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

Now beginning with chapter 4 we arrive at the apocalyptic section of the book. This is the vision proper. We saw an inaugural vision in chapter 1 but now starting in chapter 4. John commences a vision that will extend all the way to the end of the book, or 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. 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,” etc. You can think of many other songs that have been verbally inspired by Revelation chapter 4 and 5.

Overall Content of Rev 4-5: No dualism

What I want to do, and hopefully as we progress in looking at these two chapters we will see how these two fit 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 within the section. But let me make several initial comments about the overall function, the overall content, kind of an overall orientation to Revelation chapters 4 and 5. Literally, the first point I want to make, from a literary perspective is that chapters 4 and 5 provide sort of the setting or preparation for the rest of the vision, that is, chapters 6 through 22. All that happens in chapters 6 through 22 stems from and flows from this visionary section. All the blessing of salvation that are described in the rest of Revelation result from this section. All the judgments that we read about in chapter 6 through 19 starting with chapter 6 and the seven seals, all of these judgments issue 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 we see God’s judgment is being poured out as we see things getting a little chaotic. For example, it is like sending in an airplane with all kinds of turbulence going on and getting thrown about. Revelation 4 and 5 reminds 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 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 is no dualism between good and evil but the starting point is God sovereignly seated on his throne and he is sovereignly in control of all the events that take place in the world.

God’s sovereignty in Heaven, while earth resists

Second, Revelation 4 and 5 functions and prepares chapters 6 through 22 in another way. In chapters 4 and 5 we find this vision of all of heaven worshiping God seated on his throne. All heaven is portrayed in chapters 4 and 5 and again to back up just a little bit the location is clearly in the heavenlies. We’re going to see in the rest of Revelation John will show that his perspective kind of oscillates between heaven and earth. Chapter 4 and 5 begins 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 is: how will God’s sovereignty that is completely acknowledged in heaven, how will that eventually get acknowledged on earth? How will
the worship of God 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. Chapters 6 through 22 describe how the scene in heaven eventually transpires on earth. It takes place through a series of judgments that leads eventually to chapters 21 and 22 in a new heavens and a new earth, on a new creation where all of earth, all of creation, finally acknowledges God’s sovereignty. All of creation people from every tribe and tongue and nation and language finally emerge as worshipping God on his throne. So the situation in chapters 4 and 5 finally in the new heavens and the 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, rebels against it.

Lord’s Prayer and Rev 4-22

In a sense chapter 4 through 22 of Revelation, and I owe this insight to Richard Bacham and I’m convinced he’s right, Revelation 4 through 22 could be seen as an expansion as part of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew chapter 6. Jesus tells his disciples to pray, “Our father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” So heaven is a place where God’s name is hallowed and worshiped. Heaven is a place where God’s kingdom is and where God’s will is realized. But that has yet to be acknowledged on earth. God name has yet to be hallowed on earth. God’s will and God’s kingdom has yet to be completely accomplished on earth. 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.

Revelation is a Book about Worship

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 and I can’t stress it enough. Yes, Revelation does refer to the end times, but not to give 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
raising the question, who is really worthy of our worship? Who is worthy of our allegiance? Is it Rome? For the first century Christians, is it Rome and the emperor who were claiming allegiance and worship as those who provided peace and stability and prosperity and blessing for the entire world? But Revelation 4 and 5 remind us up front that one of the questions Revelation will wrestle with and the question people must wrestle with is: Who is really worthy of our worship? Who is worthy of our allegiance? No other human being, 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 gives us a glimpse into the true reality that only God and the lamb seated on the throne sovereign over all things only they are worthy of our worship.

Rev 4-5 as Direct Counter Claim to Roman Empire

Number four, and related to the third one is, Revelation 4 and 5 as 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 are a direct counter claim to the claims of the Roman Empire. Chapters 4 and 5 present 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 it so often. Many are still convinced that Revelation was written in symbolic language, so that if it fell into the wrong hands its message would sort of be hidden. It would have been too conspicuous and overt; it could have brought even more persecution for Christians. However, I cannot imagine any Roman emperor reading chapters 4 and 5 and not being upset because their reign and 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 Revelation 4 and 5 conflicts and brings Revelation into overt and direct conflict with the claims of the Roman Empire.

