

# Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 8, Revelation 4 and 5

© 2024 Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session 8, Revelation 4 and 5, an introduction.

With chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, we come to a section that is sort of different in character as we have already hinted at several times from chapters 2 and 3. Chapters 2 and 3 being sort of a more straightforward description using a lot of imagery still, but a straightforward description or evaluation of the situation of seven historical churches.

Now, beginning with chapter 4, we arrive at the sort of apocalyptic section of the book. This is the vision proper. We saw an inaugural vision in chapter 1, but now, starting with chapter 4, chapter 4 commences a John that will extend all the way to the end of the book, at least through parts of chapter 22.

Some have labeled chapters 4 and 5 as sort of the fulcrum of the book or the theological center of the book. There's probably some truth to that. Especially, chapters 4 and 5 have inspired countless hymns and songs of the church.

You don't have to think very hard to recall hymns like Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, or worthy is the lamb who was slain, or crown him with many crowns, the lamb upon his throne, hark how the heavenly anthems drum, etc., etc. You can think of other songs that have been verbally inspired by Revelation chapters 4 and 5. What I want to do before we look at chapters 4 and 5, and hopefully, as we progress in looking at these two chapters, we'll see why they belong together. Chapters 4 and 5 probably should not be treated as two separate chapters at all.

Chapters 4 and 5 constitute one visionary piece within the narrative, one section. But let me make several initial comments about the overall function, the overall content, and an overall orientation to Revelation chapters 4 and 5. Literarily, the first point I want to make is from a literary perspective, chapters 4 and 5 provide sort of the setting or preparation for the rest of the vision. That is in chapters 6 through 22.

That is all that happens in chapters 6 through 22, which stems from and flows from this visionary section. All the blessings of salvation that are described in the rest of Revelation result from this section. All the judgments that we read about in chapters 6 through 19, starting with chapter 6 and the seven seals, all of these judgments issued from chapters 4 and 5. Also, another way to look at it is in light of this, as things become rather intense in the rest of the book, as we see God's judgment being poured out, as we see at times things getting a little chaotic, for example, sort

of like sitting in an airplane that's full of turbulence and all kinds of turbulence going on and getting thrown about.

Revelation 4 and 5 remind us that in the cockpit, so to speak, in the throne room, God is seated on his throne, and he is in control of all things that take place in chapters 6 through 19. Nothing happens apart from his watchful eye. So that, what this means is we cannot read Revelation in terms of some dualism between good and evil, as if there is a dualistic conflict between the powers of good and the powers of evil, whose outcome is uncertain until it gets resolved at the end.

Chapters 4 and 5 remind us at the beginning that there's no dualism between good and evil, but the starting point is God sovereignly seated on his throne, who is sovereign over all the affairs and events that take place in the world. Second, Revelation 4 and 5 functions and prepares for chapters 6 through 22 in another way. In 4 and 5, we find this vision of all of heaven worshipping God seated on his throne.

Heaven is portrayed in chapters 4 and 5. And again, to back up just a little bit, when you read 4 and 5, the location is clearly in the heavenlies. And we're going to see in the rest of Revelation that John will. The rest of Revelation will demonstrate that John's perspective kind of oscillates back and forth between heaven and earth. Chapters 4 and 5 begin with John in heaven, where all of heaven acknowledges God's sovereignty.

Heaven is a place where all of heaven bows down and worships God, acknowledging his sovereignty. The problem is earth does not. The earth contests God's sovereignty.

The earth refuses to acknowledge God's sovereignty, especially the Roman Empire. Rome instead claims its own sovereignty and refuses to and rejects and even rebels against and contests the absolute sovereignty of God, which is acknowledged in heaven. So heaven is a place that acknowledges God's sovereignty and worships God.

Earth is a place that largely does not, especially empires and kingdoms like Rome. So, the question that chapters 4 and 5 raise in the book is how will God's sovereignty that is completely acknowledged in heaven, how will that eventually get acknowledged on earth? How does God's worship of God take place in heaven, and how will that eventually take place on earth? On an earth that refuses to acknowledge it, an earth that contests it. The rest of Revelation 6 through 22 is the answer to that question.

