

WHAT'S GOING ON?

INTRODUCTION

“What’s Going On?” prayed Daniel as he and his compatriots were taken into exile by the Babylonian Empire, and Jerusalem was left abandoned. “How can this be happening, Lord?”. The answer God gave him forms the book of Daniel. The Babylonian Empire had risen up to rule God’s people, but yet God’s plan was not lost. There would be three further empires to come as well, and there was more to hear but, for now, Daniel was to seal it up. The Messiah was coming, that was enough to focus on for now.

“What’s Going On?” prayed the early disciples, among them John, as they watched the Romans destroy Jerusalem and its Temple and all the people fled or were removed from the land of Israel. The answer God gives John forms the book of Revelation. The Roman Empire was part of the Babylonian pattern, and now God reveals that all these Empires are ruled by the ancient Serpent from Eden. Yet God’s plan is not lost, and John learns of the triumphs of God’s Kingdom in the centuries to follow.

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“What’s Going On?” I have been asked year after year in the school Christian group that I led, as young believers wanted to understand the book of Revelation. I have always told them that in order to understand it they should get to know the rest of the Bible first, as much of the imagery and references in Revelation come from there. “You don’t do your A Levels until you have done your SATS and GCSEs” I would say. Yet still they asked.

So I have set myself the task of seeing whether it is possible to teach the message of the whole Bible using the Book of Revelation as the lens to look through. As each image is introduced, to see where it comes from and what the message behind it is, and to see the structure of Revelation through an understanding of the scriptures rather than through the latest news bulletins.

For too long people have read Revelation through the eyes of other people’s interpretations. Yet the Book interprets itself - or, at least, the rest of Scripture provides the keys to unlock the meanings of so much of what is contained in it. So this is not another book telling you what to think. Rather, it is a tool box pointing to the keys and devices you can use to try to make sense of it for yourself. Undoubtedly, my own views will have latched on to some clues more than others but, hopefully, there is enough here to help you to discover gold for yourself.

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The Bible starts with God saying “Let there be light”. Not just physical light, but understanding and *revelation*. Revelation of Who He is. Finally, in the last book, we get the full revelation of Jesus Christ - as both God Almighty and Saviour/Messiah. The purpose of the Word of God is fully realised in these last chapters.

Each chapter of the Book of Revelation is covered in the following pages, starting with the chapter itself. I have taken the King James Authorised Version and updated it to more modern English myself. This is partly to give a different perspective on the text to the one you would normally read - though you should compare and contrast with your favourite translation and others as you go along. Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this book are my own KJV update. The words printed in pink are then examined in the pages that follow, to see their meaning in the rest of scripture.

You may also find it helpful as you read to look at a Greek-English interlinear translation to aid your understanding of the words. There is one available online for free at www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/Greek_Index.htm

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Finally, after the study material for each chapter I have included my own thoughts. Not about the ultimate meaning of the chapter but about what I have gained from reading it, how it has spoken to me. I hope that you find these pages useful, and that, as you read this book and Revelation itself you will find yourself *Blessed as you read... the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written here* (from 1:3)

In the Bible text pages that follow, **bold font** indicates a word or image that is looked at in detail in the pages that follow and *italics* indicate something that has previously been explored.

All photos are my own unless otherwise indicated

An Example of how the book is set out (though chapter one looks a little different as I wanted to draw some introductory themes together)

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Each chapter begins with the text of the relevant chapter of Revelation. A portion of chapter 3 is below.

18 I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that you might be rich; and *white raiment*, that you might be clothed, and that the shame of your nakedness do not appear;

After that, the words or phrases in **bold** are taken individually in order to try to explain them (the words in *italics* have already been treated this way in a previous chapter.) So for the above there is a section that looks like this: After that, if there are points that join a whole section together (such as the meaning of one of the letters in chapters 2 and 3) that appears as a pinboard section:

In 1 Peter 1: 6,7 we read *though now for a season, perhaps, you are in heaviness through much testing: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be*

tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ. There is a sense in which the fire of persecution faced by the previous church (Philadelphia) echoes this passage, their faith was deepened by standing for God in difficult times. Jesus is saying to the Laodiceans that they need refined gold from Him; in the Philadelphian letter He all but tells them they have bought this gold.

A famous story in Daniel chapter 3 illustrates this. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were on trial because

**GOLD
TRIED IN
THE FIRE**

Laodicea was smug, resting on the past and not focussed on Jesus. It's a church that has lost its way, and no longer brings healing (hot water) or refreshment (cool water). If we can see the persecuted church of today in the Philadelphian letter, can we see the western church in Laodicea?

At the end of each chapter there are some thoughts from me that draw from the whole chapter and then the chapter ends with some questions for personal reflection or group discussion.

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*Thoughts
on Chapter*

Between chapters there are often pages that take examine a theme from the chapter in more detail - such as what it means to be born again after chapter 3. This emphasises one of the main aims of the book - to teach the message of the Bible through the lens of the Book of Revelation. So many people want to start with this book, and they miss so much because they don't know or understand what has gone before.

There is a lot of work for you to do as you read on - have a Bible or a Bible app/website to hand as you turn the pages!

WHAT'S GOING ON?

CHAPTER FOUR

After this I looked, and, behold, a *door was opened in heaven*: and the first voice which I heard (as it were of a *trumpet*) was talking to me; and said, “**Come up** hither, and I will show you **things which must happen** after this.”

2 And immediately I was *in the spirit*: and, behold, a **throne was set in heaven**, and one sat on the throne.

3 And **he that sat there** looked like a **jasper and a carnelian stone**: and there was a **rainbow round about the throne**, in sight like unto an emerald.

