

The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 45

November 3, 2014 – November 9, 2014

Revelation 4-5

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, reading it like an ordinary book is quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John's gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

RATHER THAN PROVIDING THE normal running commentary, this lesson COVERS MATERIAL THAT IS READ LATER, SO THAT THE LESSON WILL CORRESPOND WITH THE PREACHING OF THE HOME CHURCH FOR THESE LESSONS. No Life Groups meet the last two Sundays of the year in the home church, so without this modification, the classes would fail to cover the end of Revelation that bring human history to a VICTORIOUS conclusion. Sorry for the change! The lessons will still provide the reading schedule to complete the one-year Bible plan (week 45 here with week 46 attached). Covered readings are noted in the text of this handout.

Week Forty-Five Readings

<p>11/3 The Letter to Smyrna Rev 2:7-2:11 cont'd</p> <p>Prov 14 Prov 22:28 Prov 23:10-23:11 Prov 29:13 Heb 3 Pslm 95 Heb 4:1-4:10 Rom 2:28-2:29 2 Tim 3:10-3:13</p> <p>11/4 The Letter to Pergamum Rev 2:12-2:17</p> <p>Num 22-23</p>	<p>11/5 The Letter to Pergamum Rev 2:12-2:17</p> <p>Num 24-25 Prov 15:10-15:16</p> <p>11/6 The Letter to Thyatira Rev 2:18-2:29</p> <p>Prov 2 1Kgs 16:29-16:34 1 Kgs 21:25-21:29</p>	<p>11/7 The Letter to Thyatira Rev 2:18-2:29</p> <p>2 Kgs 9 Prov 21:9-21:19 Rom 2:2-2:5 Pslm 26 Jer 19</p> <p>11/8 The Letter to Thyatira Rev 2:18-2:29</p> <p>2 Chron 21-24 Prov 24:11-24:12</p> <p>11/9 Off</p>
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BACKGROUND

This week we begin working through the Revelation of John. It is a book that has invigorated the imagination and scholastic endeavors of many through the millennia. The book is foreign to modern thought in many ways. It is steeped in Old Testament language. It follows a style that echoes that of multiple Old Testament prophets. Revelation fits into a genre of literature called “apocalyptic literature” peculiar historically to an era long ago. It speaks to issues that were sensitive to life in the Roman Empire in the first century, yet it seems to be speaking predictively of the future as well.

As we work our way through the book in the Context Bible series, our goal is not to write a commentary on Revelation. Nor is our goal to explain in detail all the different approaches to revelation. In these lessons, our plan is to explain the supporting scriptures to try and give a semblance of meaning to Revelation’s usage of the Old Testament. We will also explore some of the issues that help us understand the significance of some of the unique features of Revelation compared to much of our literature, culture, and thought today. For example, in this introductory lesson, we will focus on the significance of numbers. They play a role throughout the book of Revelation and understanding them is key to anyone’s processing of the text.

I add one final background note on the approach to Revelation in these lessons. While many will quite properly read Revelation through the lens of their own views of the end times (pre-millennial, post-millennial, a-millennial), only occasionally will my view peek through the pages. When it does, I will try to keep other significant views in mind, trusting the reader and teacher to apply their own personal filters. To me, many of the final end events of the world as we know it, and that of the world to come, will be understood as they unfold. While I am comfortable with my views, I am not the most adamant about my own “knowledge” of exactly how it unfolds!

Revelation 4 - The Heavenly Throne (Revelation 4; Isaiah 6:1-6:8; Psalm 11, 99; Ezekiel 1, 10; Genesis 9:8-9:17)

Revelation 5 - The scroll and the Lamb (Revelation 5; Daniel 12; Psalm 141; Genesis 10; 11:1-11:9; 49:1, 49:8-49:12)

“PERSPECTIVE.” It is so important in most every aspect of life. Without it, molehills become mountains; predicaments become problems; and challenges become catastrophes. But with perspective, one gets an entire understanding. Molehills are molehills. Predicaments are opportunities. And as for challenges, as my father would say, “That’s no hill for a stepper.” Perspective is so important in life.