6 through 22 describe how the scene in heaven in chapters 4 and 5 eventually transpires on earth. It takes place through a series of judgments that eventually lead to chapters 21 and 22, wherein a new heaven and new earth, on a new creation, all of the earth finally acknowledges God's sovereignty. And people from every tribe, tongue, nation, and language finally emerge as worshipping God on his throne.

So, in the situation of chapters 4 and 5, finally, in a new creation, in the new heavens and new earth, God's sovereignty that is acknowledged in heaven finally gets acknowledged on earth. An earth that, at the present time, contests it, refuses it, and rebels against it. In a sense, in chapters 4 through 22 of Revelation, I owe this insight to Richard Bauckham, but I'm convinced he's right.

In a sense, Revelation 4 through 22 could be seen as an expansion of part of the Lord's prayer in Matthew chapter 6, where Jesus tells his disciples, pray, our Father who is in heaven, hallow be thy name, your kingdom come, you will be done on earth as it is in heaven. So, heaven is a place where God's name is hallowed in worship. Heaven is a place where God's kingdom, where God's will is realized, but that has yet to be acknowledged on earth.

God's name has yet to be hallowed on earth. God's will and God's kingdom has yet to be completely accomplished on earth. That's part of the Lord's prayer.

In a sense, Revelation is an expression of how that's going to happen and how the Lord's prayer will eventually get worked out. Third, chapters 4 and 5 remind us that Revelation is also primarily a book about worship and not again about the end times. I've said this in several connections, but I can't stress it enough.

Yes, Revelation does refer to the end times, but not for the sake of giving us privileged insight into what's going to happen in the future or giving us information that satisfies our curiosity and allows us to construct timelines and charts and things like that. At the essence, Revelation is a book about worship. Chapters 4 and 5 remind us again that it raises the question, who is really worthy of our worship? Who is worthy of our allegiance? Is it Rome? For the first-century Christians, was it Rome and the emperor who claimed allegiance and worship as those who provided peace, stability, prosperity, and blessing for the entire world? Revelation 4 and 5 remind us up front that one of the questions Revelation will wrestle with and that God's people must wrestle with is who is really worthy of our worship. Who is worthy of our allegiance? No other human being, no other people, no other nation, no other entity is worthy of our worship, only God and the Lamb.

To worship anything else is nothing less than idolatry. Revelation 4 and 5 give us a glimpse into the true reality that only God and the Lamb, seated on the throne, are sovereign over all things; only they are worthy of our worship. Number 4, and related to the third one, is Revelation 4 and 5. We've already seen this happening in chapter 1, but now we see it even more so in 4 and 5. Chapters 4 and 5 is a direct counterclaim to the claims of the Roman Empire.

Chapters 4 and 5, because it presents God as seated on his throne, worthy of worship, and all of creation, acknowledging his sovereignty, and the Lamb as well.

Chapters 4 and 5 conflict with the claims of Rome. I've already mentioned this before, but it bears repeating again because I hear this so often.

Many still are convinced that Revelation was written in symbolic language so that it would not be so that if it fell into the wrong hands, its message would be hidden. If it would have been too conspicuous and overt, this could have brought on even more persecution for Christians. However, I cannot imagine any Roman Emperor reading chapters 4 and 5 and not being upset because their reign, their throne, and their own claims were being contested.

You cannot have two thrones. You cannot have God and the Lamb on their throne, sovereign over all things, and Caesar. It doesn't work.

So, Revelations 4 and 5 conflict and bring Revelation into overt and direct conflict with the claims of the Roman Empire. Number 5. Revelation 4 and 5 consist of two separate scenes, but they are continuous. They both have the same setting, the throne room of God, and the throne is sort of the central point around which both scenes revolve.

In chapter 4, God is seated on his throne, and he's worshipped as the creator of the universe. In chapter 5, we find a Lamb who unseals a scroll and who likewise ends up on God's throne and who is worshipped by all of heaven. So, chapter 4 and 5 again are one continuous vision, two scenes, but part of one vision and having the same setting, which is the heavenly throne room.