4 And round about the throne were twenty four seats: and upon the seats I saw **twenty four elders** sitting, *clothed in white raiment*; and they had on their heads *crowns of gold*.

5 And out of the throne proceeded **lightnings and thunderings and voices**: and there were **seven lamps of fire** burning before the throne, which are the *seven Spirits of God*.

6 And before the throne there was a **sea of glass looking like crystal**: and in the centre of the throne, and round about the throne, were **four living creatures full of eyes** in front and behind.

7 And the first living creature was like a **lion**, and the second living creature like a **calf**, and the third living creature had a face as a **man**, and the fourth living creature was like a **flying eagle**.

8 And the four living creatures had each of them **six wings** about him; and they were **full of eyes**: and they rest not day and night, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.”

9 And when those living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who lives for ever and ever,

10 The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that lives for ever and ever, and **cast their crowns before the throne**, saying,

11 “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for you have created all things, and **for your pleasure they are and were created**.”

This is exactly the same use of words that is used throughout the New Testament to describe the next thing that happened. For instance, in John 3:22 the same words are used to say “Jesus had been talking with Nicodemus, after this he and his disciples went....”

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AFTER
THIS

So, for the person reading this book originally there would be no hidden meanings. Jesus has been dictating the seven letters to John. Then, after that is done, John sees the door open in heaven. One thing follows the other. For John, the visions that are to come follow on from the messages to the churches. However, verse 1 begins and ends with the same words: After this.....after this. After the dictation of the letters Jesus says “come up here and I will show you what takes place after this”. So what follows in the Book of Revelation, in the vision John now receives in heaven, is what Jesus shows John will take place from then on.

There are different interpretations about what ‘from then on’ means - see the section on ‘The Millennium’ at the end of this chapter. In brief, some hold that *from then on* means from that moment in history (John, on Patmos, c100AD) and others hold that *from then on* means after the relevance of the letters to the churches comes to an end. What that means is that the ‘after this’ refers to a future period after the church is no longer on the earth. To use the common terminology, after *the Rapture*. That’s the name given to the event described in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17, when the believers alive at the time of Jesus’ return are instantaneously called up to meet Him ‘in the air’ as He comes down to earth. Again, there is more on this in the section at the end of this chapter. Both viewpoints agree, however, that what is described is that which was still to happen after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus - in order to set up the visible reign of Jesus on earth. We will consider another possible meaning in the section on Feasts in a later chapter.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

COME UP

The same voice is speaking as John heard in chapter one, and there and afterwards this was revealed to be the voice of Jesus.

Jesus is speaking from beyond the doorway in heaven, from the place to which He Himself had ascended. He is calling John to ascend as well. It is an invitation to be together again with Jesus. In chapter 3 Jesus knocks at the door for His people to open it. As one who had opened that door to Jesus, John is now invited through the door Jesus opens for him.

Previously Jesus had come to earth and become a man to be with His people. He had called John the first time with James his brother and they had left their fishing and gone with Jesus. The invitation to John now is the same, to leave what he is doing and go to be with Jesus, but Jesus is now inviting John to be with Him in heaven for a while.

In the letter to the Philadelphians in chapter 3 Jesus said that what He opened no-one could close, and he set this before those who were faithful witnesses to Him. Jesus has opened the doorway to heaven to John, it is an open invitation to ascend to be with Him; to leave earth behind (John would not have known if he would be coming back).

Jesus is always calling us to walk intimately with Him. One day, those who do will hear His call to ascend to His side for eternity.

Moses heard the trumpet from heaven when he was called to ascend Mt Sinai to hear from God (Exodus 19:16-20). God's call is clear (the trumpet or *shofar* was the clear clarion call that the Israelites would always recognise and not doubt). It is followed by His invitation (come up here, ascend to be with me). What is needed then is the person's response. Moses could have stayed at the bottom of the mountain, John could have ignored Jesus' call. His agreement to go enabled him to be 'in the Spirit' - that can only happen if we are willing to obey and to be intimate with Jesus.

THINGS WHICH MUST HAPPEN

History is in God's hands, yet people have free will. God's plan for the salvation of mankind is irrevocable, yet He works it out with people.

Hours are spent on debate and deliberation over how both things can be true. If Jesus *had to be crucified* then surely Judas had no choice but to betray Him, the High Priest had no choice but to accuse Him, Pilate had no choice but to convict Him, and so on. Yet the Bible is clear - they did have a choice. They exercised their free will and made choices which led to the necessary crucifixion of God's Son.

I doubt that human minds will ever fully be able to reconcile these truths in this age.

God knows each person and their state of obedience or rebellion. He works with each one so that they may be saved (Lamentations 3:33, 1 Timothy 2:3-5), even those who He knows will never turn to Him.

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This is simplistic, but it might be helpful. Have you ever watched a film in which a character you like makes a bad decision? The consequences may well be terrible. Then, if you watch the film again, do you find yourself willing that character not to make the same decision? Yet you know full well that they are going to. The Bible tells us that God knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:9-11); He sees all time as one.

But that is simplistic because it suggests that God is not also active in bringing about His purposes. He is not watching a film. Neither, though, is it just that He is writing a script and the characters do what He writes. He sets the characters free to do what they want, within the scenario He initially created and then Satan working with mankind spoilt. Then He works with those who will choose to do His will to bring about the redemption that He offers to all.

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Jesus tells John He will show him what must happen from now on, but He does not name names - He will simply reveal pictures as He sketches out the scenarios that will unfold on the stage in the time to come. That is what John records for us to follow in the pages to come; and the words of the letters to the churches ring out across the story: those who overcome will share in the rewards already promised and those to be sketched out in the final chapters, those who don't may well lose their place when the Groom comes for His Bride. Whilst the ultimate ending is written, something *which must* happen, for any individual there are two possible outcomes. The choice is ours.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

THRONE IN HEAVEN

God made humanity to live under structures of authority. The idea of thrones, sovereigns and majesty is His.