As one reads through chapters 6 and following of Revelation, there is an accounting of tribulation, difficulties and persecutions, and suffering that includes God’s people. The

book will end with victory, and that is important and reassuring. But *before* the detailed agonies, there is also a reassurance. It is found in chapters 4 and 5. These two chapters precede the visions of judgment, wrath, and persecution setting a *perspective* that is important.

Like so much of the book, John's images are found in the Old Testament in ways that illuminate the meaning and significance of the images to the reader. That is not to say that the Old Testament passages clearly referenced or used by John are to give the Revelation passage its full meaning. Rather the images used in the Old Testament help us understand the images of Revelation.

Lest this concept be unclear, let me expound briefly. As one readily sees from the contextual reading, Ezekiel 1 clearly has echoes in Revelation 4. Yet that does not mean that we find the full *meaning* of Ezekiel 1 in Revelation 4. Rather, it means as we understand the symbols of Ezekiel 1 that are used again in Revelation 4, we will more clearly understand those symbols if we understand them in Ezekiel 1.

The perspective of Revelation 4 and 5 is present in a magnificent message:

God sits in Trinity on his heavenly throne, and all else must be seen in that light. God is all-powerful, and governs everyone and everything for all time.

This is the perspective that gives assurance to those in turmoil. Knowing this informs the hurting that tears are not unnoticed. It enlightens those in darkness, and guarantees that nothing happens with God unaware.

Revelation 4

In this passage, John has finished his letters to the seven churches. After some unspecified time, John looks and sees a door opened in heaven. The voice he heard in Revelation 1:10 speaks again and calls him "up." Ezekiel experienced much the same with a heavenly vision when he was among the Jewish exiles in Babylon. "The heavens were opened" and Ezekiel "saw visions of God" (Ezek 1:1).

John's vision set up one on a throne, with an appearance of jasper and carnelian. Around the throne was a rainbow, the Old Testament covenant sign that God would not destroy the earth in the fashion of a flood as in Noah's day (Gen 9:8-9:17). The rainbow shows God's steadfastness as a just God who keeps his word, yet still maintains his powers to judge the whole earth.

Also surrounding the throne were 24 smaller thrones, with 24 elders seated on those thrones. As discussed in the earlier lesson on the symbolic significance of numbers, 24 is a full number much like seven. Seven gets its fullness as the sum of 3 (things

spiritual) added to 4 (things earthly). Twelve also gets its fullness from 3 and 4, but by multiplication rather than addition. There are many “12’s” that signify completion, not simply in the Bible. Biblically we have twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles, etc. Beyond the Bible, the Greeks had twelve principal gods in the pantheon. There are twelve months in a year, twelve inches to a foot, and even twelve days of Christmas! All of these have their origins in the ancient concept of twelve as a full number.

The 24 thrones for the “elders” are likely representative of the twelve tribes of Israel, representing the old covenant and the twelve apostles, representing the new covenant. These 24 have white garments (something we will learn of later in the revelation) and golden crowns destined to be cast before the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God!

The throne sources flashes of lightning and peels of thunder. As the heavenly scene unfolds we will see the entire Trinity at the throne. The Father sits on the throne. The Spirit is the all seeing burning torches of 4:5. (The Spirit is called the “seven spirits of God,” but seven symbolizes the fullness of the Spirit.) In chapter five, the Son will take his place in the throne as the Lamb of God worthy to open the scroll.

Further to John’s vision, we read of

four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within (Rev 4:6-4:8).

These creatures are given also in Ezekiel’s vision with very much the same descriptions and only minor differences. In Ezekiel we read of them labeled as “cherubim.”

Every one had four faces: the first face was the face of the cherub, and the second face was a human face, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle (Ezek 10:14).

In Ezekiel, they had four faces apiece, and four wings rather than six, with hands under the wings. We can get some insight into the significance of the imagery by considering the Ezekiel vision in more detail.