So, having said that, as kind of a way of introducing this section and kind of orienting ourselves to chapters 4 and 5, what I want to do is look at each of the chapters and consider their main functions, examine some of the details, and also focus on the Old Testament, particularly the Old Testament use that lies behind many of the images. As we begin chapter 4, one other point to make by way of introduction to 4 through 22, so, not just focusing on chapters 4 and 5, but 4 through 22. Chapter 4 begins the visionary section of Revelation.

There have been many attempts to try to categorize and try to systematize different ways of approaching chapters 4 through 22. The most popular way that has emerged has been to categorize throughout church history. Looking at the way Christians throughout church history have interpreted Revelation, we categorize it according to a number of labels. Virtually every commentary I have ever picked up and read utilizes these labels, and I certainly would not want to say they're unhelpful or inaccurate or anything like that, but I just want to talk a little bit about the way we approach 4 through 22.

Scholars and commentaries on Revelation, again, you can pick up almost anyone and read the introduction, and you'll be introduced to these different categories as ways

of approaching and interpreting Revelation 4 through 22. The assumption is almost any approach can be placed into one or more of these categories. For example, commentaries are convinced that many approaches to interpreting Revelation 4 through 22 can be labeled with what is known as the Preterist approach.

The Preterist approach basically says all of Revelation 4 through 22, or most of it refers solely to the first century. That is, it's simply a commentary on what's going on in the first century. That is one common way of describing the events of Revelation 4 through 22.

That is because 4 through 22 is only describing what was happening in the first century. That's called the Preterist approach. Another approach is called the Historical approach.

Interestingly, I don't find this approach described much anymore, and you'll see why as I describe it. The Historical approach is basically similar to one of the views of the seven churches we looked at. We said a popular view that doesn't seem to be very popular anymore, but one popular view in the past was that the seven churches predicted seven periods of church history.

Some read Revelation 4 through 22 as actually predicting periods of church history leading up to the modern day. Now, obviously, the difficulty with that is as history goes on and changes, this keeps having to be revised. In fact, the difficulty, too, is you can often find sections of all through chapters 4 through 22 that could fit almost any period of church history.

So, for that reason, the historical view that Revelation is sort of a forecast of church history starting in the first century, leading up to the modern day, and then finally culminating in the second coming of Christ, I don't find a popular view anymore. A third view is known as the Idealist view. The Idealist view says Revelation really is not referring to specific events either in the first century or through church history, but instead, Revelation should be understood more as a symbolic portrayal of the battle between God and Satan or good and evil.

And so, all the images and symbols of Revelation are sort of to be taken as trans-temporal. Yes, they apply to the first century, but they can apply to any century in that they describe the images of Revelation chapters 4 through 22 as a symbolic way of depicting the struggle between the church and Satan, between God and Satan, all through church history, leading up to the second coming of Christ. So, the images transcend just the first century, but they're general symbols, just a symbolic portrayal of the battle between God and evil, that eventually God is victorious over in the end, and not to be restricted to any one event or person or time period.

The final view is known as the Preterist view. A final view is known as the Futurist view. That is, most of, if not all of 4 through 22 has yet to happen.

It has not yet happened. It is solely the future, and the church still awaits and looks forward to chapters 4 through 22. Now, you'll notice I said little about this approach at the beginning, and that is because while this approach has some value in helping us to see the way the church has interpreted things and helping us to point attention to how we might understand Revelation 4 through 22, it is far too limited because it only focuses on a temporal understanding as if that is the most important feature and classification for how we interpret Revelation.

We're going to see Revelation is, the focus is not about temporally when do these events occur. In fact, some Christians, I think, or some interpreters of Revelation get obsessed with where these events fit temporally within one of these categories. Instead, our focus is going to be solely on what does the text seem to say? And how are these visions functioning? What are they saying to Christians? How would Christians in the first century of Asia Minor have made sense of these? So probably, as we've hinted at already, probably our interpretations are going to fit two or three of these approaches at times.