Ever since the Fall, however, humanity has been in rebellion against God and against authority in all shapes and forms. Isaiah 14:13,14 poetically talks of one who wants to be greater than God, to sit in command.

So, before we go on in to the rest of Revelation, the first thing John sees in heaven is the Throne. This is the ultimate symbol of authority. The One who sits on the Throne is the Sovereign. All others are pretentious and without authority. We need to keep this in mind as we read on in the book, and also as we look back over human history. There will be wars and rumours of war in the story. There will be pretenders to the throne, ones who try to take power. There will be those who try to destroy God's people. *But there is a throne, there is authority, there is a Sovereign.*

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Psalm 2 puts it this way:

Why do the godless rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, "Let us break from their rule, and cast away their cords from us."

He that sits in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall look at them in derision.

Then shall he speak to them in his wrath, and rebuke them in his sore displeasure: "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion."

Compared to God, there is no other power. The vision of the Throne is the promise that it will all be alright in the end. We must not forget that as we read on.

The prophet Micaiah had a similar vision in 2 Chronicles 18:18 *I saw the Lord sitting upon his throne, and all the host of heaven standing on his right hand and on his left.*

Throughout the Bible we see God enthroned in heaven. But now we see more than just a glimpse. John sees the One who sat there, but in the verses to come in the next chapter He sees the One as Three too. As more of Jesus is revealed through this Revelation, so also more of the Father is seen - more of God in all His fulness.

HE THAT
SAT THERE

JASPER

These stones are mentioned several times in the Bible.

They adorned the Priest's robes (Exodus 28:17-20), they form part of the description of the beauty of the King

of Tyre in Ezekiel 28:13 (most believe this to be an allegorical description of Lucifer in heaven before he rebelled against God) and we are going to meet jasper again in the City of God in Revelation 21.

We see then that they are symbols of God's Priests, of kings and of God's Bride the Church - but the reason for that is that they are used to describe what God Himself looks like.

So when the priest had these precious stones on his robes, it was to give him something of the appearance of the image of God. Jesus, the Ultimate Priest, is the 'image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15) and so too, in a sense, were the Priests of Israel. Jesus is this because of Who He is - His very nature and character reveal God to us. The Priests of the Old Testament were the image of God because of the robes they were clothed in.

The Church, the Bride of Christ, is the image of God because it is robed in Christ and then also because it is filled with the Holy Spirit - so the nature of God lives in it and the sacrifice of Christ covers it.

Traditionally, Jasper is supposed to have protective powers, including from poisonous bites and stings. It is red like blood and has often been worn by warriors as it is said to instil confidence and courage. Carnelian (originally Sardine Stone) is said to be a love stone both to protect the wearer from infidelity or unfaithfulness and yet to attract the opposite sex. It has other properties including the promotion of justice and establishment of truth. (Source: Gemstoneadvisor.com). Whilst these are not biblical ideas, they are ancient beliefs and overlap with the descriptions of God's character and nature.

CARNELIAN

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RAINBOW AROUND THRONE

In Ezekiel chapter one we have another similar vision:²⁶ over their heads was something looking like a throne, with the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was someone looking like a man.²⁷ And I saw the colour of amber, with the appearance of fire round about and within it; from the appearance of his loins upward, and from the appearance of his loins downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about.

²⁸ As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one who spoke.

Just as John saw a rainbow around the throne, so did Ezekiel. This spectrum of light, which we know will be formed when there is a bright light shining on and through crystals, is always there surrounding the Throne of God.

In Genesis 9:13-17, following the great flood, God makes a covenant with Noah never again to destroy the earth with such a flood. ¹³ I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be there as a token of a covenant between me and the earth.

¹⁴ And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: ¹⁵ And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth. ¹⁷ And God said unto Noah, This is the token of the covenant, which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth.

In that I think He says something curious. He does not say "I appoint a rainbow to remind me of the covenant". He says "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be there as a token of a covenant between me and the earth." It's not just a rainbow, God is using the spectrum of light that surrounds Him eternally and creating an image of it in the clouds on earth. When we see a rainbow, we are reminded of God's covenant just as He says He is. But, whenever God sees *His* bow He is reminded of that covenant too - and that bow is always around the throne and always in His sight.

From Genesis 9 onwards the rainbow - the coloured light spectrum - is a symbol of God's faithful promise. We see both in Ezekiel and Revelation that that symbol is eternally a feature of the Presence of God, on the Throne of the universe.



Rainbow over Loch Maree

12

Twelve is another 'perfect number' in Scripture. It represents God's ordering of His people (12 tribes, 12 apostles), and hence the associated government or leadership of them. We are reminded of it with 12 loaves on the Table in the Temple, 12 stones on the priest's robe and so forth. It appears over and over in the Book of Revelation, reminding of us of God's provision of good governmental order.

In contrast, 24 is rarely used in the Bible. It occurs linked to the pattern of duties of those leading worship and ministry. It is a pairing of 12s. Yet as we shall see on the next page it was also used in the running of the priestly duties in the Tabernacle and Temple from the time of David. It seems then to suggest something of the good ordered running of worship, particularly in the heavenly Temple. Often the double of a number signifies added strength to the original number's meaning - so perhaps 24 is to be seen as a strong 12, not weakened by being on sinful earth but in perfect heaven.

24

WHAT'S GOING ON?

