

## *The Twenty-Four Elders* *Really? Who are they?*

*"Surrounding the throne are twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads."* (Rev. 4:4)

The next thing we see "surrounding the throne" are twenty four other thrones, with "elders" in white clothing and with crowns on their heads, sitting on the seats. One of the most controversial questions raised by this vision of the throne of God is the identity of the twenty-four elders. Some Bible scholars, good ones indeed, believe them to be men, whereas the others, equally competent, believe them to be angels. Let us examine both views.

John Darby, one of the first to write on this subject, said, "The number twenty-four represents twice twelve. One might perhaps see here the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles—the saints in the two dispensations." This is better than to make them "represent" the Church; but it leaves them symbolic rather than actual elders. Dr. Ironside explains,

But now the fourth verse brings before us a sight never beheld in heaven on any previous occasion: twenty-four thrones (not merely "seats") surrounding the central throne, and upon them twenty-four elders seated, with victors' crowns (not diadems) upon their heads, and clothed in priestly robes of purest white. Who are these favored ones gathered around the glorious central Being? I do not think we need to be in any doubt as to their identity, if we compare scripture with scripture and distrust our own imagination, which can but lead us astray.

In 1 Chronicles, chapter 24, we read of something very similar; and again I would remind you that many of John's readers were Hebrews, thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament. Can we question for a moment that every Jewish believer would instantly remember the twenty-four elders appointed by King David to represent the entire Levitical priesthood? He divided the priests into twenty-four courses, each course to serve for two weeks at a time in the temple which Solomon was to build. The same arrangement was in force when our Lord's forerunner was announced. Zacharias was "of the course of Abiah," the eighth in order (Luke 1:5).

The priests were many thousands in number; they could not all come together at one time, *but when the twenty-four elders met* in the temple precincts in Jerusalem, *the whole priestly house* was represented. And this is the explanation. I submit, of the symbol here. The elders in heaven represent the whole heavenly priesthood—that is, all the redeemed who have died in the past, or who shall be living at the Lord's return. In vision they were seen—not as a multitudinous host of millions of saved worshipers, but just twenty-four elders, symbolizing the entire company. The church of the present age and Old Testament saints are alike included. All are priests. All worship. There were twelve patriarchs in Israel, and twelve apostles introducing the new dispensation. The two together would give the complete 24.

Then, observe further: these persons are not angels. They are redeemed men who have overcome in the conflict with Satan and the world, for they wear victors' wreaths upon their brows. Angels are never said to be "crowned," nor have they known redemption.

There are two kinds of crowns mentioned in this book: the victor's crown, and the ruler's diadem. The former is the word here used."

Thus two of numerous great men of God *believe that the elders are men.*

When I studied with Dr. David L. Cooper some years ago, he said of these twenty-four elders that nothing in the context would indicate that these elders are used representatively. Never should one resort to a figurative, symbolic, or secondary meaning of any passage of Scripture unless there is a warrant for the same in the context. One will seek in vain for such justification. There is nothing that suggests the idea of representation. The language simply states that there were twenty-four thrones and twenty-four elders seated on their thrones, with crowns of gold on their heads.

Another popular suggestion is that these elders are heavenly beings that are of an especially high order, who, under God, are assisting in the administration of the universe. Dr. William R. Newell, who held that view, explains it:

We can only assume, not prove, that the "elders" are not of our race at all. The cherubim are not; nor the seraphim nor the "chief princes" (Daniel 10:13). Because the term "elders" is so often mentioned (over 200 times) in Scripture, both in connection with Israel and the Church, many are willing to assume that the elders are human beings. But the elders do not testify of their own *salvation* at all: although they celebrate that of *others*, as in Revelation 5:8, 9 (R.V.).