And it's probably unnecessary to try to pigeonhole Revelation into only one of those. But again, suggesting that these are the most important categories restricts Revelation to the most important features. When do these events occur temporally? So, as I said, we'll focus our attention more on how we understand these texts functioning in their literary context. How would they have addressed the situation of the seven churches? So, chapter four, Revelation chapter four, what I want to do is especially four five, I do want to spend time reading chapters four and five. Again, I want you to hear the text.

I want you, in a sense, as John did, and as he probably intended for his readers, to be able in one sense, to visualize what is going on before we try to talk about some of the details. Because we don't want to just dissect this text and examine the details under a microscope, lest we lose the force of the vision and see it, the images and their beauty are kind of, again, passing before our eyes and helping us to kind of feel the effect of the vision. So, chapter four begins sort of the vision proper.

After this, I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me, like a trumpet, said, come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this. At once, I was in the spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

And the one who sat there had the appearance of Jasper and Carnelian. A rainbow resembling an emerald encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were 24 other thrones, and seated on them were 24 elders.

They were dressed in white, and they had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. Before the throne were seven lamps blazing.

These were the seven spirits of God. And before the throne, there was one who looked like, or there was, what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center around the throne were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes in front and in back.

The first living creature was like a lion. The second was like an ox. The third had a face like a man, and the fourth was like a flying eagle.

Each of these four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under the wings. Day and night, they never stopped singing, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come. Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to him who sits in the throne and who lives forever and ever, the 24 elders then will fall down before him who sits in the throne and they worship him who lives forever and ever.

They lay their crowns before the throne and they 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 they have their being. So this is the beginning of the vision proper. And as we've said, it begins in heaven.

And revelation, as I've already mentioned, will kind of alternate between John being in heaven, at other times he will apparently be on earth or see things going on in earth, then he'll be back up in heaven again, and we'll try to be alert to that. But the beginning point with a heavenly vision is appropriate because, remember, as an apocalypse, John is trying to provide a heavenly perspective on reality. As his readers look out at the empirical physical world, John now is permitted to see into heaven.

The curtain is removed, the veil is removed, the covering is taken away so that John can see another reality. It's not a separate, different reality, as if John enters some dream fantasy world, but this is true reality. It is the reader's situation now expanded to include the heavenly reality that influences it and lies behind it.

So now John's vision begins with heavens opened so that he can now peer into heaven and see a whole new reality that will shape him and his reader's view of their present situation. It's important to see that John begins chapter 4 with a reference to heaven open, a door standing open in heaven, and then hearing a voice. This was part and parcel of apocalyptic literature.

In many other Jewish apocalypses, you often find references to the seer or the visionary going up to heaven and hearing a voice addressing him. There are numerous references to heaven opened. In fact, you find later on in the book of Acts chapter 7, there's a reference to heaven opened.

Peter has a vision of heaven opened. I have even argued elsewhere that Jesus, after his baptism, when he sees heaven opened, he is having an apocalyptic vision. In chapter 4, the temptations of Jesus, and chapter 4, 1-11 in Matthew, are all part of an apocalyptic vision that Jesus had, much like John's.

And so, this opening of the heaven was part and parcel of apocalyptic literature. More specifically, it seems to have its background in the book of Ezekiel, a book that, along with Isaiah, a book that plays a crucial role for John throughout Revelation. In fact, what is interesting is to just make a brief comment about John's use of the Old Testament; what is interesting is that when John draws on the book of Isaiah, he often draws on it thematically.

That is, in different sections, he'll draw on main text that communicate the theme that he's trying to communicate in that section. When John follows Ezekiel, he follows it pretty much in the order of the book of Ezekiel itself. And so, in chapter 4, the reference to the open heaven resembles Ezekiel chapter 1 and verse 1. And notice it begins, in the thirteenth year, this is Ezekiel 1 verse 1, in the thirteenth year, in the fourth month of the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar river, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.

And probably, that verse alone provided the impetus for other apocalypses. And I mentioned before a work by a British scholar named Christopher Rowland, whose book was entitled *The Open Heaven*. And he demonstrates how Ezekiel 1.1 was very influential for the notion of apocalyptic visions.