Number five, Revelation 4 and 5 consists of two separate scenes but continuous. They both have the same setting. The throne room of God and the throne is the central point around which both scenes revolve. In chapter 4 God is seated on his throne and he’s worshiped as the creator of the universe. In chapter 5 we find a lamb who unseals the
scroll and who is likewise ends up on God’s throne and is worshiped by all of heaven. So, chapters 4 and 5 again are on continuous vision two scenes but part of one vision and have the same setting which is the heavenly throne room.

Interpretation Schema for Rev 4-22

So having said that, as kind of the way of introducing this section and orienting ourselves with 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 that lies behind the images. As we begin chapter 4, one other point to make by way of introduction to 4 through 22, so we’re not just focusing on chapters 4 and 5 but 4 through 22. Chapter 4 begins the visionary section of Revelation and there has been there have been many attempts to try to categorize and try to systematize different ways of approaching chapter 4 through 22. The most popular way that has emerged has been to categorize throughout church history and looking at the way Christians have interpreted Revelation is to 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 are 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 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 it. That is, the further away we get, the further history goes on, the further away we get from the events of Revelation 4 through 22. That is because 4 through 22 is only describing what is 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 basically is similar to one of the views of the seven churches we’ve looked at. We said a popular view that doesn’t seem to be very popular anymore but one that was popular 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 as history goes on and changes this has to keep being continually revised. In fact, the difficulty too is you can often find sections all through chapter 4 through 22 that could almost fit any period of church history. So for that reason the “Historical View” is sort of a forecast of church history starting in the first century leading up to the modern day and finally culminating with the second coming of Christ. I don’t find it 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. So, all the images and symbols of Revelation are sort of to be taken as trans-temporal they. Yes, they apply to the first century, but they can apply to any century. They describe the images of Revelation chapter 4 through 22 are 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 are general symbols just the symbolic portrayal of the battle between God and evil that eventually God is victorious in the end. They are not to be restricted to any one event person or time period.

A final view is known as the futurist view that is, all or most of if not all of 4 through 22 has yet to happen. It has not yet happened it is solely future and the Church awaits and looks forward to chapters 4 through 22. Now I said little about this approach in the beginning and that is because while this approach has some value in helping us see the way the church interpreted things and helping 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 the focus of Revelation is not about temporally when did these events occur, in fact some Christians interpreters of Revelation get obsessed where these events fit temporally into one of these categories. Instead, our focus is going to be solely on what does the text seem to say? How are these visions functioning? What are they saying to Christians? How would Christians in first century Asia Minor have made sense of these? Probably as we’ve hinted at already, our interpretation is going to fit two or three of these approaches at time. It’s probably unnecessary to try and pigeon hole Revelation into one of those. To suggest that these are the most important categories restricts Revelation to the most important features when did these events occur temporally? We’ll focus our attention more on how do we understand these texts functioning in their literary context and how would they have addressed the situation of the seven churches.

Revelation 4

So Revelation chapter 4, and what I want to do is, especially with chapters 4 and 5, to spend time reading chapters 4 and 5 again I want you to hear the text. I want you in a sense, as John did, and probably intended for his readers to visualize what is going on before we try to talk about 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 the images and its beauty as passing before our eyes and helping us to feel the effect of the vision.

So chapter 4 begins 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 there 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 twenty-four other thrones and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and 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. There are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were fours 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 the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stopped singing: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty four elders will fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and 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 have their being.’”

