

### THE BOOK OF REVELATION

#### Lesson 11 - Chapter 4

Before we completely exit from the Revelation letters addressed to the 7 Believing congregations of Asia I want to make a couple of remarks because whatever it is that you have taken from these lessons I would like you retain what I am about to say.

Hopefully what you have observed is that when we can set aside our various Christian denominational doctrines that most of us have been immersed into a goodly part of our lives.....doctrines that behave as information filters and litmus tests for readers and listeners.... we get a surprisingly different and more complete picture of what John is saying.

For example: one of the common alternate names for the Book of Revelation is the Apocalypse of John. Some Christian expositors say that this is a misnomer because in truth the revelation is not John's but Christ's. That seems right until we read the first words of chapter 1, verse 1 that say: <sup>CJB</sup>**Revelation 1:1 "This is the revelation which God gave to Yeshua the Messiah, so that he could show his servants what must happen very soon. He communicated it by sending his angel to his servant Yochanan...."** It doesn't matter which Bible version one consults, they all say essentially the same thing: indeed this was not John's revelation, but neither is it Christ's. Rather it is that God gave the vision to Christ, who gave it to an angel, who gave it to John, who gives it to us. Therefore when we accept this as written we learn at least two things. First is that there is a hierarchy of authority in the Godhead with The Son being subservient to the Father, and second is that when Christ ascended into Heaven and God appointed Him as ruler over God's Kingdom, the Father did not retire, exit the scene, and leave everything to Yeshua. The Father will continue to be active and involved including in the End Times era.

Further, in most any commentary you might consult on Revelation the author will say that the divine narrator of the 7 letters was Jesus. And yet He is never once mentioned by name in any of those letters. Instead each letter opens with merely a description or characterization of the divine narrator that invariably includes some characteristics that in hindsight we can rather easily identify as that of Messiah; but yet we also get additional characteristics that have always been traditionally and scripturally reserved for the Father. For reasons I cannot fathom, most (otherwise excellent) Bible commentators have little hesitation in transferring the Father characteristics listed to Christ when such a thing has no precedence in the previous books of the New Testament. While being provided with a name would clear up the mystery of the identity of this divine being who is front and center in John's first recorded vision regarding the 7 "churches", the fact is that commentators declaring the divine narrator to be Christ exposes the rather bad habit of reading things into Scripture that are not there. Even though such a method may uphold certain personal doctrinal beliefs, it does not reflect what is actually written.

So while I cannot deny the possibility (maybe even likelihood) that the narrator of the 7 letters

is Yeshua, John's book to this point leaves us hanging and does not definitively tell us. In fact, John's words combined with the prophecy of Zechariah 14 very clearly state that Yehoveh, the Father, is also coming at the End of Days, even setting foot upon the Mt. of Olives whereby the mountain splits; something that makes for a mind-numbing mystery when we take it literally (as it should be taken literally since there is no good reason to see these statements as symbolism or allegory).

It is my opinion that perhaps what is being revealed by God in these 7 letters is an inscrutable, ever closer unity between Father and Son as a result of Yeshua's death, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven. A unity greater than what existed while Christ was on earth. A unity in which the Father and Son characteristics (and perhaps, substance), which up to now have separately identifiable attributes, eventually become indistinguishable. A unity of the divine persons of the Godhead that progresses in much the same way that the Kingdom of God progresses from little more than an ideal since the day John the Baptist announced the Kingdom was here, until its physical reality at the entry into the Millennium, and then at its fullest reality upon the end of the Millennium when the old heavens and earth pass away (meaning the cosmos in its entirety), and the elements that formed it are melted down and recreated in a manner in which spiritual Heaven and physical earth seem to meld into one whereby there is no longer a barrier between the two dimensions as there is in our era. I cannot say that what I speak of is a certainty; it is much more in the realm of an idea or maybe even a not-fully-formed thought (so don't pick it apart too much). However my point is not to explain what happens after the Millennium; rather it is to say that these 7 letters reveal that in a mysterious way even the Godhead has some kind of transition towards an inexplicable and greater kind of unity because as we're told Revelation 3:12 even God will have a new name:

<sup>KJV</sup> **Revelation 3:12 *Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.*** I use the KJV here because language scholars say that this passage is the best most accurate translation from the Greek. And what we learn is that at a certain time known only to the Father everything will become new and different. Believers will be new and so we'll get a new name. Jerusalem will be new and so the city will get a new name. Even God Himself dons a new name. When wrestling with all this we need to remember to take the term "name" as primarily meaning a set of attributes or reputation, and only secondarily as meaning a formal name. Or better: the new formal name describes a set of attributes or reputation.