TWENTY FOUR ELDERS

These are not specifically identified, and that has led to much debate about who they are. Several things are clear though - they are human, not angelic. Why? Because they are clothed in white raiment (chapter 3:5, see page 28), they wear crowns (chapter 2, see page 18) and they sit down with God in His Kingdom (Mark 10:40) - the Bible does not speak of heavenly beings in this way.

More than that we cannot be clear. Some say it is the 12 Patriarchs of Israel (Reuben, Judah, Gad,... etc) plus the 12 Apostles (Peter, James, John,...etc) but then John would have been looking at himself! Others say it definitely cannot be the Patriarchs because we do not ever hear of them dressed in white or wearing crowns; that is a New Testament description of the church.

There are lots of other theories out there in googlesphere.

But the important thing is - they are *not identified specifically* here in Revelation or elsewhere. They are simply those who have the job of leading the worship of God by man in heaven.

In 1 Chronicles 24 we read that David appointed 24 of the family of the Priest and *separated them into divisions for their appointed order of ministering.* (v3, NIV). Similarly in 1 Chronicles 25 another 24 are appointed to their duties.

The earthly temple was an image of the invisible heavenly temple, and the ministries were divided in to teams of 24 in Jerusalem doubtless to reflect what happens in God's heavenly temple. It may even be that the 24 on the throne in heaven are there on a rota basis like the ones on earth!

However, we can learn a little more. These 24 elders are sitting on thrones surrounding the central throne.

Who is it that sits on a throne next to a King?

There are two answers to that question: one is the Queen and the other is a co-Regent.

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The Bible teaches that the Church - all believers - are the Bride of Christ (John 3:29, Revelation 19:7) and so we can expect to see the Church sitting with Jesus as His Queen.

The Bible also teaches that we shall reign with Him as joint heirs (co-Regents). Romans 8:17,18 says ¹⁶ *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: ¹⁷ And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if it so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.*

Jesus said in Mark 10:40 *to sit at my right hand and at my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared.* He is saying that only the Father will grant this, and that He either does not know at the time of speaking or will not say who it will be that sits in the Throne room on either side of Him.

Nor does John reveal who they are in Revelation. The final reason for this is surely that they are there to bring glory to God, not to be glorified themselves. Their own glory is lost if they are revealed. The purpose of the Church is to point to Jesus and the Trinity. These, the elders, are leading the Church in that mission. If we knew who they were we would focus on them to some extent. Instead, they are mentioned only to see them in worship, bringing honour to the One True God.

In Exodus chapter 19, as Moses prepares to go up Mt Sinai to receive God's commands, we read: ¹⁶ *And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet was exceedingly loud; so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.*

¹⁷ *And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the lower part of the mount. ¹⁸ And Mount Sinai was covered in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. ¹⁹ And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice.*

Before this scene in Exodus, God had walked on earth in Eden. The Messenger of the LORD (on many occasions believed to be Jesus appearing in the Old Testament) had met with people. God had spoken to Moses from the burning bush and called him into leadership and ministry, guiding him to bring the People of Israel out of Egypt. But only a few chosen people (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, perhaps a few others) had ever heard God; never had He made His Presence known to the whole People, now, at Sinai, He does. He uses symbols of power and terror known on earth (lightning and thunder) as well as the sound of a voice.

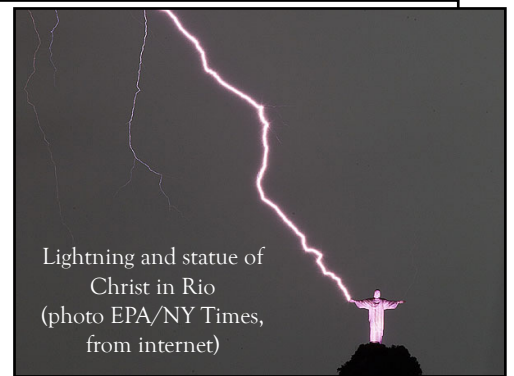
LIGHTNING THUNDER VOICES

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WHAT'S GOING ON?

But this was not thunder-and-lightning caused by atmospheric conditions. Clearly it isn't that in the Revelation passage, for the scene there is not on earth; nor do I believe it was at Sinai. In Revelation the phenomena proceed out from the Throne; the sense of the Exodus passage too is that here the people were in the Presence of God, He had somehow removed the barrier between heaven and earth, and the power from the Throne was being heard by all.

God was instituting the first great covenant between God and Mankind at Sinai. It was the start of a new phase in human existence. Now, the family of Jacob - the nation of Israel - were being appointed as God's representatives on earth with a specific task and mission.



Lightning and statue of Christ in Rio
(photo EPA/NY Times, from internet)

Nearly fifteen hundred years later, on the part of Mount Zion known as Calvary, a new covenant was instituted by Jesus. In John 12 we read ²⁸ *Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, "I have both glorified it (God's Name), and will glorify it again."* ²⁹ *The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, "A messenger spoke to him (Jesus)".* ³⁰ *Jesus answered and said, "This voice came not because of me, but for your sakes."* As Jesus prays in Jerusalem in the days before His death, so we again hear God speaking through the sound of thunder.

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In the Old Testament again we read of the sound of God's voice associated with thunder (2 Samuel 22:13,14; Isaiah 29:6 and 30:30,31; Jeremiah 25:30).

Revelation starts in chapter one with John turning to *see the voice* that He heard. The voice made such an impact that He turned to see what it was. God's voice, the voice of Jesus, is awesome. His very Presence is powerfully loud and brilliant. Yet we read elsewhere that He can speak through a quiet still voice (1 Kings 19:12,13).