Vision of Heaven Opened

So this is the beginning of the vision proper. As we’ve said, it begins in heaven and Revelation as I already mentioned will alternate between John being in heaven and being on earth or seeing things on earth and then he will be in heaven again. Try to be alert to that. But the beginning point with the heavenly vision is appropriate because as you remember as an apocalypse, John is trying to provide a heavenly perspective on reality. As his readers look out on the empirical physical world, John now is permitted to see into heaven. The curtain is removed; the veil is lifted; 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 the heavens opened so that now he can peer into heaven and see a whole new reality that will shape him and his readers 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 see reference 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 see in the book of Acts there is 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, and in chapter 4 verses 1 through 11, in Mathew are all a part of an apocalyptic vision Jesus had much like John’s. So this opening of the heavens 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, plays a crucial role for John in Revelation.

In fact, what is interesting just to 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 texts that communicate the theme he is trying to communicate in that section. When John follows Ezekiel, he follows it pretty much in the order of the book of Ezekiel itself.

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 impotence for other apocalypses. I mention before a work by a British Scholar named Christopher Roland whose book was entitled The Open Heaven he demonstrates how Ezekiel 1:1, was very influential in this notion of apocalyptic visions. Certainly John now draws specifically from Ezekiel 1:1, to describe his own apocalyptic vision. He wants to make clear he is having a visionary experience in line with that of Ezekiel. So the heaven opens and hearing the voice, are common themes 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 a vision of heaven, but we’re going to see Isaiah chapter 6 as well. But, as the heaven is opened John is told to come up
here. Hopefully, most of us realize this is not a reference to the rapture. This is just a common part of the visionary experience. The heaven is open and the seer is taken up to heaven or taken on a visionary experience.

One common theme in many Jewish apocalypses is what are called “Merkabah 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. The goal is to arrive at the final heaven, the seventh one or wherever the throne room of God is. We have no reference of John ascending through levels of heaven, we simply have John being summoned up to the heaven, that 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 4 then will describe what John saw in this visionary experience, Again it is important to realize John draws very heavily from Ezekiel, especially chapters 1 and 2 which is Ezekiel’s heavenly vision. He also draws very heavily on Isaiah chapter 6 which portrays Isaiah in a 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 and Isaiah. What John is seeing 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 Ezekiel himself has followed.

The other thing to reiterate 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 visionary experience, but that experience has been communicated to him in images and
language like Ezekiel and Isaiah. John goes back to Ezekiel and Isaiah to draw on those texts to make clear what he saw and to draw the connection with the Old Testament texts. Those who have had similar visionary experiences to his own, he has his own vision yet he writes in the language of his Old Testament predecessors, but now he shows even the vision of his predecessors have now been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

One other thing to say before we look at some of the detailed features of Johns 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 will 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 chapter 2 and 3, now John sees this and John will now record his visionary experience in chapters 4 and 5.

Revelation 4: The Throne

The first thing to note about chapter four is the mention of the throne. That will provide the focal point, the center point, 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. Now in John’s vision in chapters 4 and 5 it begins to emerge and play a more crucial role where the throne is significant because it is a symbol of sovereignty and rulership which again suggests 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?

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 John’s initial part of his vision in chapter 4. In fact, the word “throne,” appears thirteen times in Revelation chapter 4 alone will occur also in chapter 5 as well. The other way that I contrast this to, 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 in who is in control. God’s sovereignty is contested by Satan and ultimately by Caesar and any other human ruler. But Chapter 4 at the forefront reminds us that there is no dualism in Revelation as if the outcome of this contest is in doubt until we come to the end. But already we are introduced to Jesus and the Lamb and God seated on the highest throne, the heavenly throne, and that just has to get worked out on this earth, and earth contests it.