Therefore as we venture into the next recorded vision given to John in chapter 4 let us remain true to the text and not read into it what is not there nor ignore or try to explain away what is there. And especially when it is most difficult to accept what is there on a rational intellectual level, in light of our vantage point in redemption history when there is so much prophecy yet to be fulfilled, let us make mental note of what we discover but also allow that which is mystery to us to remain as such until God reveals the answers.

Open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 4.

**READ REVELATION CHAPTER 4 all**

This chapter begins with the words "after these things"; we'll find John using this phrase a number of times when he introduces another in his series of visions. There is great disagreement among Bible scholars as how to understand this. That is, does "after these things" mean (as in our case) what comes next in chronological order after the things of the vision of chapters 1 - 3 happen? Or does it mean that the vision itself is simply the next vision in the series of visions that John received, but the contents of the vision don't necessarily occur in the order of the several visions as they were recorded? That is, the contents of this vision of chapter 4 could happen before what happens in chapters 1 -3, or later than what happens in the next vision that comes after the one we just read in Chapter 4. Even more, does the sequence of the events contained within each vision happen precisely in the order they are given? Depending on your answer to these questions it will largely determine your doctrine about how to understand the entire Book of Revelation.

For example: those called Futurists or Dispensationalists (this general category of Believers' doctrine is most typical of what we call the Evangelical churches today) believe that generally speaking we should take everything John says in the precise order it is given in the book. While I can't get into all the nuances that this stance necessarily creates when reading Revelation, it means to this category of Believers that verse 1 of chapter 4 is speaking of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture in which Believers are removed from earth. That is, a door to Heaven is opened, a trumpet is blown, and God speaks the words "come up here" to His earthly Believers and the Rapture happens. Of course if this is the case, then it would seem that the Body of Messiah would no longer be present from the time of the events of Revelation chapter 4 until the events of chapter 19 or even perhaps to the end of the book. And so it would also mean that from this point forward everyone who comes to faith after Revelation 4:1 is seen by God as in a different category of Believer than those who were raptured away and therefore they would not be counted as among the traditional Body of Christ. The arguments and counter-arguments to this are lengthy and complicated and we'll not get deep into it. The point is that your doctrinal choice about how to understand the order of John's visions and the sequence of their content will necessarily predetermine how to interpret much of what John says from here forward; it will put you in a box inside which there is little wiggle room. I find this mindset and approach to studying and interpreting Revelation unnecessarily rigid and limiting and (if I was a little cynical) I might wonder if this strict doctrinal approach is little more than a way to intentionally create doctrinal disparities that allows for the establishment of a different denomination with its own separate ideology and leadership.

So here's the thing: we'll not make a decision on this issue for now. We'll continue to read Revelation with an open mind and take it for what it says in the order it says it. Thus this necessarily means that verse 1 can only be referring to an invitation of God to John, and not allegorically as an extension and invitation to the entire Body of Christ, because that is what it says and means in the plain sense.

The "door" to Heaven being opened was much more literal to John and to Jews of his day than it is to us. For centuries the Hebrews pictured a divide between earth and heaven that is called the Firmament so there had to be some kind of doorway to gain access between the two. Back in Genesis we are reminded of Jacob's vision when he envisioned a stairway or a ladder between heaven and earth. Through this entryway beings from each of the two dimensions

could, under certain conditions, travel from one to the other. Therefore since God communicates to us His worshippers within the circumstances and cultures we live, naturally the vision to the Jewish John would include a doorway into Heaven as his means of access.