As we consider the images of Ezekiel chapter one, we should first note that the overall message that the image conveyed to Ezekiel was stunning. YHWH was coming into Babylon, where Ezekiel dwelt with the exiles. Why would this have stunned the people in Ezekiel’s day? Contrary to the people’s mistaken belief, YHWH was not simply a mountain God in Judah’s hills that was going to pass into history as the people dispersed into far away lands and distant cultures. YHWH was not a God limited to his temple or to Jerusalem. At this time (the fifth year of Jehoiakin’s exile), we should

remember that the temple was still standing in Jerusalem, yet YHWH comes to Babylon, and not *from the direction of Jerusalem* (southwest). YHWH comes from the north. Isaiah 14:13 indicates that the Babylonians thought their gods lived “in the far reaches of the north.” YHWH was coming from the same direction, but not in weakness or defeat. YHWH came in great power, riding “a stormy wind,” and “a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually.” The Babylonians knew Adad as the storm god, those tribes closer to Judah’s homeland called him Ba’al (the same god also worshipped by many Israelites). The storms were supposed to be Adad’s chariots, the thunder his voice, the lightning his power. For Ezekiel, these earthly significances of the gods were subservient to YHWH.

The angelic cherubim who travelled below the throne of YHWH in Ezekiel 1 also showed the subservience of Babylonian and Mesopotamian gods to Israel’s true God. The angelic beings had four faces: human, lion, ox, and eagle. If we are not careful, we are misled reading into these creatures the issues of our times. In this we would not be the first! Medieval rabbinic commentators considered these four faces to represent the four kinds of exalted beings, each set under the chariot of God so that they would know the kingdom of God is exalted above all:

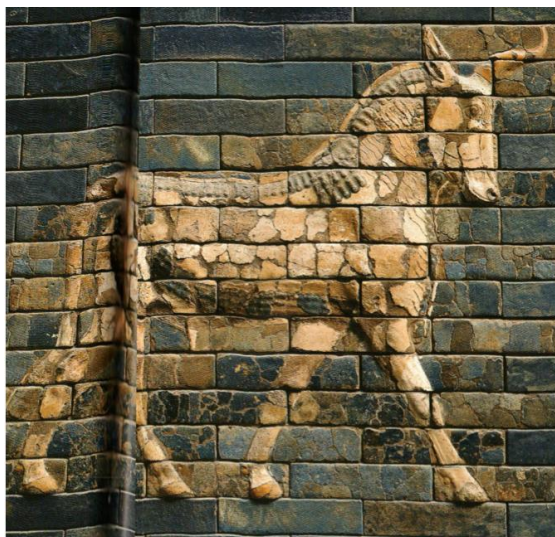
Four kinds of exalted beings have been created in the world. The most exalted of all living creatures is man; of birds, the eagle; of cattle, the ox; and of wild beasts, the lion. All of these received royalty and had greatness bestowed upon them, and they are set under the chariot of God [citing Ezekiel 1:10].¹

The early church seized on these same features to represent the four gospel writers. Matthew was depicted as a human, Mark as a lion, Luke as a bull, and John as an eagle. Irenaeus of Lyons (c.125 – c.202) seems to be the first to read the gospels into this vision. He reasoned that the lion, the king of beasts, represented Christ’s regal qualities as king of kings. The bull as an animal used in sacrifice represented Christ’s sacrificial and priestly roles, the human represented the incarnation, and the eagle was the hovering gift of the Holy Spirit to believers. Irenaeus then applied these creatures to the gospels asserting the lion was John, who wrote of the pre-existent Word, Christ in his regal nature. The bull was the gospel of Luke because it began with the priest Zachariah offering sacrifice to God. The human was Matthew who opens his gospel with the human lineage of Jesus. The eagle was Mark whose gospel quotes frequently from the prophets and thus manifests the Spirit of God through those prophets.²

¹ *Midrash Rabbah – Exodus*, XXIII.13, translated by S. M. Lehrman (Socino Press 1939) at 291.

