

Revelation 4 & 5

Dispensationalism. Suggests that God works with humans in distinct ways (dispensations) through history; that God has a distinct plan for Israel over against the church; that the Bible, especially predictive prophecy, needs to be interpreted literally; that the church will be secretly raptured from earth seven years prior to Christ's second coming; and that Christ will rule with Israel during a literal thousand-year earthly reign. Contemporary, or progressive, dispensationalism remains thoroughly premillennial but rejects the ontological distinction between Israel and the church as two peoples of God, seeing them instead as two salvation-historical embodiments of a single people.¹

Revelation 4:1-3

This passage marks one of the major turning points in the Book of Revelation. Everything in the previous chapters concerns "things which you have seen" and "the things which are" (1:19). We now come to **things which must take place after this** (v. 1). To the dispensational view, **after this**, or, more literally, "after these things" [meta tauta] means after "the things of the church," or after the church age. Thus the material in Revelation after this point will be fulfilled after the church is gone.

Some believe that John's transportation to heaven may be viewed as a type of the Rapture of the church, and the mention of **a voice ... like a trumpet** (v. 1) here may recall the language of the Rapture passages in 1 Corinthians 15:51-54 (which refers to "the last trumpet") and 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 (which refers to the "voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God"). Dispensational *futurists* note that the church is not seen hereafter on the earth—only in heaven (7:9-17). As Walvoord puts it,

the word *church*, so prominent in chapters 2 and 3, does not occur again until 22:16, though the church is undoubtedly in view as the wife of the Lamb in Revelation 19:7.... Saints who come to know the Lord in this period are described as saved Israelites or saved Gentiles, never by terms which are characteristic of the church, the Body of Christ.

Futurists who reject the dispensational view do not place the Rapture of the church here, but they agree with the dispensationalists that the future Tribulation is the subject matter of the following chapters (4-19). In response to Walvoord's points stated above, they would say that the word "church" is used in the Apocalypse only with reference to individual congregations, thus leaving unaddressed the question of the universal church and its whereabouts. "The church," conceived as a global entity, is mentioned nowhere in Revelation—either before or after chapter 4. They further note that the terms *saints* (5:8; 8:3-4; 11:18; 13:7-10; 14:12; 15:3; 16:6; 17:6) and *redeemed* (5:9; 14:3-4) are indeed "terms which are characteristic of the church, the Body of Christ," when found elsewhere throughout the New Testament.

¹ Grenz, S., Guretzki, D., & Nordling, C. F. (1999). In *Pocket dictionary of theological terms* (pp. 39-40). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Revelation 4:4-5

Henry Morris appears alone in suggesting that the **twenty-four elders** (v. 4) are the first 24 ancestors of Christ (Adam through Pharez) listed in Genesis 5 and 11.

Ladd and Mounce both understand the elders to be angels, not human. Mounce describes them as “an exalted angelic order who serve and adore God as the heavenly counterpart to the twenty-four priestly and twenty-four Levitical orders (1 Chron. 24:4; 25:9–13) functioning both in the royal and the priestly.”

The majority opinion among dispensationalists (e.g., Gaebelien, Ryrie, Walvoord, Lindsey, and others) identifies the 24 elders as the New Testament saints, who were raptured into heaven (in v. 1). Gaebelien writes: “There is only one possible meaning. They represent the redeemed, the Saints in glory. They are Priests (clothed in white) and they are Kings (crowned); they are the royal priesthood before the throne.”

Their presence before the throne of God, prior to the unleashing of the various tribulation judgments, is seen as proof of a pretribulational Rapture.

Revelation 4:6-11

The sea of glass (v. 6) is the heavenly model for the “molten sea” (laver) in Solomon’s temple (2 Chron. 4:2–6). According to Gaebelien, “Now it is solidified because no more water is needed for the cleansing of the Saints.”

Of the many interpretations of the **four living creatures** (v. 6), Walvoord prefers the idea that they represent “the attributes or qualities of God presented to John here as living entities.” This is also the opinion of Ironside. Ryrie gives this as one possible option also, since “they are said to be ‘in the midst of’ the throne.”

Ladd follows the rabbinic interpretation of the four faces on Ezekiel’s cherubim (see under *Historicist*, page 90), seeing the four creatures as four aspects of nature: wild beasts, domesticated animals, human beings, and flying creatures. He suggests two possible interpretations which he says may both be correct: (1) They represent the praise and adoration extended to the Creator by the totality of His creation; (2) they are angelic beings used by the Creator in executing His rule and divine will.

Henry Morris believes them to be angelic beings, an alternative Walvoord also admits as possible. Lindsey thinks they are angels “who represent the four portraits of Christ that we find in the four Gospels.” The idea that the lion, ox, man, and eagle portray, respectively, Christ as King (as in Matthew), Servant (as in Mark), Son of Man (as in Luke), and Son of God (as in John) goes back at least as far as Victorinus. Ryrie approves this view, although Walvoord seems to join Alford in condemning this notion as excessively speculative.

Gaebelien believes them to be the cherubim of the Old Testament, which, he says, were seen “always in connection with the throne and the presence of Jehovah.” He adds: “Their constant cry, ‘Holy, Holy,’ reminds us of the seraphim also” (i.e., of Isa. 6). Domitian demanded that he be worshipped as “lord and god”.

The purpose of all of these details is to reveal the greatness of God.