking saints, would have these going and coming in a rather bewildering succession of movements. Third, it is strange beyond understanding, if the resurrection and translation of the saints do take place in this fourth chapter, that there is no mention of it, for the event is mighty beyond imagination, and our need of knowledge of it at this point is important beyond description. And lastly, it is a fact that there is no view, subsequent to the command "Come up hither," of the saints in heaven in resurrection form, which, no doubt, would have been the case if such had taken place; but, on the contrary,

³ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 65-66.

⁴ Edmund Shackleton, *Will the Church Escape the Great Tribulation?* pp. 41-42.

somewhat later we are given to see the souls of the martyrs beneath the altar crying, "How long" (6:10), this betokening the fact that they--and therefore all others--were still waiting for their resurrection bodies. Indeed, it seems as if we are justified in saying that there is no hint of the coming of Christ and the consequent resurrection and rapture of the saints in this fourth chapter; and hence, we are confident in making the statement that the first intimation of these events taking place is found, not here, but in the fourteenth chapter as a foreview of what is to come (14:1-16), and in the nineteenth as a description of what there actually takes place (19:1-21).⁵

John sees a throne in heaven on which One sits. *"And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald"* (v. 3). Most commentators agree that this is God the Father. A worthy comment is made on this verse respecting the nation Israel:

Are the colors significant? . . . Surely then the encircling rainbow, enclosing all with its endless line of radiant green, speaks of grace and abiding. For was not the first exhibition of a rainbow the token of God's first Covenant with all flesh, "between Me and you and every living creature that is with you for perpetual generations (Gen. 9:12)." Was not that Covenant made independently of all future human resistance and apostasy and guilt--was not the rainbow the token, "of a covenant between Me and the earth (Gen. 9:13)?" Surely the rainbow symbolizes and represents grace--the grace of benevolent purpose, the grace of changeless attitude, the grace of persistent long-suffering and patience, the grace which is endless, all-inclusive, all conquering. No other reason but that of changeless grace could have spared Israel the complete annihilation they deserved. And shall the original purpose fail, the original declaration be falsified or even modified, shall works be substituted for grace or any kind of transference of specific promise take place? Shall not the whole purpose come to final achievement as with Zerubbabel, who after gazing on the desolations of Jerusalem, desertion, rubbish, silence, defilement and ashes, after confronting opposition and apathy, yet saw in vision and by promise the work of the new temple completed and the headstone thereof brought forth with shoutings of "Grace, grace unto it" (Zech. 4:7).⁶

Continuing in the text, *"Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads"* (v. 4). Walvoord notes that the crowns on their heads are crowns given to a victor (*stephanos*), not crowns awarded to a sovereign (*diadem*).⁷ Gundry notes:

It is difficult to conceive that the crowns imply an already judged Church, for the elders were already wearing them when John arrived in heaven. If the crowns imply rapture and reward, the rapture and reward must have taken place *before* John's being caught up into heaven. Then John's being caught up cannot

5 Frost, *Matthew Twenty-Four and the Revelation*, pp. 169-170.

6 Samuel Hinds Wilkinson, *The Israel Promises and their Fulfilment*, quoted by Barry Horner, *Future Israel*, pp. 353-354.

7 Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, pg. 106.

symbolize the rapture. And since the text does not tell us at what time the elders received their crowns, the whole argument rests on conjecture. John clearly indicates that the casting of the crowns before the throne was an act continually repeated in conjunction with the incessant chant of the four living creatures (4:8-10).⁸

There is disagreement among the scholars as to whether the twenty-four elders are redeemed beings or heavenly beings. The view that they are *not* human beings seems to me to be the stronger. Reese has some lengthy insight on this subject:

Even if we admit that the Twenty-four Elders symbolize redeemed beings, we can have no certainty whom they represent. Indeed, on this hypothesis, there are about as many interpretations as there are Elders. Some take them as symbolical of the Christian ministry; others of the Patriarchs and Apostles; yet others of the O.T. believers; others again of the disembodied spirits in heaven. How are we going to decide among the rival theories? John has nowhere expressed his preference for any of them; so that any symbolical interpretation must be guesswork. Even pre-trib writers cannot agree among themselves. Newberry adopts the view that the Elders do not signify the Church at all, but are "symbolic representatives of the saints of the former dispensation, from Adam and Abel to Pentecost." . . .

This brings us to a further point, that there is absolutely no evidence that these Twenty-four Elders are human beings at all, or have any connection with the redeemed. A careful consideration of all the passages where they are mentioned will warrant the following conclusions: (1) They are glorious heavenly beings taking the lead in the praise and worship of God. (2) They celebrate with joy each crisis in the onward march of events to the consummation of the Kingdom. (3) They seem never to have known the experience of conflict, sin, pardon and victory; yet they rejoice over the blessedness of those who have, and give glory to God for His grace in the victory of those who overcome. (4) They distinctly disassociate themselves from the prophets, saints, and godly of ages past who rise in the resurrection at the Last Trumpet and are rewarded. This passage indicates that *they* have not known death or service on earth. (5) Acting as assessors prior to the great consummation, they disappear from the scene when the new assessors--the great multitude of the heavenly redeemed--sit down on thrones and exercise judgment with the Lord Jesus at His coming.⁹

Johnson essentially agrees with the above: "Here [7:13-14] and in 5:5 are the only references in Revelation to an elder speaking individually, a fact that supports the view that the elders in Revelation are angels and not a symbolic group representing the church."¹⁰

In verses 6-9 we read of four living creatures. "*Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of*

8 Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pg. 73.

9 Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, pp. 88, 92-93.

10 Johnson, *Revelation*, pg. 486.

eyes in front and in back. . . . And they do not rest day or night, saying: *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!*" Following is Cumming's view of them together with that of the elders:

The four living creatures, it is probable, refer to the Jewish church, and are meant to personate it, as seems to be indicated by their respective Jewish characteristics. The twelve tribes were arranged, in their marching, into four divisions, and each division had its appropriate symbol. Judah and his two tribes had the symbol of a lion; Reuben and his two, that of a man; Ephraim and his two, that of a bull; Dan and his two, that of an eagle. The four and twenty elders very probably represent the Gentile church, being in no respect signalized by Levitical symbols. At all events the two parties, the living creatures and the elders, are of the Redeemed church, and not angelic beings, as is obvious from their anthem, chap. v. 8,9--"And when he had taken the book the four living creatures and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb . . . and they sung a new song, saying . . . for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood . . ."¹¹

The phrase "has redeemed us" will be discussed at length in chapter 5. For now, however, it would seem to me that the four living creatures of verses 6-9 are angelic beings, seeing they have six wings each and never stop worshiping him who sits on the throne, saying "*Holy, holy, holy.*" According to Milligan,

There can be little doubt, then, as to the meaning of these four living creatures. They are sharers of the Almighty's holiness, and of that holiness in its more awful form, as a holiness that cannot look on sin but with abhorrence. They are the vicegerents of His kingdom. They are assessors by His side. Their aspect is not that of the sweetness associated with the word "cherub," but that of sternness, indignant power, and judgment.¹²

11 Cumming, *Apocalyptic Sketches*, pg. 42.

12 Milligan, *The Book of Revelation*, pg. 73.