This description of thunder, lightning and a voice in Revelation 4 identifies the One who is speaking clearly with the God of Mount Sinai, the God of Calvary. But this is not another new covenant about to be made, rather it is the culmination of all that God has prepared throughout the ages. God is unveiling the full revelation of His character, His plan, and His glory and John is there to record it for us.

SEVEN LAMPS OF FIRE

We have already seen that the lampstand represents the church. It is an image that comes originally from the Tabernacle, as described to Moses by God in Exodus 25. The items in the Tabernacle were vital illustrations to the Israelites to teach them about God and His covenant with them. The purpose of the lampstand, then (in the Tabernacle) and now (as the Church), was to hold high the Seven Lamps - identified here as the Holy Spirit.

That is, in *Heaven* the Holy Spirit appears as 'seven lamps of fire' - remember that seven represents something as complete and perfect. In the earthly Tabernacle, the lamps are a symbol of God's Presence in His Spirit. In the Church the lamps are the tangible and real Presence of the Holy Spirit amongst the people of God. The purpose of the church is to hold Him high.

Jesus said *'No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light.'* (Luke 11:33, NIV). When God lit the fire of the Holy Spirit on the lampstand of the Church at Pentecost (Acts 2), He was not putting it somewhere to be hidden. The Church, as we have seen, is the stand so that all who approach it might see the Light. Jesus said two things: that *He* is the light of the world (John 8:12) and that we, the Church, are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). Both are true, the Church has the Spirit to shine light that all might see the Light of Jesus.



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WHAT'S GOING ON?

SEA OF GLASS LIKE CRYSTAL

Transparency, reflection and purity are the images we get from these words.

Surrounding the Throne of God is a vast expanse (sea) of purity, which in itself is transparent (it exists only to bring glory to the light shining on it) and which reflects the glory of God so that it shines forth over an even larger area.

Some suggest that the sea represents the Church, reflecting God's glory, but we are not told that and so it is important to consider what the Bible says about its imagery and, where it is silent about meanings, to try to comprehend what is being presented on its own merits.

What we do see is the purity of the place where God is, and that the very environment of the Heavenly Throne Room reflects His glory and amplifies it all around. John uses the word 'sea' which might suggest that the reflections are moving, as waves ripple the surface. There is then a constant change in the lighting 'effects' in the Presence of God. The word crystal suggests that, once again, the light is being split into its spectrum of colours.

We see this straight after the rainbow and the lightning - all these expressions of light are now reflected and sparkling on the surface of the sea. John was trying to describe something he had never seen or imagined before - it is unlikely we can imagine exactly what it was that he saw.

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This light is in heaven, and it is part of the Nature of God. Again we are reminded that Jesus, the visible representation of the invisible God, is described as the One True Light by John in John 1:9. He is the true light that is already shining in the world through the church (1 John 2:8). So, on earth we see dimly as through a mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12), in Heaven John is now seeing clearly.

4

Four is the number of creation, it represents created things. Material creation was completed on day 4 (Life was created on days 5 and 6). The earth is divided into 4 (N,S,E,W), the Bible speaks of the four winds, there are four seasons, etc. It has the sense of 'all the earth': the 4 rivers from Eden 'watered the earth' for instance. It speaks of completion. Source: www.biblebelievers.org.au/number08.htm

This will be a long essay, but to start let us just continue with the number 4. So much that these creatures are and do is related to 4. There are 4 of them, divided as 3 (animal) + 1 (man). They seem clearly to be linked with creation - they have been seen before in the Bible (we shall get back to this later) and always there is something to do with creation.

They are 'round about the throne' which suggests one on each side - N, S, E and W to use earthly directions.

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Let's now look at other times in the Bible where it is believed these same creatures are seen. The most obvious one is Ezekiel 1:4-28. There are obvious similarities, but also obvious differences:

In Ezekiel they have four wings, in Revelation six. In Ezekiel they each have all four faces, in Revelation one face each. In Ezekiel they are seen on earth, as if bearing the throne of heaven down to man, whereas John's vision is in heaven.

So it may well be that the two visions are of different creatures. Very similar, but not the same.

Later in Ezekiel, when the glory departs from the Temple, we see these creatures again and they are called *Cherubim*. That is the same name used for the earthly design used to cover the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. Many Old Testament passages speak of the Ark which is in the midst of the Cherubim, and others speak of God dwelling in the midst of the cherubim (as in Revelation 4). See for instance 2 Kings 19:15 and Psalm 99:1.

The first use of Cherubim is in Genesis 3:24 where God placed cherubim at the entrance of Eden to guard it (His perfect creation). The word is used there without introduction or description. In Exodus 25:18-20 Moses was told to make 2 cherubim to guard the ark, and they would have faces and wings but we are not told more. Then in 2 Samuel 22:11 we read of God mounting the cherubim to fly - very similar to the passage in Ezekiel.

LIVING CREATURES

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Now there is another word used of heavenly beings too - and that is *Seraphim*. We meet these in Isaiah 6 which is also a vision of the Throne in Heaven. Here they are described as 'each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' (verses 2,3 NIV). This is so similar to what is described in Revelation 4 that I think we must say the creatures in this chapter are more likely to be *Seraphim*, and not *Cherubim*. The difference would seem to be the number of wings and faces, and the fact that the *Seraphim* are always around the Throne in Heaven whilst the *Cherubim* have duties that bring them to earth. However, they have many similarities, including the fact that their faces are like those of a man, a lion, an ox (or calf) and an eagle.

Many scholars, however, will say that John saw *Cherubim*. Maybe we should just stick with calling them *Living Creatures*! It is worth saying, though, that *Cherubim* are not angels, *Seraphim* are not angels, and the *Living Creatures* are not angels. God's *angelou* are a different part of creation, with a different purpose.