² Irenaeus of Lyons (c.125 – c.202) used this vision of Ezekiel and its association with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to argue against the Marcion and gnostic inclusion of any other gospel. See a thorough

Our suggestion before reading any contemporary issues and thoughts into these visions is to first ask what the visions likely meant and conveyed to Ezekiel and his contemporaries. Combined creatures like these were not unknown in Ezekiel’s world. Frequently carvings of part human part lion, or some other combination carried the idea of one who had the traits of both (or more). There is an interesting set of ivories on display in the Louvre from a site in northern Syria (Arslan-Tash) that predates Ezekiel by about two hundred years. One Arslan-Tash ivory now on display at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem is a composite of the same four creatures as Ezekiel’s cherubim. The ivory has a human face, eagle wings, lion feet in the front and some remains of ox feet in the back (that portion of the ivory is damaged). These features in Ezekiel’s day were consistent representations of the gods and/or their counterpart-representatives on earth.



Many bulls adorned and protected the Ishtar gate

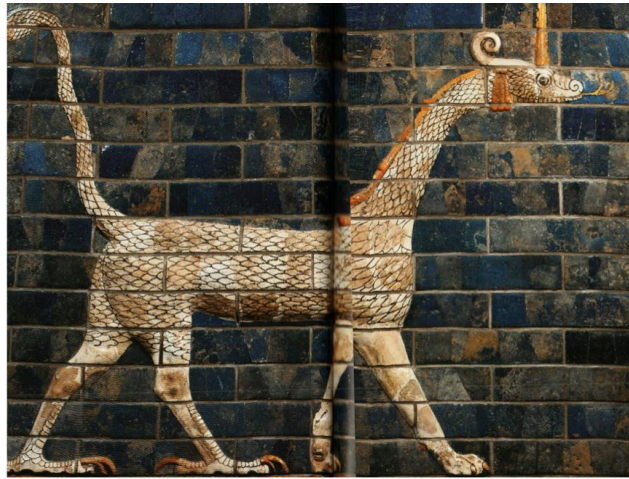
In Babylonian thought, the bull was the symbol of the god Adad, the weather god. The lion represented Ishtar, the goddess of fertility, love and war. As Nebuchadnezzar built up Babylon, he had a broad entry from the north into the city going through the Ishtar gate, the grandest and most spectacular entrance to the city. For 220 yards (roughly two football fields) a broad paved road passed between high walls on the east and west. This road was called the *Aibur-shabu*, meaning, “the enemy shall never pass.” This road was protected by Ishtar and others, as shown by the approximately 120 lions made from molded glazed brick and plastered on the walls on each side of the road.³ The British Museum has published some spectacular photos of the vibrant colors involved in these structures.⁴ The black and white included here does not do justice!

discussion of these early church views in Christman, Angela, “*What Did Ezekiel See?*” *Christian Exegesis of Ezekiel’s Vision of the Chariot from Irenaeus to Gregory the Great*, (Brill 2005).

³ For a discussion of the archaeological discoveries and the significance of the animal symbols, see Oates, John, *Babylon* (Thames and Hudson 1979).

⁴ Finkel, Irving and Seymour, Michael, *Babylon: City of Wonders* (British Museum Press 2008).

The major emblem in Nebuchadnezzar's capital was that of the *Mushhushshu*, typically translated as "dragon." This was the symbol of the king of the gods, Marduk. This creature combined the elements of a lion, an eagle, and a serpent. There were many ceramic glazed representations of this composite creature throughout the Ishtar Gate. Marduk was so powerful; over time he seemed to embody the traits and functions of the other lesser gods.⁵



The "dragon" that represented the supreme god Marduk was a composite of eagle (rear legs), lion (front legs) and serpent (head and tail).

