

The Book of Revelation
Heavenly Worship (chpts. 4-5)

The Temple

The next two chapters of the Book of Revelation make no sense unless you have a clear image of the Jerusalem Temple. The next paragraph attempts to depict the immensity which was the Jerusalem Temple. Words do no justice to the Temple so, if you would like a visual representation of the Temple go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2tha7ogpec>. Or search Solomon's Temple 3D on youtube.com.

The Temple sits atop the highest hill in Jerusalem overlooking the Kidron Valley and the city of Jerusalem. Although the highest hill, it is not a very tall hill but mainly the highest in the area. The Temple consists of four major sections: the outer court or the court of the Gentiles, the inner court or the area of sacrifices, the first chamber of the Temple or area of incense offering, and the Holy of Holies or the inner chamber of the Temple. As we approach the outer walls, the iron gates greet us as the crowds of people stream into the outer court. Anyone of Gentile origin, or not Israeli, is permitted only into the outer court. From here, a person can only see glimpses of the sacrifices. The second gates allow entry into the inner court. This area would segregate women and men although both were allowed to offer sacrifices. The inner court is dominated by three major features: The Temple building, the altars of Sacrifice, and the Brazen Pool. The Brazen Pool is a brass pool of water that sits atop 12 oxen each set of three face a different cardinal direction. The Brazen Pool is a representation of the water of the sea whom God has dominion over. The altars of the sacrifice are almost constantly burning. At the height of the Temple sacrifices, anywhere between 3000-5000 animals were sacrificed daily. Writers of the 1st century AD comment that rivers of blood flowed from the side of the Temple due to the number of animal sacrifices. During most of these sacrifices only the fat and shanks of the animals were burned and the rest of the meat was roasted and eaten. Sometime the entire animal was completely burned as a holocaust offering. You can imagine the complex smells of this court. The last major item in the inner court is the Temple. The Temple was made of cut stone with two huge bronze doors. These doors led into the temple and were normally kept shut. Throughout the year the priests would bring the sacred objects out of the Temple for people to see. This would happen in the inner court. Two columns adorned the front of the Temple. These columns are important as indicated by 2 Chronicles. The doors of the Temple are bronze with various nature scenes depicted on the façade. Most people have an image of the Temple as devoid of imagery. This is not true. Pomegranates and figs were the most common images as described and ordered by God in Exodus 34-36. Once inside the bronze doors the inside of the Temple is inlaid in gold with the most prominent features being the altar of incense, the seven branched candle stands, and the table of the showbread. The design of the candle stands comes from Exodus as a symbol of God's perfection, hence seven branched. Above the candles stands on the wall hung the bronze serpent that Moses created in the desert. The priests were required to burn incense on the altar of incense every morning and evening. The people would wait outside and pray during the incense offering. Then the priest would leave the Temple and bless those who were praying outside. The table of the showbread was another feature required by God in Exodus. Every week

the bread was exchanged for fresh bread and the priests would consume the old bread. Beside the table of the showbread was a jug of wine that was always kept next to the table of the showbread. Heading further into the Temple requires going through the second set of bronze doors into the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest could enter this part of the Temple and only on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Inside the Holy of Holies is the Arc of the Covenant with two cherubim inlaid in gold on top. Above the Arc of the Covenant were two larger Cherubim whose wings stretched from one wall to the other meeting in the middle of the room. This entire room is inlaid in gold.

The Second Vision

Throughout the Book of Revelation John will give us details regarding these visions. The entire book is not exactly one vision but a series of visions. Each vision is delineated from the others by the words “I had a vision.” Similarly, in each vision John is taken up in the Spirit. I mentioned this in the previous section: the act of being taken up in the Spirit is both a prophetic action but also a recognition that these visions happen by God’s will and not by the mental activity of one man.

John’s specific details about this vision are deeply immersed in temple imagery. The first detail is the open door. We should be shocked to hear that the door is open. The Temple doors never remained open to prevent people from looking at what is holy. Therefore, the detail that the door to Heaven is open is quite surprising. This detail will continue to build as a new image of Heaven emerges, one in which the Risen Lord has radically changed the nature of the cosmos by his action. Like the previous vision and the messages to the churches, John hears the “trumpet like voice” that indicates that God is speaking or that he is in God’s realm.