And certainly, John now draws specifically on Ezekiel 1.1 to describe his own apocalyptic vision. But he wants to make clear that he now has visionary experience in line with that of Ezekiel. So, the heaven opens and hearing the voice, a common theme of apocalyptic literature, where now the veil is lifted, and John is allowed to see behind the scenes and glimpse the heavenly reality.

Interestingly, at this point, John actually ascends to heaven. And let me back up. John is not only dependent on Ezekiel for this concept of vision of heaven, but we're going to see Isaiah in chapter six as well.

But as heaven is open, John is told to come up here. Hopefully most of us realize this is not a reference to the rapture or something like this. This is just common.



This is part of a visionary experience. The heaven is open and the seer then ascends to heaven or is taken on a visionary experience. One common theme in many Jewish apocalypses is what are often called Merkava apocalypses or sort of apocalypses of ascent.

That is, you often find what you don't find here in John, you find in some other Jewish apocalypses, where they often ascend through various heavens and the number differs. Sometimes it's three, sometimes it's seven, sometimes it's more than that. But the seer ascends through various heavens and sees something in each one.

And the goal is to arrive at the final heaven, the seventh one or whatever, which is the throne room of God. We have no reference to John ascending through levels of heaven. We simply have John being summoned up to heaven, which is the throne room of God or the temple of God where God dwells.

John is summoned by this voice and in preparation for his apocalyptic vision, he now ascends to heaven. The rest of chapter four then will describe what John saw in this visionary experience. And again, it's important to realize John draws very heavily from Ezekiel and especially chapters one and two, which is Ezekiel's heavenly vision.

And he draws very heavily on Isaiah chapter six, which portrays Isaiah in a visionary, heavenly visionary experience and seeing different creatures surrounding the throne of God as Ezekiel does. So again, John is making clear that his vision is to be understood along the same lines as Ezekiel's and Isaiah's. What John sees is the same heavenly throne room.

And what John experiences is to be understood in the same way as Isaiah and Ezekiel, as John sort of takes the mantle of Isaiah and Ezekiel upon himself in this apocalyptic vision. As I said, John will draw on these two books, especially Ezekiel and Isaiah, throughout the rest of his work. Isaiah more thematically, he'll move throughout the book, drawing on texts that support his themes, but Ezekiel, he will follow almost in the identical order that Ezekiel himself has followed.

The other thing to reiterate too, by saying John has drawn on Ezekiel and Isaiah for his own presentation of his own vision, I want to emphasize that John has had a real, I think, real visionary experience, but that experience has been communicated to him in images and languages like Ezekiel and Isaiah. And then John, I think, goes back to Ezekiel and Isaiah and draws on the language of those texts to make clear exactly what it was he saw and to draw the connections with the Old Testament texts and those who have had similar visionary experiences to his own. So, he has his own vision, yet he writes in the language of his Old Testament predecessors, but now he shows how even the visions of his predecessors have now been fulfilled in light of the person of Jesus Christ.

One other thing to say before we look at some of the detailed features of John's vision is to realize that this phrase that begins verse 4, after this, or after these things, again, I want to make clear this language that we'll see throughout Revelation, after this, I saw, or after these things, then I looked and saw this. That language is not meant to convey chronological order of how these things will transpire as if the events of chapters 2 and 3 happened first, and then when they're done, chapters 4 and 5 happen. Instead, this is the order in which John writes, or this is the order in which he saw these things.

So, after hearing the message, after seeing what he did in chapter 1, the vision of the exalted Christ, and after hearing and writing the messages of chapters 2 and 3, John sees this, and John will now record his visionary experience in chapters 4 and 5. The first thing to note about chapter 4 is the mention of the throne. That will provide the focal point, the center point, and almost the gravitational pull for everything else that takes place in chapters 4 and 5. The throne is significant because, actually, we already have been introduced to the throne and its significance back in chapter 1, but now, in John's vision in chapters 4 and 5, it begins to even emerge and play a more crucial role, where the throne is significant because it is a symbol of sovereignty and rulership, which again will suggest an important feature or theme throughout the rest of Revelation. Who is really in control? Who is really the sovereign ruler of the universe? Who is really the sovereign ruler over all the nations and over the world? Is it Caesar or someone else? So, again, just the mention of the throne here would immediately be a counter-imperial claim.