John speaks of the voice he heard bidding him to "come up here" as the same as the first voice that sounded like a trumpet; this may be referring to **Revelation 1:10 - 12**. <sup>10</sup> *I came to be, in the Spirit, on the Day of the Lord; and I heard behind me a loud voice, like a trumpet,* <sup>11</sup> *saying, "Write down what you see on a scroll, and send it to the seven Messianic communities- Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea!"* <sup>12</sup> *I turned around to see who was speaking to me; and when I had turned, I saw seven gold menorahs;*. Both the command to "come up here" and the sound of the voice as being that of a trumpet reminds us of when Moses was at Mt. Sinai.

**Exodus 19:16-20 CJB** <sup>16</sup> *On the morning of the third day, there was thunder, lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain. Then a shofar blast sounded so loudly that all the people in the camp trembled.* <sup>17</sup> *Moshe brought the people out of the camp to meet God; they stood near the base of the mountain.* <sup>18</sup> *Mount Sinai was enveloped in smoke, because ADONAI descended onto it in fire- its smoke went up like the smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain shook violently.*

<sup>19</sup> *As the sound of the shofar grew louder and louder, Moshe spoke; and God answered him with a voice.* <sup>20</sup> *ADONAI came down onto Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; then ADONAI called Moshe to the top of the mountain; and Moshe went up.*

While one could reasonably say that John remembered from the Holy Scriptures that Mt. Sinai scene and borrowed from it, instead I choose to see it as a repeating God-pattern of how the Lord deals with His Prophets and how He ushers some into getting a glimpse of the spiritual world.

Verse 2 begins: "Immediately I was in the spirit". This verse is also thought by Futurists and Dispensationalists to refer to a Rapture experience. However I see a couple of important bits of information that would beg to differ with the Rapture idea on a couple of levels. First, this directly refers to John and no one else. Second, if we assume as Dispensationalists do that sequential order of vision and context is maintained throughout Revelation, then we have to ask why if John was already "in the spirit" in chapter 1, he was said to again be "immediately in the spirit". In **Revelation 1:10-11** we read: <sup>10</sup> *I came to be, in the Spirit, on the Day of the Lord; and I heard behind me a loud voice, like a trumpet,* <sup>11</sup> *saying, "Write down what you see on a scroll, and send it to the seven Messianic communities- Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea!"*. Now it is certainly possible that some time passed between the first and second visions or that the first and second visions are in no way connected sequentially; it's hard to know. But more fundamentally, what does it mean for John to be "in the spirit"?

Some translators capitalize "Spirit" indicating that it is a proper name, thus pointing to the Holy Spirit. Others leave "spirit" in the lower case meaning spirit in a more general sense and indicating something supernatural; that is, John didn't go to Heaven physically but rather in

some other ethereal way. I think the matter gets cleared up a little when we notice that bad habit of English translators once again surface: they will sometimes translate according to predetermined doctrinal beliefs (perhaps subconsciously) and not necessarily according to what the Greek actually says. In our case the Greek definite article....that is, the word "the"....does not appear before the word "spirit". So the phrase actually reads "in spirit" and not "in THE Spirit"; big difference. "In spirit" means something out of body and supernatural, but otherwise undefined; while "In THE Spirit" refers to a spiritual being or entity of some sort. So we shall stick with the original Greek and understand that John entered into some type of ecstatic, spiritual state but no direct connection with the Holy Spirit is being suggested.

Ezekiel makes a similar claim as being in the spirit when he is shown the new Jerusalem, but it is not at all evident that a translation from one kind of body into another has occurred to Ezekiel or to John as is the general Christian viewpoint of what happens to Believers in the Rapture experience. So John has not experienced a Rapture in this verse anymore than did Ezekiel, and there doesn't seem to be any reasonable connection between verses 1 and 2 to the general Rapture of all Believers that is yet to come.

In this vision once John is transported in spirit through a cosmic doorway into Heaven he immediately sees a throne and he sees the One who is sitting on it. This is an obvious allusion to the vision of Daniel 7. **(Dan. 7:9 CJB) <sup>9</sup> "As I watched, thrones were set in place; and the Ancient One took his seat. His clothing was white as snow, the hair on his head was like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames, with wheels of burning fire.** So John is seeing what Daniel was seeing; or it least it is exactly the same setting. Please note: The One, which is short for Ancient One, is God the Father and NOT God the Son.