LION

OX

MAN

EAGLE

In Ezekiel, the text is clear: the creatures there were in human form but each had four faces, and these faces were of a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle. In Revelation, the only one that is described by its *face* is the third one which had a face like a man's. The other creatures are described *fully* as being 'like a lion, like an ox, like a flying eagle'.

I think this marks them out as clearly not the same as the Ezekiel creatures.

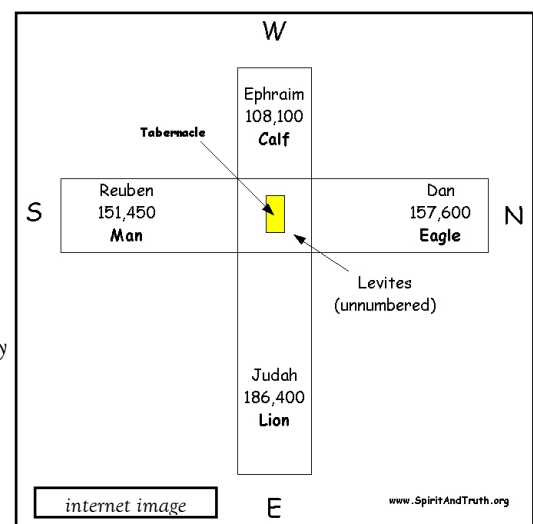
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But why are the lion, ox, man and eagle visible in both visions? Why not other animals?

According to spiritandtruth.org, and also the blog writings of RG Wallace in www.biblefragrances.com these were the four animals which appeared on the banners of the 4 lead tribes of Israel. Wallace quotes the following:

"According to rabbinical tradition, the standard of Judah bore the figure of a lion, that of Reuben the likeness of a man or of a man's head, that of Ephraim the figure of an ox, and that of Dan the figure of an eagle; so that the four living creatures united in the cherubic forms described by Ezekiel were represented upon these four standards.

Jewish tradition says the "four standards" under which Israel encamped in the wilderness, to the east, Judah, to the north, Dan, to the west, Ephraim, to the south, Reuben, were respectively a lion, an eagle, an ox, and a man, while in the midst was the tabernacle containing the Shekinah symbol of the Divine Presence. The Talmud saw in these four creatures the four primary forms of life in God's creation. It also noted that the twelve tribes of Israel camped under these four banners; three with Reuben (symbolised by a man), three with Dan (symbolised by an eagle), three with Ephraim (symbolised by the calf, or ox), and the final three with Judah (symbolised by a lion)." (from "A Testimony of Jesus Christ, a commentary on the Book of Revelation" by Dr Tony Garland ISBN:0-9788864-1-0).



Whilst we cannot glean this information from the Bible itself, the fact that it is found in ancient Jewish tradition makes it very plausible. And the Bible does tell us, in the next chapter of Revelation, that Jesus Himself is the lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5), which gives a clear link between the lion and Judah.

So, it is possible that the four living creatures are representations of God's People, encamped around the Throne of God as they were in the desert. This also leads us to recognise that we need to read what follows in the book with a good understanding of the Old Testament. After all, God teaches there that the

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Tabernacle and the worship in it were a reflection of Heaven. What we are looking at now, in Revelation, is the original - not the copy.

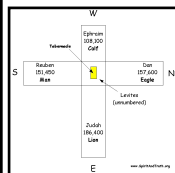
In the Old Testament, as he prayed over his sons, Israel said the following to Judah: *You are a lion's cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness – who dares to rouse him?* (Genesis 49:9, NIV).

The calf was the chief animal of sacrifice in the sin offering for the priests (Leviticus 9:2). Lambs and goats were used greatly in the sacrificial system for the people, but it was the calf that atoned for the priests. In Jeremiah 31:18 we read: *'I have surely heard Ephraim's moaning: "You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the Lord my God."* (NIV)

In Exodus 19:4 God reminds the people how He carried them to safety 'on eagle's wings'. There are many references to eagles, speaking of their swiftness in movement and the strength of their wings, and these are often used to describe Israel's enemies and the world's empires as well as God's protection.

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Throughout the Bible man, and the Son of Man - the Messiah, are obviously paramount. These together may suggest that the four characteristics of the Living Creatures might be reminders of God's People and their protection by God. The lion is not defeated, the calf is broken in and becomes a useful ox to do its masters bidding, the eagle denotes God's swiftness to come to their aid, and the Man is the ultimate Saviour who restores a right relationship with



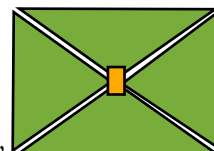
When drawing the image of the tribes surrounding the tabernacle, many modern commentators deliberately give it the shape of the cross.

My problem with this is not that God did not know His ultimate plan, for He surely did, but that the people just don't fit that neatly round the tabernacle!

The Tabernacle was about 150' long by 75' wide. If we assume that each person requires a space of about 8'x3' to sleep (*not allowing extra room for tent and shelter*) then you will only get 50 people along the long side of the tabernacle. There are about 157,000 in the Dan section - call it 150,000. That means there would need to be 3,000 rows of 50 people - and 3,000 x 8' is roughly 4.5 miles.

To fit the 190,000 of Judah along the short side would require 7,600 rows of 25 - a distance of 11.5 miles. So there would be a camp in one direction just 75' wide but 11.5 miles long, and vast stretches of desert between it and the Danite wing, 4.5 miles long and 150' wide.

Surely the arrangement of the camps would be more like the diagram to the right? More practical, if less theologically pleasing!