You can't have two thrones. It's either God is seated on his throne, or Caesar is seated on his throne. Either God is worthy of worship and allegiance, or Caesar is worthy of worship and allegiance.

So, who is in control? Who is truly the sovereign ruler of the universe? That question is already raised simply by the appearance of God's throne in the initial part of John's vision in chapter 4. In fact, the word throne, if you count, the word throne appears 13 times in Revelation chapter 4 alone and will occur again in chapter 4 and will occur also in chapter 5 as well. The other way that it contrasts, too, is we've already been introduced back in chapter 2 to Satan's throne as well. And so, once again, the image of the throne plays a crucial role.

Who is in control? God's sovereignty is contested by that of Satan ultimately but by that of Caesar and any other human ruler. But chapter 4 at the forefront, as we've already said, reminds us there is no dualism in Revelation, as if the outcome of this contest is in doubt until we get to the end. But already we're introduced to Jesus and the Lamb and God seated on the highest throne, the heavenly throne, and that has yet just to get worked out on this earth, an earth that contests it.

One other question that is inevitably raised in our mind as we read these verses in chapter 4 is, when does this take place? What is John describing? Is he describing a specific scene historically in the past? Is he describing what's going on now? Is this some event yet to take place in the future? What is interesting when you read it, it's really not clear. There are no clear temporal indicators of when this takes place. Or should we perhaps take this more a-temporally, that John is not describing a specific event in chapter 4 at any time, but simply is describing a reality that is simply true at all times.

God is depicted as seated on his throne in all of heaven, acknowledging his sovereignty without John being concerned exactly when this takes place. Or is there a certain time when this is evident? Again, it's interesting there's a lack of any specific temporal indications as to when this going on. Again, perhaps we're not delimited to any specific temporal moment.

So, there's no specific chronology as far as when this text takes place. The other thing to mention about chapter 4 in relationship to what is going on is it's intriguing to me when you read this carefully, one thing that your English translations hide is the fact that, and this is necessary just because we have to do this in English usually if you were to read the Greek text if you're able to and read the Greek text of chapter 4, there are very, very, very few indicative verbs that would suggest movement and activity. There's only a couple of them.

One is associated with the thunder and lightning coming from the throne. But other than that, there are very few verbs at all that describe activities and actions and movement actually going on in chapter 4. Instead, chapter 4 is almost a static scene. It's highly descriptive of the heavenly environs, but it's, in a sense, fairly static.

I think the reason for that is chapter 4 probably functions to provide the setting for chapter 5. Interestingly, to go back to the Greek text, if you could read the Greek text, when you get to chapter 5, all of a sudden, there are all kinds of indicative verbs. That is, verbs that portray actions and activities going on in heaven. So again, chapter 4 provides the backdrop and the setting for chapter 5. What that means is the main focus of our attention should be in chapter 5. That does not mean that chapter 4 is not important.

Yes, of course it is. But chapter 4 mainly provides the setting and the backdrop for what's going to happen in chapter 5. And that's where the lamb emerges on his throne and that's where the main action begins to take place. And everything is leading up to that in chapter 4. It's interesting too that in chapter 4, John does not describe directly the one who is seated on the throne.

Again, following Isaiah and Ezekiel, John, instead, it's interesting that John's attention is going to move very quickly and is going to move away from the one seated on the

throne to what goes on around it. So, he begins again, notice in verse 2, once I was in the spirit and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone seated on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian; a rainbow resembling an emerald encircled the throne.

So, notice he says almost nothing about the person on the throne. He doesn't describe this person in detail. He just says there's one seated on the throne and his appearance was like this.

But immediately, he moves away to describe this rainbow encircling him. And then in verse 4, he begins to describe other thrones, these 24 thrones and 24 elders that encircled the throne, and then also the four living creatures. So, it's intriguing that John does not directly describe the one seated on the throne, but moves very quickly away from the throne to begin to describe the environs and the surroundings of the throne.