Inasmuch as God had "elders" over His people *Israel*, and "elders" were also to be appointed in each *Church* (Titus 1:15); and inasmuch as twenty-four seems God's governmental order, we do not see why it may not be that there are "elders" over God's creation; that they were created so; and they are twenty-four in number ... so these "elders" were created and associated by God with His government. When Christ, with His Bride, the Church, comes to reign in power, in Revelation 19, we hear no more of these twenty-four elders: for God then subjects *all* to the *Man*; Psalm 8 is fulfilled. The elders as all other heavenly beings, have their place, but under Christ and the Church.

The word "elder" means leader. Actually it is a title of rank. It has been pointed out that, militarily speaking, we have a similar expression in English. The commanding officer of any unit is often called "the old man." This has nothing to do with his age or the size unit that he heads, for he may be the commanding general of an entire army. On the other hand, he may be a twenty-four-year-old first lieutenant who is a company commander. Both are more or less affectionately referred to as "the old man." Essentially that is what the word "elder" means: "the old man." This word is used of pastors and church leader to indicate leadership.

Obviously good Bible scholars can be found on both sides of this issue of the identity of the heavenly "elders." Very honestly, I have changed my view since I originally wrote this commentary. Then I leaned toward the "twenty-four elders" being special representative angels who administered the universe of God. Three things worked to change my mind.

1. Further Bible study convinced me that these "elders" had been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (5:9). Angels have not been redeemed, so it could not be angels. *I had been misled by the study note in the Scofield Reference Bible that indicated the word "us" in the KJV was not found in the most ancient manuscripts. Actually, it is indeed found in twenty-three of the twenty-four oldest manuscripts of the book of Revelation!*

And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; For You were slain, and have redeemed *us* to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made *us* kings and priests to our God; and *we* shall reign on the earth." (Revelation 5:9,10; [The words "*us*" and "*we*" are my italics])

2. The NIV translators identify the "twenty-four elders" in 5:9: "With your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." Nothing could be clearer, these are

indeed redeemed men!

3. The following quote comes from my esteemed friend Dr. Henry Morris:

The word "seats" is the Greek *thronos*, the same word as used for "throne." The elders were seen by John seated on thrones exactly as he had seen the divine presence seated on the throne (4:2). The identity of these elders, sometimes mistakenly interpreted as angels, is important.

The elders are undoubtedly redeemed and glorified men, or, representative of such men, in view of the following considerations: (1) although there are principalities and powers in the angelic hierarchy, there can be no "elders," since all angels are of the same age, created probably on the first day of creation; (2) "Elder" is always used elsewhere in the Bible only of men; (3) elders are always chosen representatives and leaders of the people, both in Israel and in the church; (4) there are no elders in the visions of God's throne in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1-10, in consequence of the fact that prior to the cross the spirits of all the redeemed were still confined to Hades; (5) the elders were wearing white raiment (as promised to overcoming believers in Revelation 3:5) and victors' crowns (Greek *stephanos*, "wreath," as also promised to overcomers in Revelation 2:10 and 3:11); angels, being "ministering spirits" (Hebrews 1:14) are never described in the Bible as wearing crowns of any kind; (6) in Revelation 5:9-10, elders sing a song of praise to the Lamb who had redeemed them by His blood.

But why twenty-four elders? The Israelites used seventy elders (Exodus 24:1), and no indication is given as to the number of elders in the early church. There were twenty-four orders of priests in Israel (I Chronicles 24:7-19), but these were not the elders and, even though believers are to be kings and priests (Revelation 1:6), there seems no reason why the office of the priest should be commingled with that of the elder in heaven. The number twenty-four has often been held to be symbolic of the twelve patriarchs plus the twelve apostles. The latter, however, are specifically assigned to the job of judging the twelve tribes of Israel on twelve thrones in the millennial kingdom (Revelation 19:28), whereas the twenty-four elders are at the throne in heaven. If twelve of these are the twelve apostles, assigned to judging the twelve tribes, then the identity and function of the other twelve are left up in the air. It is barely possible that they are the twelve sons of Jacob."