God. It seems to be certain, however, that just as the people surrounded the tabernacle which represented God on earth so these creatures are around the Throne of God representing the people in heaven. There is one more thing to say - and we start back in Isaiah 6. The Hebrew word *seraph* is just used in English. What did it actually mean? The answer is *fiery* or *fire-like*. The word appears in Numbers 21:6-9 along with the word *nachash* which means snake. A translation of those verses is *And the Lord sent burning snakes among the people, and they bit the people; and many people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against you; pray to the Lord, that he takes the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one who is bitten, when he looks upon it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze (or copper) snake, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a snake had bitten any man, when he beheld the bronze snake, he lived. It's interesting to note that in verse 9 God says "Make a fiery", using the word *seraph* without *nachash*. - in other words the object on the pole did not have the usual word for snake/serpent in its description but the same word used later in Isaiah and just given in English as *Seraph*.*

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We know that Satan is described as a snake or serpent throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Once the people in Numbers started grumbling against God, they were attacked by snakes. Throughout scripture, when people turn against God, they are open to attack by Satan. The 'burning image on the pole' that Moses made is a symbolic picture of Jesus on the Cross (John 3:14), and anyone who is under the attack of Satan can the look with faith at Jesus to be given life. Satan may appear to be burning and bright, but this appearance evaporates in the true light of Jesus. Remember again that vision of Jesus in chapter 1, where He appears in brilliance and even His feet glow like 'fine brass'.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

6

Six is the number of man, and also of mankind's rebellion and sin. Mankind was created on the sixth day, and it was at the sixth hour that Christ was crucified to bring redemption, and He was on the cross for 6 hours. Unlike other numbers which were represented by Greek letters, the symbol for 6 was the serpent shaped *stigma* (see illustration). So, the number 6 is thought to represent man's weakness (led astray by the serpent) and inability to achieve perfection and sinlessness. Because of sin man must work for 6 days to remember his sin. 6 can also be seen as the number of evil and its full development. *Source: various.*

WINGS

Wings are often used in scripture to talk about a covering or protection. The Cherubim figures that were fashioned over the Ark of the Covenant had wings 'spread upwards to overshadow' (Exodus 25:20, NIV) and God speaks of carrying His people in deliverance (a form of protection) as if on Eagles' wings (Exodus 19:4). In Ruth 2:12 Boaz talks of God to Ruth, under 'whose wings she had come to take refuge' (NIV).

So perhaps the wings of the Living Creatures are there to represent the provision of a covering and protection, as the Living Creatures represent the people before God, so they are seen as being under protection. There are 6 wings on each creature, for man is weak and needs God's protection. Altogether there are 24 wings, one for each of the 24 Elders. It's worth remembering too that *if* the Living Creatures represent the 4 groupings of the Tribes of Israel (see above), then those tribes are here each represented with a pair of wings with which God carried them to Himself with (Exodus 19:4).

In Genesis 3:5 Satan tells Eve that eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil will open her eyes and make her like God. It was, of course, a lie. Although they were opened to the fact of her nakedness (opened to physical temptations), her eyes became closed to spiritual truths because of the sin she and Adam committed. In Matthew 6:22 Jesus said "*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light.*" (NIV).

EYES

Here we see the Living Creatures have their bodies and their wings covered with eyes, front and back. Their whole bodies are full of light - light represents revelation, purity and truth. They have this light in front of them and behind them, there is no sin in them at all. The purity of God is absorbed by them. The eyes in front of them see God, the eyes behind them may well see the people of God arranged round the Throne in worship. They see the redeemed worshipping their Saviour.

Proverbs 15:3 says *The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.* Here we see the creatures representing the covering over the people of Israel around the Tabernacle covered in eyes, keeping watch with the Lord and for the Lord.

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Whilst I don't think I am in a position to say definitively that these 4 creatures represent the tribes of Israel, under God's watchful and covering protection, I do think that that is a possibility. Israel was chosen to represent God on earth, to record His Word faithfully (both Old and New Testaments were written down by Israelis), to be the family into which Jesus the Saviour was born and to carry the Good News to the rest of the world.

Some would argue that the "Israel of God" in the New Testament is now the Church, that the family of Abraham is the family of faith. Others believe Israel (all 12 tribes, or just Judah - the Jews) still has a specific role to play in God's ultimate plan. Whichever is the case (or both?), I believe it likely that John gazed on a heavenly representation of Israel when he saw these creatures around the Throne in Heaven.

CAST THEIR CROWNS

After hearing a sermon about Christ's return to earth, Queen Victoria is reported to have said, "Oh how I wish that the Lord might come during my lifetime." When asked why, she replied, "I should like to lay my crown at His feet." Billy Graham quoted this when he received an honorary knighthood from The Queen, and said he would also lay it at the feet of Jesus. This reflects the idea of these verses in Revelation 4, that our most treasured honours, medallions and awards are all for Him and His glory. We have already seen that the word translated as crown might be better interpreted as medal or reward. All that we have, we lay at His feet. The 24 Elders do just that, leading the worship of God in heaven and recognising that all they have is from Him and should be offered to Him.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

FOR YOUR PLEASURE THEY WERE CREATED

This is one of the high truths of the whole of the Bible. Creation is for God's pleasure. That's not to say that He plays with it without care, then casts it aside like a spoilt child. Rather, that He looks at His creation with delight. As He made things, He saw they were 'very good' (Genesis 1), and even though sin spoilt and ruined so much of the goodness, it has been God's plan to restore it to its created state. This too is for His pleasure (Ephesians 1:5-9). The Greek word translated as pleasure is a strong form of "will" linked with best intentions. "For God's best intended desires they were created". It brings Him delight to see the blessing His will brings to those He created. God's pleasure emanates from providing the best for creation. There is goodness in the act of creation, goodness in the preservation of creation, and goodness in the redemption of creation. Goodness is at the heart of God's best intended will, His pleasure.