God calls John to Heaven. This details seems unimportant or merely a piece of the story, but not so. God’s call is always indicative of a prophet. More so for the man who will explain the fullness of who God is to the world through these visions. God is going to show John what will “happen afterwards.” We must ask the question, after what? The visions of Revelation are slightly out of order. God gives John a vision to prepare him for another visions seemingly jumbling up the visions. The vision in chapters four and five are meant to give the reader hope during the darkness of chapters 6-19. If we started with the dark visions of the doom and gloom as God recreates the world, we might fall into despair and become hopeless. Chapters four and five are meant to give us hope for the joy that comes after the struggle.

The vision itself is incredibly similar to the vision Ezekiel receives by the river Chebar in Ezekiel 1-3. Although Ezekiel and Revelation share many similarities, the differences between these two passages are far more exciting. Both visions depict God in a brilliant array of colors and images: flashing fire and red carnelian, lightning and thunder, brilliant halo of emerald around him, seated on a throne above the heavens, and four living creatures. The sea of glass or crystal from both visions is a representation of the firmament created in Genesis 1 that separated the waters above the heavens and those below. The rest of the differences fall into two categories: the new era of heaven inaugurated by Jesus and the details of the Temple. The seven flaming torches and

the throne are both depictions of the Temple. John wants to make a point that this vision is of God in his Temple.

The 24 elders are the fulfilment of the prophesy. Twelve princes of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 Apostles. The number 24 is combination of 12 and 2, 12 the special number of the people of Israel. The number 24 is also 6 times 4, 6 the number of imperfection making the point that these elders are human and 4 the number of multitudes or a huge number. The 24 elders represent the completion of salvation history: the coming together of the two eras of salvation history the old and new covenant. The white garments of the elders represent their royalty and status. The color white was far more difficult to make in the 1st century than in our modern era. Keeping something white was even more difficult considering their soaps were made of lard and lye which had a brown hue. Thus anyone who can wear white garments was exceedingly rich. The white will later represent their connection to the lamb: those who have washed their garments in the blood of the lamb and made their garments white, or baptismal imagery. The golden crowns represent their kingly status. God has made these elders rulers alongside him as he had promised.

The 4 living creatures.

Ezekiel and Daniel both describe the four living creatures in ways similar to Revelation. Ezekiel describes them as having four different faces each and four wings but the same basic types of faces. Revelation has four distinct creatures each having a different face. According to Williamson, the author of the Catholic Commentary on Revelation, the four animals represent the greatest of their kind: the eagle the swiftest, the ox the strongest, the lion the most noble, and the human as the smartest. I think that the four creatures represent the four most important creatures for the Israelites: the man was created in God's image, the ox is another representation for God, the lion was the feared and noble creature, and birds are always connected with God as they soar in the Heavens. The wings are very different between Ezekiel and Isaiah's vision and Revelation. In both Ezekiel and Isaiah the wings cover their bodies. The covering of their bodies represents the need to not be exposed before God. With two they covered their faces so as to not look at God, with two they flew, and with two they covered their bodies or groin so as to not be naked before God. Revelation does not describe the actions of their wings. Later the same imagery will apply. This lack of detail suggests that the creatures are no longer fearful of being in God's presence. They can now look on the face of God and stand naked in his presence without cause for shame. Again, the power of the Resurrection at work. The last detail is that the creatures are covered with eyes inside and out showing that they are completely watching the world. In the Book of Job, Satan is depicted as patrolling and watching the world. The same image applies to the four living creatures.

Where is everything?

We need to pause for a moment and build the picture of this scene otherwise we will lose the gravity of the next passage. John enters heaven through the door, which should be at one side of the Temple. The throne is on the opposite side or possibly in the middle of the temple. God is seated on his throne. The four living creatures are around or surrounding the throne. The 24 elders are a step further from the four living creatures and surround the throne.

The hymns

These two chapters contains parts of one great hymn. As the hymn develops through the chapters, so does the imagery and the explanation of everything that has happened. We begin with the creatures and elders proclaiming the same words that we find in Isaiah 6: “holy, holy, holy.” With the addition of the descriptors used for God that we already saw in chapters 1-3. The thrice holy is supposed to mean the most holy of holy things. The Hebrew language does not have superlatives which means it can’t say the greatest or holiest of something. Instead it repeats the word to indicate its greatest. Hence the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords are examples of Hebrew superlatives. In this case the word holy is repeated three times to show that it’s the absolute holiest of possible holy things. The next parts of the hymn will continue in verses 13, 5:9-10, 5:12, and 5:13.