To bring this subject to a conclusion—with all due respect to my friends and many I admire who hold the view that I once did, that the "twenty-four elders" are some kind of five-star generals of the angelic hosts who are always before the throne of God—I no longer believe that is accurate. Instead, as John Darby, a careful student of Bible prophecy who lived a century and a half ago, taught—these are men who represent Israel and the church, representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles to represent the Church. This view of a future event in heaven is a beautiful picture of the many things we share with the redeemed members of the nation of Israel.

This view also highlights the difference between Israel and the Church (1 Cor. 10:32). After the Church is raptured to be with Christ in His Father's house, Israel will go through the Tribulation here on earth. We will join them and the Tribulation saints after their resurrection, and we will all share the blessings of the Millennium and eternity together. Our Lord evidently has a slightly different relationship planned for Israel than He does for His Church, even in the Millennium. But we all will share its blessings and that of the eternal heaven as individuals, who can all sing the song of the redeemed because we have personally received Him who is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation Unveiled, By Tim LaHaye; Zondervan Publ. House, Grand Rapids; ©copyright 1999; Pgs 116-120.

### ***Where is the Church During The Tribulation?***

1. The first three Chapters of Revelation mentions the "Church" 22 (+/\_ ) times on earth.
2. Chapter 2-3 of Rev. is Christ encouraging the 7 Churches to repent!... before it's too late.
3. The final mention of the Church in Heaven is Rev 22:17— (she is the Bride of Christ).
4. The Church is the "Bride of Christ". Not because we are the better; but because we are those who chose to be washed in the precious Blood of Christ (both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant saints), and live for Him exclusively for the rest of our lives on earth—simply because of Who He Is in us—and who we are in Him! Though we daily yearn to be with Him forever, we also realize that many still have not repented of their sins. We must attend the Father's business till Christ returns—but *then*—we will spend the 7 years of Tribulation in Heaven preparing for the "*Marriage Supper of The Lamb*" which takes place near the end of Tribulation.

### ***The Bride of Christ throughout the Tribulation period:***

1. **Revelation 4: 4-7** – see vs 1, after Christ says, "Come up hither."
2. **Revelation 4: 8-11** – 24 seats for the elder around the throne
3. **Revelation 5: 8-14** – mightily in worship of the Lord Jesus
4. **Revelation 7: 11-13** – again mightily in worship of the Lord Jesus
5. **Revelation 11: 16-18** – Praying for judgment on earth. Ch. 12 God pouring out His wrath
6. **Revelation 19:4-8** – Proclamation calling the Bride to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb!
7. **Revelation 22:17** – *And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come" ....* (The Bride, The Church).

### ***How do we know the elders are the Church?***

1. They responded to the voice, "Come up hither" (Rev. 4:1). This is the same voice that also called the "two resurrected witnesses" to heaven at Mid-Tribulation (See Rev. 11:11-14)
2. They are seated on 24 thrones (12 tribes of Messianic Israel; 12 for Apostles)
3. They are dressed in white linen garments.
4. They wear incorruptible crowns on their heads, and cast them before the Lord.
5. They were, in every case, near the throne of their Saviour, Jesus Christ, in worship.
6. They awaited the time when Jesus would call the saints to the "Marriage Supper" of the Lamb.
7. They sang a new song; one no other could sing, saying, "*Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God Kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.*" (Revelation 5: 8-10) These saints claimed their inheritance! **Note:** The highlighted words "us" and "we"; Apostle John was speaking here concerning himself and every blood-washed born again believer, ever! (Rev. 7:11-14).
8. **Rev 7: 11-13:** Verse 13 refers the reader back to verses 9 and 10, which is the Tribulation saints (those saved by decision inside the tribulation period).
9. A Proclamation: It's time for the "Marriage Supper Of The Lamb"! (Revelation 19: 4-8)
10. And finally, the Church, *as the Bride of Christ*. (Revelation 22:17):

*And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.*

*He who testifies to these things says, "**Surely I am coming quickly**" Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20, 21).<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Nelson's NKJV Study Bible; Thomas Nelson Publishers; Chapter 5-22 (References only, as given in text above on the "Elders" of the Church of Jesus Christ).