Ezekiel was not numb to these images. As a priest, it is fair to assume that Ezekiel would have had a natural affinity for studying and understanding the gods of the conquerors. At least he would have noticed them! They could not be missed. These gods were paraded in animal form annually from the north (their home) down the processional way and through the Ishtar gate. We also know from Biblical texts that Israelites were attuned to the gods of those around them (aside from the previously discussed addiction of actually worshipping the deities of their neighbors!). British Professor Saggs, well known for his writings on Babylon and Assyria, goes to great lengths to show that there was not only awareness, but often times incorporation of religious elements from Babylon, Assyria, and others into the religious worship of Israelites.⁶

In this light, we can now better understand Ezekiel's vision. The creatures that in Babylon symbolized their gods were set *below* the throne of YHWH. They were not YHWH's superiors, and they certainly were not his equal. As Fredenburg notes,

⁵ Scholars debate the import and meaning of texts that seem to indicate this. See in general, Oates at 172.

⁶ Saggs, H. W. F., *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel*, (Athlone Press 1978), at 6ff. One example for Saggs is the ability of King Jehu to pass himself off as a Baal worshipper, even to the priests of Baal.

Far from respecting the territorial claims of Babylon's gods, Yahweh shows Ezekiel that things are opposite from what he and his companion suppose. The gods of Babylon are the obedient, throne-bearers of Yahweh!⁷

YHWH came from the north, the direction of the annual parade of gods for the Babylonians, and the symbols of Babylon's gods were nothing more than the angelic servants of YHWH, who travelled below his chariot and throne. In ancient Near



In this photo of Hatshep in Egypt one can see the typical parade carrying a god in idol form on the shoulders of men. This contrasts with Ezekiel's vision where YHWH moves by the Spirit: "Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went."

Eastern carvings, we can see likenesses of their parades bringing out their figures (idols) of their gods and carrying them almost like Rose Bowl parade floats! YHWH needs no such people to carry him. He moves by the Spirit. YHWH himself is enthroned above an expanse that extends high above these serving creatures. YHWH himself cannot be described in the form of any creature. He is on a likeness of a throne and has the likeness of a human appearance, but such an image is not adequate. Fire and brightness are the repeated terms Ezekiel uses to describe the Almighty YHWH. To Ezekiel in Babylon, YHWH is awe-

inspiring and sovereign. He is not simply some trifling tribal God of Judah!⁸

Now as we return to Revelation, we see why the earlier statement about using the Old Testament references to help understand imagery was made. We are not to import into Revelation the entire 6th century B.C. meaning and the immediate context of the Ezekiel passage. Rather we are to see the imagery of Ezekiel and from that better understand the imagery of John. John's angels are not identical, but his meaning can be understood as the imagery of these figures. The lion was strong – strong for the king of Babylon, strong for the gods of Mesopotamia. So strong, he was the top of the food chain. The ox (or bull) was a creature used in service. He could plow ground, turn millstones, or carry transport. The man was the intelligent one. Humanity outthinks the animals. The

⁷ Fredenburg, Brandon, *The College Press NIV Commentary – Ezekiel*, (College Press Publishing Co. 2002, at 41.

⁸ Ezekiel's imagery of YHWH and others is a transition in the world of the prophets. Ezekiel's imagery begins a genre of literature that evolves into what scholars term "apocalyptic literature." We will delve into this more deeply as we continue our studies, but Ezekiel provides source material for the language, imagery, and religious thought of later apocalyptic works. A most famous apocalyptic work is the New Testament book of Revelation. Not surprisingly, Revelation references or uses imagery of Ezekiel more than any other Biblical book.

eagle was both swift and carried a great presence from on high. We still speak of one being “eagle-eyed” when they can see things from afar.

These are the images of the angels before God as John described from his vision. The cherubim are surrounding God and giving their worship and all praise to him. They sing the songs of angels as we read in Isaiah 6.

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come! (Rev 4:8).

Isaiah 6 records Isaiah seeing the Lord on his throne and the Lord was “set apart” (or “holy”) visually, he was “high and lifted up” (Isa 6:1). The Lord was also set apart audibly, surrounded by angelic Seraphim who cried out to each other, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (Isa 6:3). This left Isaiah realizing how profane and common he was in comparison. His proclamation “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of unclean people” (Isa 6:5), carries with it recognition of being “lost” and self-realized “woe” in comparison. It brings the recognition earthward as we see God not only holy and set apart in heaven, but also on earth.