One interesting feature of the throne and the one seated on the throne that John brings out is that the appearance of the one on the throne is described as precious stones or precious jewels. The NIV translation that I read used the words the appearance of jasper and carnelian and then a rainbow surrounding the throne that resembled an emerald. Now, obviously, at one level, this sort of language simply adds to the aura of the vision.

It adds to the splendor and the beauty of the vision and the awe of what John sees. But probably we should push a little bit more beyond that. And it's interesting that two things to draw your attention to.

Number one, it's interesting that these precious stones recall, I think, the foundations of the stones that belong to the temple. For example, the stones in the breastplate of the high priest. Elsewhere, texts like Isaiah 54 describe the rebuilding of the New Jerusalem in terms of precious stones.

Elsewhere in Jewish literature, we find the temple described as gold and precious stones. So, at one level, the precious stones recall the temple. This is the place of God's dwelling.

This is the holy temple where God dwells, where his throne is seated. But second, along with that, these precious stones probably function to symbolize divine presence. Interestingly, these stones will appear later on in Revelation 21 and 22 as the stones that make up the New Jerusalem temple where God dwells with his people.

So, these stones, then, are probably not meant to represent specific attributes of God that we should worry about. What does this refer to as far as God's character?

The rainbow may suggest the flood account in Genesis and God's faithfulness to his creation, which I think certainly fits here. Because God back in Genesis chapters 6 and 12, the rainbow was part of the demonstration of God's covenant and his faithfulness to his creation from Genesis 1 and 2. It's interesting that here in Revelation 4, God is celebrated as the creator of all things.

So, the rainbow is an appropriate element in John's vision because, and we're going to see later on in just a moment, why that's significant, but it's appropriate in celebrating God as the creator of all things that the rainbow would emerge as a sign from Genesis 6 and 9, once again, as an indication of God's faithfulness to his creation. And I want to return to that in a moment. But the point is, the stones, we probably don't need to be too specific as far as what in God's character or attributes they represent, but simply together they represent God's glorious and shining presence in his heavenly temple but in anticipation of the time that he will dwell with his people in a new creation in Revelation 21 and 22.

But as we said, now we move away from the throne and its occupant, which John hesitates to describe, but that's common in apocalyptic literature. Often in apocalyptic literature, the person on the throne is not described, but everything around him and the appearance of his brilliance and shining. What happens next then? John's attention moves away from the throne and its occupant to what surrounds it.

John singles out two separate groups, a group of twenty-four elders or twenty-four thrones and twenty-four elders seated on those thrones, and then another group of four living creatures. Now, at one level, it's easy to deal with both of these groups in that it's easy to answer the question, what do these do? What do these two groups, the twenty-four elders and the twenty-four thrones and the four living creatures, do? What is their function in this vision? Well, when you read it closely, they seem to have one function and that is to offer up ceaseless praise to the one seated on the throne. Day and night, they worship the one on the throne.

They worship God. Their primary function is to acknowledge, to acknowledge God's sovereignty and to offer up worship to the one who is the creator, the sovereign creator of all of the entire universe. The difficulty comes in trying to identify who these groups are.

Who are these twenty-four elders that sit on the throne? Who are these four living creatures that are described in rather strange language? Now, up until this point, hopefully, you will come to the conclusion these groups are symbolic of someone or something though. And that's the question what or who do these groups represent or what or whom do these two groups symbolize? The obvious question is, are these groups symbolic of angelic beings, or are they symbolic of human beings or some group of human beings? Or again, should we resist deciding and pigeonholing into

one group or the other and suggest some combination of the two? But we'll start by looking at the twenty-four elders. Actually, the twenty-four elders play an important role in the rest of the book of Revelation.

We'll see them cropping up in chapter seven and in a couple other places throughout the book of Revelation. But again, the twenty-four elders had probably even more than the four living creatures. There have been a number of attempts to try to explain and describe their precise identity.

Again, at one level, we don't need to worry too much about this because, as we said, the main point is their function. Whoever they are, their primary function in the vision is to worship God, to acknowledge his sovereignty day and night, to worship the one who sits on the throne, the one who is the sovereign Lord over all creation. That is the main point that you need to understand.

