

#11 WORTHY IS GOD (REV 4)

The best thing one can do with Revelation 4-5 is to slowly read it and imagine what John saw. Mediate on *why* the one on the throne and the lamb are worthy, what they are worthy of, and how their worthiness contrasts with the beastly human rulers who so often insist on their own worthiness. Then, join in the praise of heaven and earth.

Revelation 4-5 begins with heaven worshipping the one on the throne and concludes with the worship of all creation of both the one on the throne and the lamb. One wonders if this flow in some way foreshadows the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer in Matthew 6:9-10. "*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" The adoration and obedience of the heavenly beings must expand to all creatures in heaven and earth. The slain lamb and his kingdom of priests are the means.

Worthy are you, our Lord and God. The same trumpet-like voice of Jesus invites John into heaven. Without losing the sense of what John sees, it is helpful to be aware that this vision of God's throne room bears similarities to other theophanies (times when God manifests himself). Mount Sinai trembled with thunder and lightning when God descended on it (Ex 19:16-20). Moses and others saw a clear pavement of sapphire under God's feet (Ex 24:10) and Ezekiel saw an expanse shining like crystal on which the throne rested (Ez 1:22, 26).⁶⁹ Ezekiel compares the brightness all around the one on the throne to a rainbow (Ez. 1:27-28). Zechariah saw a lampstand with seven lampstands that related to the Spirit (Zech. 4:2, 6).⁷⁰

Given the distinct status and roles of both the elders and the living creatures in the heavenly throne room, it seems most reasonable to see them as heavenly beings. They certainly *may* have earthly counterparts when the worship of God plays out on earth.⁷¹ In Revelation, these **elders** worship, hold the prayers of the saints, and interpret to John.⁷² The **living creatures** are very similar to the *living creatures/cherubim* Ezekiel sees carrying the throne of God (Ezek. 1, 10). Cherubim were depicted all around the earthly temple, imitating the heavenly reality seen here.

Creatures like cherubim were also depicted around the thrones of kings and gods in the ancient Near East.⁷³ It is often suggested that God is presenting his own throne in the visual imagery familiar to that world, but it may be preferred to see that the ancient royal and divine world were actually imitating a common and more ancient understanding of YHWH's throne.

But the elders and living creatures are not the focal point of the scene. However great they are, they are not looking in mirrors: their awe is aimed at the one on the throne. The living creatures *never cease* to proclaim that God is *holy, holy, holy*. God's uniqueness to his creation

⁶⁹ "It may even be that in John's depiction we are to see a symbolic reference to the water-filled expanse of heaven upon which the throne of God is said to rest (Gen 1:7; Amos 9:6; Mounce 136)." Martin Pickup, *Overcoming with the Lamb: Lessons From the Book of Revelation*, 34.

⁷⁰ Martin Pickup notes that John's theophany also bears similarities to 1 Enoch 71:5-10 and 2 Enoch 20:1-21:1, though he does not see these as genuine heavenly experiences. *Overcoming with the Lamb: Lessons From the Book of Revelation*, 34.

⁷¹ Contra the common suggestion that the elders represent saints (or 12 tribes + 12 apostles) and the living beings represent all creatures of earth, I am instead suggesting instead that people and depictions of cherubim on earth represent and/or imitate the heavenly reality.

⁷² An earthly correspondent or imitation of these twenty-four elders *may*, as Beale suggests, "be based on David's twenty-four orders of priests (1 Chron. 24:3-9), twenty-four Levitical gatekeepers (1 Chron. 26:17-19), and twenty-four Levitical worship leaders (1 Chron. 25:6-31)..." Beale, 101.

⁷³ Martin Pickup, 37. "The biblical depictions of God's throne are accommodations based upon royal motifs from the ancient Near Eastern world. Composite creatures very much akin to the cherubim and seraphim of the Bible have been discovered among the iconography of the Phoenicians, Canaanites, Egyptians, Hittites and Mesopotamians (Harrison 642-43). These creatures were commonly associated with the thrones of kings and gods. It should not surprise us that the Bible's portrayal of the sovereign God would include the traditional trappings of royalty so familiar to the ancient mind."

cannot be overstated, so they cannot but continually proclaim it. We are led to believe that they voluntarily submit their entire existence to proclaim the utter uniqueness of God. In contrast, the whole earth marvels at the beast and declares its uniqueness, “*Who is like the beast?*” (13:4).

The elders follow the living creatures by falling down, worshipping, and casting their crowns before the throne. These elders reign with authority, but they are acknowledging God as the true king. Osborne explains that the practice of laying a crown before the throne was “a common practice as client kings” as the “demonstrate[d] their allegiance to the emperor.”⁷⁴ In Revelation, kings will later receive authority with the beast, hand their power over to the beast, and make war on the Lamb (17:12-14). Earthly kings see their power is derived from the people and they plot with their people how to be free from the rule of God and his king (Ps. 2:1-3), but the elders acknowledge their authority is derived from God and they submit their authority to God’s.

Roman emperors were declared to be “worthy” as they entered cities.⁷⁵ Though official divine status is not applied to rulers today, modern political rallies are do not differ much in character: the masses gather to ascribe glory, power, and wealth to political figures while those who dissent are mocked and removed. Meanwhile, the elders proclaim God’s worthiness to receive glory, honor, and power because he is the one who created all things and they continue to exist by his power. Other receptors of worship are nothing in comparison.

This scene impresses us with God’s holiness and draw us into worship him. The importance of worship cannot be overstated, but as you contemplate this vision, do try to state it. Why all is worship so important — declaring both God’s holiness and worthiness?

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What else strikes you as significant about this vision and about our God?

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HOLY, HOLY, HOLY! By Reginald Heber, 1826

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty! God over all, and blest eternally.
Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee, Casting down their golden crowns around the crystal sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee, who wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.
Holy, holy, holy! Tho’ the darkness hide Thee, Tho’ the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see; Only Thou art holy!
There is none beside Thee, perfect in pow’r, in love and purity.
Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! All Thy works shall praise Thy name, in earth, and sky, and sea;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty! God over all, and blest eternally.

⁷⁴ Osborne, *Revelation Verse By Verse*, Kindle Location 1780.

⁷⁵ Osborne, Kindle Location 1780.