The Hebrew word for “holy” is *qadosh* (קדוש). It denotes something that is “commanding respect, awesome, treated with respect, removed from profane usage.” The word emphasizes the “otherness” of that which is holy. That which is *qadosh* is not common, but is set apart and different in an awesome way. There is a 21st century tendency to think of “holy” as a description of very ethical behavior. While actions can certainly be “holy” or “profane” (common), the word goes beyond simple behavior. It is rooted in something extraordinary. See, Koehler, L., Baumgartner, *et al.*, *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Brill 1999).

This comparison continues in narrative and poetry throughout Isaiah as the Israelite people, even though “chosen people,” are profane when compared to the unique holiness of God. The people “despise the word of the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 5:24).⁹ The people are a “sinful nation” and “laden with iniquity.” They “have despised the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 1:4). Even as the prophet proclaimed about the Lord, the people did not want to “hear about the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 30:11). In crisis, the people look for help to other profane and ordinary men, rather than the Lord who is set apart and holy:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very

⁹ In twenty-eight verses, Isaiah speaks of God as the “Holy One of Israel.” This is not a typical phrase. It occurs only seven other times in the entire Bible! One is not surprised that Isaiah uses the phrase four times more than the rest of the Bible considering Isaiah’s early encounter with *YHWH* on his throne in Isaiah 6.

strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD! (Isa 31:1).

The actions of the people are ones that “mocked and reviled...the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 37:23). In spite of what the people thought, though, God remained God, and *as God*, was the Creator of Israel!

I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your king (Isa 43:15).

The people pretend to be ignorant of God and far off from the Holy One, but he is their Creator! Isaiah follows this theme through another illustration from the everyday world of his day, that of a potter making pots:

Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?" You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"? (Isa 29:15-29:16).

Paul will later seize this theme, echoing Isaiah as he scolds those who “disagree” with God’s purposes among mankind:

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? (Rom 9:20-9:21).

Even as the people are far from holy and are ignoring God their Creator, the Holy One of Israel continued to reach out in promise to his people. The contrast is between a faithless people and a separate unique God who was faithful. So as the people were mired in sin, the Holy One of Israel was constant in his holy love and redemption:

Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who helps you, declares the LORD; your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel (Isa 41:14).

The promises of God were not profane promises of men whose word is only as good as the circumstances that surround the promise. The promises of God were set apart and holy as well. In Bob Dylan speak, “God don’t make promises that he don’t keep!”¹⁰ Israel’s future was secured not by their good works or wisdom, but by the unique integrity of God!

Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: "Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because

¹⁰ Dylan, Bob, “When You Gonna Wake Up?” from the Slow Train Coming album (Aug 1979).

of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." (Isa 49:7).

YHWH, the Holy One of Israel, was unique and set apart in Israel, but was never to be understood as simply the God of Israel. Part of God's holy uniqueness was that he ruled and reigned beyond the borders of Israel. In a time where people set aside certain locations for worship, thinking those were locations where divinity reigned as opposed to locations where he was missing, such was not the case with *YHWH*. *YHWH* chose Jerusalem and the temple as a special place, but it was always *YHWH's* choice, for *YHWH* truly reigned everywhere. This truth was apparent in Isaiah's vision noted in Isaiah 6. The angels were constantly proclaiming that the "whole earth" was full of the Holy God's glory.

Accordingly, Isaiah had visions and oracles of *YHWH's* judgments on the foreign nations. In Isaiah 13:1-13:22, Isaiah delivers an oracle of God's judgment on Babylon. In the oracle, God commanded his "consecrated ones" to execute his anger. The word translated "consecrated" is *qdsh* – "holy." The Holy One of Israel enthroned over all the earth has a Holy Army to do his bidding! More oracles detail the reign and authority of God over Assyria (Isa 14:24ff), Philistia (Isa 14:28ff), Moab (Isa 15:1ff), Damascus (Isa 17:1ff), Cush (Isa 18:1ff), and Egypt (Isa 19:1ff). The gods of these other lands are mere idols that "will tremble at his presence" (Isa 19:1). The real God of all is the Holy One of Israel!