But we, the created, need to remember well that our creation was *for Him*. In Isaiah 29:16 we read *for shall the work say of him that made it, "He did not make me?" or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, "He had no knowledge or understanding?"* The common desire of people today is to be in charge of their own lives, to have no authority figures over them, which essentially comes from a rebellion against God. "He did not make me! He doesn't understand what I am like!"

In humility, we all need to turn to God and to recognise that He is our Creator, and we are made for Him. It is not the other way round. The whole of chapter 4 demonstrates that central truth of the Universe.

Thoughts on Chapter

There are deliberately unclear references in this chapter. The 24 Elders are not identified, the Living Creatures are seen but not fully understood. However, despite that, we do see the Throne at the Centre, and the One who sits there. And all the other characters in the chapter are focussed on Him, and worshipping Him. In the end, who *they are* is not important. It is all about God.

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I do think it is important that we see here a scene which reminds us of the Tabernacle as described to Moses in Exodus and elsewhere. That was set up as an earthly representation of God's Presence in heaven. In the Tabernacle, God's place was in the Holy of holies. Outside of that was found the sevenfold lampstand and the 'Sea of Bronze' - in Revelation 4 we see the seven lamps and the 'Sea of Glass'.

God's ministers were appointed - the High Priest who would enter the Holy of Holies (more of this in chapter 5) and the others who had duties in ministering in the Tabernacle and leading worship. We see in them a reflection of the 24 Elders and the 4 Living Creatures, who led the worship in this scene in Revelation.

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Standing back from the detail, in chapter 4 our eyes have been taken from earth to heaven and we see the centre of all things. Everything is about the worship of God. The rest of what we will read in Revelation is about the worship of God and the consequence of ignoring that duty.

- Which of the images in this chapter speaks to you most powerfully about the nature and character of God?
- Do you think it matters that we cannot be certain who the Elders are?
- Do you think the Living Creatures are the same as the Seraphim of Isaiah chapter 6, the Cherubim of Ezekiel chapter 10, or are another form of angelic being altogether?
- 'Casting their crowns' - how would you worship God if you stood before Him today? Should we change the way we worship Him in our ordinary lives in the light of what we see in Revelation 4?



WHAT'S GOING ON?

Views on the Millennium.

The way people understand the book of Revelation depends in many ways on their views of the end of the world. The term used for this is *eschatology*. Although we have yet to reach the parts of the book that cause the greatest disagreements to their meaning, it is probably a good idea to reflect on these viewpoints here. There are three main classifications, and then some of those are sub-divided too. Because, in Revelation 20:1-10 we read of Christ reigning on earth for 1000 years, the classifications relate to that millennium period.

Post-millennialists believe that slowly the reign of Christ on earth increases, through the ministry of the Church and the evangelism of the nations, until a point where the earth is mostly Christian. After this, Christ returns to bring the age to an end and judge the world. This is the view that the **preterists** (see page 26) have, and in their version as we have already seen, the prophecies in Revelation were fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Scripturally, post-millennialists refer to many Psalms which speak of the nations fearing God.

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Pre-millennialists believe that the world will continue to move away from God, and the gap between Christian and non-Christian will widen until a point when Jesus will return to usher in a new age with Him on the Throne on earth for 1000 years, and then comes the Day of Judgment. There are a variety of different groups with different interpretations. Most popular at the moment probably are the ones who hold that 7 years before Christ returns the Christians alive at the time will 'disappear' (an event that has come to be known as the Rapture of the Saints) - having been taken up to meet Christ and the already-dead Christians. There will then be 7 years of terrors on earth (they call this the Tribulation) under the reign of the AntiChrist before Jesus returns to defeat the unGodly and Judge the world. Other pre-millennialists believe that the Rapture happens immediately before the return of Christ and that the Christians alive at the time will live through the Tribulation. Pre-Millennialists, therefore, view the Book of Revelation as prophetic, to do with events of the Tribulation period and the build up to it. Some take all of the images in Revelation literally - as descriptions of things to happen on earth whilst others argue that some, at least, should be seen symbolically or as events taking place in the heavenly realm mirroring the situation on earth.

A-millennialists believe none of the above. They say that the Millennium began on the Day of Resurrection, with Satan defeated and Christ as King of kings. Since then Christ has sat at the Right hand of God the Father and reigns with Him over the entire universe. The 1000 years is not to be taken literally, but is a descriptor of the period of time between the first and second comings of the Lord.

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So, what are we to make of all this? How did we end up in a situation with so many possible viewpoints about what the Bible is saying? There are various reasons. The first is that it is in the Devil's best interest to spread confusion, especially when it distracts the Church from the main task of rescuing people from Satan's clutches. Disputes about eschatology have led to many divisions not just in interpretation but then also in the ability to share fellowship with each other.

The Scribes, Pharisees and other teachers of Jesus' day had totally misunderstood the prophecies relating to the coming of the Messiah, and were arguing things through just as the Church of today does about the return of the Messiah. People are very prone to seeing things as black and white issues, and believing others to be wrong. The truth is always bigger than your or my understanding.

So I would suggest that the second main reason why we have ended up in this situation is that we can each only see a small part of a bigger picture. It's like the old story of 3 blind people asked to describe an elephant. One held the trunk, and described something like a snake. Another held a foot, and described a tree trunk. The third held an ear and described a huge leaf. They did not accept the others could possibly be right; whereas actually they all had *part* of the truth.

As we continue through Revelation, I am going to take the view that *all* the viewpoints have got some of the truth. Even if that is a **pre-posterous** position to hold!

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