Worship

Chapters 4 and 5 are about heavenly worship. Although many commentators skip over the actions of the elders once the words holy, holy, holy are pronounced, I see greater merit in their action. These actions would not have been part of the vision had they not had importance. The basic meaning is that the elders are giving back to God the honor, power, and glory that he gave to them so that they could rule in God’s place. But the gold crowns signify more than the power and honor they were given. The gold crowns are the only possession of the elders. Therefore everything they did in life is symbolized by the gold crowns they wear. When they throw down the golden crowns before God, they are giving him everything they accomplished in their earthy life as a tribute. This action combined with the singing of the hymns encapsulates divine worship. If you would like to know what we do in heaven, here it is.

The chapter ends with the next piece of the hymn which repeats the words already used several times throughout the book of Revelation. God is worthy of honor, glory, and power because he created everything. They are glorifying God because they recognize the things that he has done.

The Scroll

The heavenly vision takes a sharp turn as we transition from chapter 4 to chapter 5. If you were following the vision from Ezekiel 1-3, you would notice some striking similarities. John now sees a scroll. Scroll are symbolic not just of messages and communication but of law. Each of the books of law were written on scrolls and throughout scripture the image of a scroll indicates the giving or receiving of law. This scroll is immensely important. A scroll with a seal was intended for the person whose name was on the letter or indicated by the seal. Only people of great importance would send sealed letters and seal them with the sign of their authority. This letter has seven seals. The number seven could be the actual number of seals on the letter, which is odd, or could indicate the importance of the person for whom the letter is intended. Namely, the most important person possible. The description of searching for the worthy person includes all the known places: heaven, the earth, and sheol or the place under the earth or the land of the dead in Hebrew and Greek cosmology.

John reacts to the seven sealed letter in a way that could surprise us: he weeps. Most of us would not weep because a scroll could not be opened. Recall: the scroll represents God's will or voice. John wants to hear God's voice and his will. Thus he weeps for desire to hear the contents of the scroll, the voice of God's action.

The next many details we must see in sequence for the vision is intended to leave us guessing and build the scene for us. The elder speaks about whom the scroll is intended. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah is a reminder of Jacob's blessing for Judah in Genesis 49. The Root of David indicates the kingly authority of the one who can open the scroll. This person has "triumphed." We don't know what is meant by "triumphed" and must wait until for the vision to unfold. Yet the word takes on a military tone: this person was immensely victorious in battle. Behold the Lamb! I hope you are getting a sense of the weirdness of the next line. Almost as though transitioning from the sadness of the scroll, a lamb appears. This lamb has been slain. The word slain in Greek has the connotations of a victim of a heinous crime, the slaughtered lamb for the sacrifice, and the sacrificial animal. We must keep all of these images in our mind to understand the rest of the vision. Again, seven horns represents fullness of power and seven eyes represents the fullness of wisdom. This lamb received that all important scroll from the *right hand* of God, the hand of power. He wasn't given the scroll he took the scroll. We are building an image of this lamb as immensely powerful. Pause, where is the lamb? If you were following closely, the lamb is *seated on the throne*. Now the images are greatly important. The image of the lamb on the throne and the elders worshiping tells us that the lamb is God, the only one who can or should be worshipped.

Now the elder continue their worship and their hymn with some new additions. They are now offering incense, the sweet smell which pleases God and represents the prayers of the faithful, and playing harps, instruments of worship and joy. Their new hymn, or addition to the hymn, speaks about the importance of this lamb. The lamb who received the scroll on account of the fact he was slain. Due to this honor he can now purchase people from every corner of humanity and make a kingdom. The word purchase implies that we were slaves and thus needed to be bought back. The idea is that we were sold into slavery on account of our sins and now we have been bought so as to live as free people again. The next piece of the hymn includes the myriads of angels (literally thousands upon thousands and tens of thousands upon tens of thousands. The word myriad literally means thousands.) These new voices add additional lines to the grandeur of God which are new to this book thus far: "power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing." Now everyone possible – those in heaven, earth, and the whole universe (first and only time this word is used) – join in the hymn concluding by joining the praise of God with the lamb and the praise of the lamb with God.

Amen

The only word that is untranslated in all languages. It means "so be it," "thus it is done," "may your will be done," "I assent."