One other question that is inevitably raised in our mind is 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 or is he describing what’s going on now? Is this some event to take place in the future? What is interesting when you read it’s really not clear. There are no clear temporal indicators of when that takes place. Should we perhaps take this more a temporally? John is not describing a specific event at a certain time, but is simply describing a reality that is simply true at all times. That God is depicted as seated on his throne and all of heaven acknowledging his sovereignty without John being concerned exactly when this takes place. Is there a certain time when this is evident? It’s interesting there is a lack of any specific temporal indications as to when this is going on. Perhaps we’re not to limit it 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, its intriguing to me, when you read this carefully, one thing that your English translations hide is the fact that (and this is necessary because we have to do this in English usually), if you were to read the Greek text, there are very, very, very few indicative verbs that would suggest movement and activity. There are 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 that’s highly descriptive of the heavenly environs but it is in a sense fairly static. I think the reason for that is, chapter 4 probably functions to provide the setting for chapter 5. And interestingly to go back to the Greek text, if you could read the Greek text, when you get to chapter 5 there are all of the sudden a bunch of indicative verbs –that is verbs that describe 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 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 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, it’s interesting John’s attentions is going to move very quickly away from the one seated on the throne to what goes on around it. So he begins again notice in verse 2, “at 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, was encircling 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, the twenty-four thrones and these twenty-four elders that encircled the throne and then also these 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 describe the environs and the surroundings of the throne itself.

One interesting feature of the throne and the one seated on the throne that John does bring 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 word “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 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. It’s interesting that there are 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, these precious stones probably function to symbolize divine presence. And 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 certain attributes of God. We shouldn’t worry, what does this refer to as far as Gods 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 chapter 9, verses 12 and following the rainbow was part of the demonstration of God’s covenant and the demonstration of 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 and we’re going to see later on in just a moment why that’s significant. It’s appropriate in celebrating God as the creator of all things that the rainbow would emerge as a sign from Genesis 9 once again as an indication of Gods faithfulness to his creation. 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 attributes they represent but simply to gather they represent God’s glorious and shining presence in the heavenly temple in anticipation of the time 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 what the appearance of his appearance and shining.

Around the Throne: 24 Elders and 4 Living Creatures

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 are seated on those thrones and then another group of four living creatures. Now, at one level it’s easy to deal with both these groups in that it’s easy to answer the question what did these do? What did these two groups, the twenty-four elders and the twenty-four thrones, and the four living creatures, what is their function in this vision?

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 God’s sovereignty and they offer up worship to the one who is 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 who sit on the throne? Who are these four loving creatures that are described in rather strange language? Now up until this point you hopefully will come to the conclusion these groups are symbolic of someone or something though that is the question. What or whom do these two groups represent? What 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 groups of human beings? Again we should resist deciding and pigeon-holing the one group or the other and suggest some combination of the two.

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 7 and a couple other places throughout the book of Revelation. But again, the
twenty-four elders have had, probably even more than the four living creatures, 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 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, and 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 you need to understand.

But at the same time, I think it is also necessary to ask, who might they be? Can we identify these twenty-four elders? One option, 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 best explanation for what we find in chapter 4. One possibility is that the twenty-four elders are simply heavenly beings that are modeled, of course, 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 provides a model for these twenty-four heavenly beings who function apparently as priests. Now the difficulty with that is it’s not abundantly clear that these twenty-four elders function as priests in a way the fact that they offer a 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 the twenty-four elders represent the church who has now been taken to heaven. This is often associated with a certain view of how we interpret Revelation that 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 the present, God is actually 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 anti-Christ 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 chapters 4-22 are only future and it’s mainly God
dealing with Israel and mainly 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 24 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 counter part to the earthly reality. 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. So here we might have the heavenly representatives of the earthly people of God that is the nation of Israel in the Old Testament as well as the church so you’d get twenty-four by adding up two 12’s. Remember we said 12 is a number of the people of God. So the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles representing the church together end up being twenty-four. So the number of 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. So, for example, Isaiah chapter 24 and verse 23 may provide some more situation or provide the background for what one finds here. 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] like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and 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 the portrayal is God on his throne with his heavenly court, with elders surrounding him, and that is the model for what we find in chapter 4 of Revelation with the twenty-four elders. So this would be angelic beings a heavenly angelic court, that surrounds God seated on his throne who is surrounded by
these angelic beings.

There are other possibilities that we could explain, but I simply focused on the main ones that I think could provide potential background for understanding the twenty-four 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 and recall their function. Their 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 the sovereign ruler over all the universe.

In the next section then I want to look a little bit more detail at the twenty-four elders and see if we can, out of these different options, determine if one of them fits. And how does that help us understand what is going on in the book of Revelation.