For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, *the God of the whole earth he is called* (Isa 54:5).

YHWH was further set apart as the God of history: past, present and future. Unlike all who are captive in time, God uniquely reigns beyond time. It was the Holy One, the Lord of Hosts, who had "struck Midian at the rock of Oreb" and who lifted *his* staff (not Moses' staff!) against Egypt and over the parting sea (Isa 10:26). In the present, it is the Holy One who was moving:

Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel (Isa 12:6).

As to the future it was also the Holy One writing history. God promised to "open rivers," "make the wilderness a pool of water," so that:

they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it (Isa 41:20).

As Old Testament scholar John Watts has written,

The Vision [of Isaiah] also teaches God's control of the forces of history, no matter how great and powerful they are. They, too, are and must be ultimately responsible to God.¹¹

God was Israel's Holy One. He was, and is, bound to no one, working his purposes through people as he brings history to a close, keeping his promises, and working things out for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes!¹²

The cherubim sing this same song of holiness in Revelation 4. Where, as the scene unfolds, the 24 elders fall before the throne and remove their crowns, casting them forward. After all, who would dare wear a crown in the presence of the Holy Lord God Almighty? The elders repeat their own refrain,

Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created (Rev 4:11).

This refrain, and in fact, the entire chapter, find expression in Psalm 99. This psalm is, in my opinion, a non-symbolic proclamation of much of Revelation 4.

The psalm begins recounting the LORD reigning, enthroned upon the cherubim (Pslm 99:1). The earth trembles and his greatness is exalted over all peoples (Pslm 99:2). The people are called to praise God as "Holy!" (Pslm 99:3). Deeds and attributes of God are recited in verses 4-8, and the psalm ends with another cry to exalt God and worship him because he is holy.

Before leaving Revelation 4, we are reminded of the reading in Psalm 11. It sets out the conclusion of God enthroned above all, the center of everything. In this psalm, the question is asked, how can one expect a child of God to react to earthly circumstances with fear? With the Lord in his heavenly throne, the righteous can be assured of the end. "The upright shall behold his face" (Pslm 11:7).

Revelation 5

In Revelation 5, the throne scene continues. The Lord God Almighty (he who sits on the throne) holds a scroll, written both on the front and back. This is unusual. Most scrolls were written only in the inside. This speaks to the scrolls fullness. Seven seals have the scroll closed to reading.

¹¹ Watts, John D. W., *Word Biblical Commentary Isaiah 1-33*, (Word 1982), at xxxvii.

¹² While this sentence merges into a quote of Paul's from Romans 8:28, the thought is core to Isaiah's teaching. It is God, the Holy One of Israel doing this very thing!

The cry goes out from a mighty angel, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” John begins crying because no one was found worthy to do so “in heaven or on earth or under the earth” (Rev 5:3).

It is apparent from John’s weeping, that these scrolls are important in God’s plan for history. God’s plans protect his people, and bring them to ultimate victory over evil and the results of sin in this life and world. Because they are holy plans in the hands of a holy God, no one is worthy to open them. It would be shocking if one were even worthy to reach and take them. This is the God before who all fall down in worship.

John’s weeping was interrupted by one of the elders, who consoled him saying,

Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals (Rev 5:5).

The Lion of the tribe of Judah was a prophecy as old as the Israelites. When Jacob blessed his sons, he spoke of what was to “happen to you in days to come” (Gen 49:1). The sons were to bow before Judah who, as a lion’s cub, would keep the ruling scepter until tribute comes to him along with the obedience of the peoples (Gen 49:8-49:12).

Then John saw the Lion – he was a Lamb! And not just any Lamb, he was one “standing as though it had been slain. It was a sacrificed Lamb that had “seven horns” and “seven eyes,” which represented the seven Spirits of God sent into the earth.