But at the same time, I think it is helpful and necessary to ask, well, who might this be? Can we identify these twenty-four elders? One option, and again, I'm not going to survey all the possibilities. I just want to focus on a few that I think are perhaps the most likely and might provide the explanation for what we find in chapter four. One possibility is that the twenty-four elders are simply heavenly beings that are modeled on the twenty-four courses of priests that one finds back in the Old Testament, especially 1 Chronicles 23.6 and 1 Chronicles 24.7-18. So, the twenty-four courses of priests in 1 Chronicles provide a model for these twenty-four heavenly beings who function apparently then as priests.

Now, the difficulty with that is that it's not abundantly clear that these twenty-four elders function as priests. In a way, the fact that they offer up praise to God and worship to God may suggest a priestly function, but they don't do some other things one might expect from a priest, such as offering up sacrifices or some other things that actually one finds going on in the book of Revelation. Others have suggested this is actually the twenty-four elders representing the church who have now been taken to heaven.

This is often associated with a certain view of how we interpret Revelation, which one can see, for example, in the Left Behind series. That is before all these end-time events in Revelation 4-22 happen, the church will actually be raptured away. At present, God is dealing with the church, but before he pours out his wrath, before he pours out his judgment, before he begins to deal with the nation of Israel again, before all that happens, before the end-time Antichrist and the enemy arrives, before any of that happens, starting in chapter 4, God will rapture his church away, and that is what the twenty-four elders are.

Again, that might be convincing if one follows that line of interpretation. If you're convinced that 4-22 is only future and it's mainly God dealing with Israel and God

pouring out his judgment on humanity that the church will be spared from, then seeing the twenty-four elders as representing the church might be a valid conclusion. A third possibility is that the twenty-four elders are the heavenly representatives of Israel and the church.

Remember, we suggested that the apocalyptic literature functions to demonstrate or present the heavenly counterpart to earthly realities or the heavenly reality that is a counterpart to the earthly reality. And so, it could be that what we have here is a counterpoint to or a counterpart or reflection in heaven of the earthly people of God. That is, for example, we saw with the seven angels of the seven churches, the seven angels being the seven heavenly representatives of the earthly churches.

And so, here we might have the heavenly representatives of the earthly people of God, that is, Israel, the nation of Israel from the Old Testament, as well as a church. So, you get twenty-four by adding up twelve. Remember, we said twelve is the number of the people of God.

So, twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles representing the church together end up being twenty-four, obviously. And so, the twenty-four elders are the heavenly representatives of Israel and the church. A fourth option is that these are simply angelic beings who belong to a heavenly court.

When one reads texts like 1 Kings 22:19, but also another text, Isaiah chapter 24:23, both of these portray the heavenly court or heaven with God seated on his throne and a heavenly court surrounding him, apparently. For example, Isaiah chapter 24 and verse 23 may provide a similar situation or provide the background for what one finds. So, in 24 verse 23, we read, I'll back up and read 22.

And interestingly, these verses have often been labeled as Isaiah's apocalypse. Verse 22: They will be herded together, all the nations and the kings of the earth, they will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon. They will be shut up in prison, be punished after many days.

The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed, for the Lord Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before its elders gloriously. Some have suggested that the portrayal is of God on his throne with his heavenly court elders surrounding him. And that is the model for what we find in chapter 4 of Revelation with the 24 elders.

So, this would be an angelic being, a heavenly court that surrounds God seated on his throne and surrounded by these angelic beings. There are other possibilities that we could explain, but I've simply focused on the main ones that I think could provide a potential background for understanding the 24 elders seated on the throne. Again, I want to remind you that what is important is not so much that we pin down exactly

who these are in the background, as much as we remember them and call their function.

The primary function is that they surround the throne of God. They acknowledge God's sovereignty. They, in a sense, lead heaven in worshiping the one who sits on the throne, who is a sovereign ruler over all of the universe.

In the next section, then, I want to look a little bit more detail at the 24 elders and see if we can, out of these different options, do one of them fit? How does that help us understand what is going on in the book of Revelation?

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of the Revelation. This is session number 8, Revelation 4 and 5, An Introduction.