Then to begin verse 3 we read about the Father's appearance as similar to jasper and carnelian, which is also called sardius (please note that the CJB incorrectly uses diamonds and rubies), and there is a rainbow around the throne with the appearance of emerald. I cannot stress enough that while we commonly refer to John's era, and to the era of Christ and all the Apostles, as the New Testament era, that is a misleading characterization because that is certainly not how any of the New Testament writers would have thought of it. Rather there was not such thing as a New Testament yet and none was being contemplated. So calling that time the New Testament era is another anachronism that is sloppily used in our day and it creates a false impression. For Jews living in that era, they would think of themselves as still living in what we would call the Old Testament era since it is the first and the only Testament existing at that time. Thus as regards their religion and their national expectations, they looked to the Old Testament and the Prophets. Here in this verse we'll see an unexpected connection to John's vision and the Torah.

The jasper, carnelian and emerald that are mentioned are selected for a very critical reason; they are explicitly representative of 3 tribes of Israel and those exact stones are present on the High Priest's breastplate (this is found in Exodus chapter 28). As you might recall each of the 12 tribes was assigned a certain precious or semi-precious stone to represent that tribe and each of those stones was arranged in 4 rows of 3 and fastened to the High Priest's special breastplate. It is fascinating that jasper and carnelian are the last stone and the first stone on the breastplate, respectively. Jasper represents the youngest son of Jacob, Benjamin, and

carnelian the eldest: Reuben. And in whose presence are these stones in John's vision? In the presence of the First and the Last; the God of Creation. But then it gets even better; the rainbow around God's throne is said to be the color of emerald. Emerald is the 4th stone on the High Priest's breastplate and it represents the Tribe of Judah. And who is the most famous person ever to come from the Tribe of Judah? **Yeshua HaMashiach**; Jesus the Christ.

Also notice this (something we've talked about before); carnelian and jasper representing the first and the last of the 12 tribes forms a common literary vehicle in Hebrew grammar called a merism. A merism is when you have a group of things but it is represented by speaking only of the first thing and the last thing in the group. The idea is that it is a short cut from mentioning every single thing in that group. For instance, in English we might say "everything from A to Z". We don't just mean items A and Z; we mean A, Z and everything in between. That is a merism. So by saying that God Himself had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, which is an obvious reference to the stones on the High Priest's breastplate (obvious if you have studied the Torah), then it is a definite reference to the 12 Tribes of Israel that is somehow manifested in the very appearance of the One sitting on the Throne. Add to that the emerald color of the Rainbow (the Rainbow was a reminder of God's mercy that He would never destroy the earth by flood again) and that emerald is the stone representing the Tribe of Judah (Christ's tribe), and we see the unmistakable symbolic connections between God, Christ as the Lion of Judah, and the 12 Tribes of Israel in John's vision.

Moving on to verse 4 the symbolism involving Israel continues. We are told that seated around the throne of the Father were 24 elders sitting on their own thrones, clothed in white garments, and wearing crowns of gold. The easiest part of this passage to decipher is the white garments and the crowns. White garments always symbolize ritual purity. The crowns are symbolic of those who have been admitted into the Kingdom of God, and sitting on thrones is because we are explicitly told that Believers will be given crowns and the authority to rule alongside King Yeshua in the Kingdom. Such symbolism of crowns for the righteous is not a Christian innovation at all; it was already a well established and accepted principle within Judaism. In the Talmud Berakhot 17a we read this: ***In the olam haba (the world to come)....the righteous sit with their crowns upon their heads and feast on the Shekinah...***

But what of the 24 elders? Who are they and what do they represent and why 24 of them? There are various reasonable thoughts on these, but I think the answer is clear if one can get beyond standard Christian doctrine that thinks only in terms of gentiles.