This Lamb was able to approach God Almighty and take the scroll from the right hand (the hand of authority). At this, the four living creatures *and* the 24 elders all fell before the Lamb in worship. They held a harp and bowls of incense that represented prayers of the saints. (This was typical Old Testament symbolism as we read in Psalm 141:2, “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you.”) They sang a new song to the Lamb proclaiming HIM “worthy” as they had previously the Lord.

The song recounted the deeds of the Lamb being slain so that his blood would ransom people for God from among all the nations, making them a kingdom to reign upon earth.

At this, all of heaven breaks out in praise and worship of the Lamb calling him “worthy.”

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! (Rev 5:12).

Then every creature, “in heaven, and on earth and under the earth” give the Lamb the same praise as the Father on the throne.¹³

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever! (Rev 5:13).

At this all bow down and worship. This scene recounts the assurance of Paul to the Philippian church in a passage where, after recounting the atoning death of Christ Paul wrote,

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-2:11).

Importantly, many scholars believe Paul was quoting an early hymn of the church. If so, that would no doubt echo in the minds of John’s listeners and readers as the scene is recounted in the vision.

Many scholars see in this passage a repeat of the end times concerns found in Daniel 12. This passage is one where a scroll is associated with God’s plan and protection for his people in the end times. Daniel 12 speaks of a time of intense trouble for God’s people. But deliverance is assured for those whose names are written in the scroll (ESV calls it a “book”). Daniel is instructed to shut up the words of deliverance and protection, sealing the names in the scroll until some end time (Dan 12:4).

Daniel wanted to understand the plans, but they were “shut up and sealed until the time of the end” (Dan 12:9) leaving Daniel with the assurance that at the right time, it would work out as it should. This sets the stage for the Lamb to open the seals and reveal the coming tribulations and promised redemption of God’s people. This we reach in the readings of Revelation 6 and following.

QUESTIONS

1. What would you do if you saw God? Do you seek him in ways he can be found today, in anticipation of the day when you see him face to face? Does his presence change you today?

¹³ We have inserted Genesis 10:1-11:9 for reading to emphasize the many peoples of earth. Rebellion will cease. Self-centeredness over, all people, all languages, will proclaim Jesus as Lord.

2. Do you take time to deliberately and intentionally praise God as holy, and set apart?
3. Do you truly find God to be the highest and greatest thing in your life? Is he worthy of all you have? Is there anything that can or should trump him at any point or in any way? Knowing mentally there is not, why do we often have trouble not letting something else take priority over him?
4. How does the holiness of God affect your perspective about tribulation and troubled times? How does the assurance of God holding history in his right hand change things in our lives as we live history?

Week Forty-Six Readings

<p style="text-align: center;">11/10 The Letter to Sardis Rev 3:1-3:6</p> <p>1 Pet 4:1-4:11 1 Pet 4:17-4:19 Ezek 7 Pslm 137</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11/11 The Letter to Sardis Cont'd Rev 3:1-3:6</p> <p>Eccles 9 Prov 22:29 1 Pet 3 Prov 22:19-22:21 Prov 25:15 Jas 2:14-2:26 Jas 3:1-3:17 Prov 18:21 Prov 16:14-16:18, 16:20-16:22 Prov 22:10-22:14 Prov 25:23 Prov 22:7-22:8, 16</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">11/12 The Letter to Philadelphia Rev 3:7-3:13</p> <p>1 Jn 5:16-5:21 Isa 22 Job 12</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11/13 The Letter to Philadelphia Cont'd Rev 3:7-3:13</p> <p>Col 4:2-4:4 Isa 45:14-45:21, 45:24-45:25 Jer 1 Ezek 48</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">11/14 The Letter to Philadelphia Cont'd Rev 3:7-3:13</p> <p>Pslm 97 2 Chron 25 2 Chron 27-28</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11/15 The Letter to Laodicea Rev 3:14-3:22</p> <p>2 Pet 2 Hos 12 Heb 12:1-12:17 Luk 12:13-12:21</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11/16 Off</p>
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