One line of thought is that the number of 24 represents two times the number 12. The number 12 was seen as a divine number, and therefore included a measure of perfection and also represents a special kind of completion as concerns redemption. Another thought is that the 24 elders are the 12 tribal leaders of Israel plus the 12 Apostles (and there are several other scenarios as well). However when we understand the symbolism of the jasper, carnelian, and emerald in the previous verse as representing attributes of Israel, then we must look to the same regarding the 24 sitting on thrones. During the times when the Temple stood there were established 24 courses of priests and Levites to serve at the Temple; this organizational structure continued until the destruction of the first Temple by Babylon. It was reestablished with the reconstruction of the Temple and then continued until the Roman destruction of the

2nd Temple in 70 A.D. Each course was 2 weeks in duration and so every Priest and Levite served 2 weeks per year at the Temple and the rest of the time they lived the lives of common folk. Knowing exactly when they would serve and for how long allowed them to farm, raise livestock, grow grapes, ply a trade, etc. all the rest of the time so that they could support their families. I have no doubt that while these 24 elders in John's vision are Believers and could also be saved Levites and Priests, at the least they are Believers who serve God (in the same manner as did the Levites and Priests) as their thrones are arranged around God's throne.

Next in verse 5 we read of John witnessing lightening, voices, and thunder emitting from God's Throne. Where have we heard this before? Although I've already quoted it today, it bears repeating: **Exodus 19:16-19 CJB** <sup>16</sup> *On the morning of the third day, there was thunder, lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain. Then a shofar blast sounded so loudly that all the people in the camp trembled.* <sup>17</sup> *Moshe brought the people out of the camp to meet God; they stood near the base of the mountain.* <sup>18</sup> *Mount Sinai was enveloped in smoke, because ADONAI descended onto it in fire- its smoke went up like the smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain shook violently.* <sup>19</sup> *As the sound of the shofar grew louder and louder, Moshe spoke; and God answered him with a voice.* So the Hebrew motif of Israel's past and present continue in John's vision. Thunder, lightening and voices are all standard biblical phenomena associated with a theophany: an appearance of God. Along with the thunder, lightening and voices were 7 fiery torches that represent the 7 spirits of God. If you'll recall from Revelation chapter 1 we had similar symbols but they represented different things. There the 7 fiery torches, or lamps, represented the 7 Believing congregations of Asia. Here they represent what is called the 7 spirits of God.

In our introduction to Revelation I asked you to watch for the avalanche of sevens that we would see throughout the book. Since seven is the ideal number, and the number of divine completion and perfection and (especially to be noticed in this case) also the divine number of finality, it is fitting that in the book of the Bible that deals with the finality of human history and redemption that we'd see all these sevens. Thus while there are other possibilities, I believe the 7 spirits spoken of in verse 5 represent the complete work of the Holy Spirit of God.

As the vision continues to unfurl John saw something like a glass sea of crystal. The wording here is important; it is NOT "a sea of glass", instead it is "a glass sea". And this glass sea has the look of crystal. There's been many attempts to understand the symbolism of this verse up to and including that in ancient Israel's history the Canaanite god of the sea was Yam and not coincidentally the Hebrew word for sea is yam. Thus some Bible scholars think that this passage is somehow invoking the pagan god of the sea before the Lord. Honestly, even though some pretty smart modern Bible scholars think this is a real possibility I find it absurd. Not only are the Jews of John's day centuries and centuries removed from the era of dealing with Canaanites and their pagan god systems, but for God to intend to use a pagan god symbol under His holy throne makes no sense. However I think the reason there is so much trouble trying to decipher this mention of a glass sea is once again due to lack of Torah knowledge.

In Solomon's era a large brass laver of water for ritual washing purposes was set in the Temple area for priests to use; it was known as The Molten Sea. It was huge; like an elaborate above

ground swimming pool. And what do we find before God, in His heavenly Temple next to His throne? Something called a glass sea. And who was present around His throne but 24 priests and Levites who were those that used The Sea for ritual purification. So let me sum this up: if we go back to the symbolic elements used in the Torah for service to God, then every symbol we find so far in John's vision of Revelation 4 reappears. Now with no offense intended, this not something that the Christian Church can comprehend or wants to hear because according to most denominational doctrines gentile Christians are now God's people and the Jews have been rejected. All the promises and blessings that were made for Israel, now belong to the Church. So any Jewish or Hebrew symbols in the New Testament, let alone in Heaven in the Book of Revelation, are most unwelcome. And yet John's vision of Heaven and of Believers in Heaven and of God in Heaven is only understandable in the context of Israel, the tribes of Israel, the Temple and the Levite Priesthood.

But wait: there's more! Verses 6, 7 and 8 speak of 4 living creatures who were in the middle of the throne and around God's throne. Each one had a separate and distinct identity. The first one resembled a lion, the second an ox, the third had the face of a man, and the fourth an eagle. I just love talking about this. I'm going to draw heavily on a lesson I put together years ago to explain the significance of these strange creatures.

Nothing in the Bible stands alone; it's all connected. To demonstrate this listen to Ezekiel 1:10. Ezekiel was a prophet that lived about 700 years after the time of Moses and about the same amount of time before the Apostle John wrote Revelation. The vision Ezekiel had in the first chapter of his book begins with a view of Heaven and God's throne area, and it speaks about four living creatures. These living creatures had wings and 4 faces. **Ezekiel 1, verse 10:**

***"...as for the appearance of their faces), they had human faces in front, each of the four had a lion's face on the right, each had a Bull's face on the left, and each of the four had an eagle's face toward the rear".***

Please note that a Bull and an Ox were interchangeable symbols. And we're told that wherever the Spirit of God went, the 4 living beings went.

In the time of the Exodus the placement of the 12 tribes around the Wilderness Tabernacle had tremendous prophetic symbolism and meaning; and it denoted a tribal pecking order. As with the Priest's Breastplate, the 12 tribes were divided into 4 groups of 3 tribes. The 3-tribe group was assigned a specific, and permanent, side of the Tabernacle on which they were to camp, and it was given according to compass directions. Each of the 3-tribe groups had a dominant leader tribe so there were 4 leader tribes in all: Reuben, Dan, Judah, and Ephraim. Each of the 4 dominant leader tribes had a specific symbol, an emblem placed upon a banner, by which they were known (in fact all 12 tribes did). We all know the symbol of Judah is the Lion.....we even call Christ the Lion of Judah. So the tribe of Ephraim's symbol was a male calf or better a Bull, sometimes shown as a male Ox. Dan's tribal symbol is a little more of a mystery, as it the tribe itself; at times it was a snake, at other times a flying snake, and more traditionally it has been accepted that it was an Eagle. Reuben's symbol was a man, a human being.

So the 4 dominant leader tribes, which represented all 12 tribes, each had a symbol: one was



a Lion, one was an Eagle, another a Bull or Ox, and the last was a man or human. And these tribes surrounded God's earthly dwelling place, God's throne on earth, the Wilderness Tabernacle. They protected the Sanctuary of God from outsiders and the Lord protected them from their enemies.

The 4 Living Creatures of John's vision in Heaven had the faces of a Lion, an Eagle, a Bull, and a man. Now where did we just see those same symbols? Right! Those were the representative symbols of the 4 dominant tribes of Israel. Coincidence? Hardly. The connections between the earthly physical Israel and the Heavenly throne room of God are unmistakable provided we don't insist on allegorizing them away or ignoring them altogether.

These strange creatures were said to have 6 wings and were full of eyes. This is probably an allusion to Isaiah's vision from Isaiah chapter 6.

**<sup>CJB</sup> Isaiah 6:1 *In the year of King 'Uziah's death I saw Adonai sitting on a high, lofty throne! The hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> S'rafim stood over him, each with six wings- two for covering his face, two for covering his feet and two for flying. <sup>3</sup> They were crying out to each other, "More holy than the holiest holiness is ADONAI-Tzva'ot! The whole earth is filled with his glory!"***

While John doesn't give these creatures a name, Isaiah calls them Seraphim. And we also see Isaiah speak about how these beings constantly extolled God's holiness. Thus among Isaiah, Ezekiel and John we get a combined picture of these guardian spirit beings surrounding God's throne. That the creatures were full of eyes indicates that they see everything and know everything; nothing escapes their gaze. They never pause in their watchfulness over God Himself or over His creation. But they also never pause in their worship and praise of God. And neither should we.

We'll finish up chapter 4 next time and get well into chapter 5.