

INTRODUCTION to REVELATION chapter 4

1 THE THEME

2 THE STRUCTURE

- a. The revelation is from eternity to time and back to eternity (chapter 4 and 5)
- b. The seven parts of chapter 4 and 5
- c. The throne Occupant is surrounded by seven concentric circles (chapter 4 and 5)
- d. The division of chapter 4

3 THE CONTENTS

- a. Visions (4:1-2a)
- b. The message of God's throne (4:2b-3)
- c. The message of the lightning and thunder (4:5a)
- d. The message of the four living creatures (4:6b-8)
- e. The message of the twenty-four elders (4:4a,9-11)
- f. The distance between heaven and earth

4 THE BACKGROUND

- a. A door (4:1)
- b. The throne (4:2)
- c. The lightning and the thunder (4:5a)
- d. The seven lamps (4:5b)
- e. The sea (4:6)
- f. The four living creatures (4:6b-8a)

1 THE THEME

GOD ON HIS THRONE RULES THE WHOLE UNIVERSE FROM ETERNITY TO ETERNITY

2 THE STRUCTURE

In structure, chapter 4 and chapter 5 belong together.

a. The revelation is from eternity to time and back to eternity (chapter 4 and 5)

In Revelation chapters 4 and 5 Christ reveals the following in visions:

- (1) God's heavenly throne in eternity. God is in the centre from eternity (4:1-11).
- (2) Christ's work of salvation and judgement in time. Christ is in the centre in time (5:1-12).
- (3) The effect of God and Christ on every creature in heaven and on earth: they stand around the throne of God and the Lamb in eternity. Again God and the Lamb are in the centre until all eternity (5:12-14; 2 Peter 1:11).

b. The seven parts of chapter 4 and 5

- (1) the open door (4:1)
- (2) the throne and its occupant (4:2-3)
- (3) those surrounding the throne (4:4-8)
- (4) the worship in heaven (4:9-11)
- (5) the seven sealed scroll (5:1-4)
- (6) the triumph of the Lamb (5:5-7)
- (7) the worship in heaven and on earth (5:8-14).

In Revelation chapter 4 and 5 John describes what he sees in his vision of heaven. He sees the throne, the radiance of its Occupant and everyone in the universe:

- (1) God the Father (the throne Occupant) (4:2)
- (2) God the Son (5:6)
- (3) God the Spirit (4:5)
- (4) the four living creatures (4:6-9)
- (5) the twenty-four elders (4:4)
- (6) the innumerable angels (5:11-12)
- (7) all other creatures in the universe (5:13)

c. The throne Occupant is surrounded by seven concentric circles (chapter 4 and 5)

The throne Occupant (God the Father) shares his throne with God the Son (5:6) and God the Spirit)(4:2,5)
The first three circles describe the radiance of God and the last four circles describe the creatures that encircle the throne.

- (1) First circle. The jasper symbolises God's glory or *holiness*.
- (2) Second circle. The carnelian symbolises God's character as it expresses itself in *judgement*.
- (3) Third circle. The emerald rainbow, symbolises God's character as it expresses itself in his faithfulness and *salvation*.
- (4) Fourth circle. The four living creatures symbolise heavenly beings that *represent God's whole creation* before God's throne and that worship God who reigns over all history and especially the history of salvation (4:8).
- (5) Fifth circle. The twenty-four elders symbolise heavenly beings that *represent the Church of the Old and the New Testaments in heaven* and that worship God as the God of creation and nature (4:11).
- (6) Sixth circle. The innumerable angels praise Christ's enthronement and perfect attributes (5:12).
- (7) Seventh circle. All the other creatures in the universe praise God's reign through Christ (5:13).

Thus the picture is of the throne in the centre of the whole created universe and its history. All creatures, saints and angels without any exception praise God! This responsive singing between the living creatures, the elders, the angels and God's creatures will continue forever into all eternity! They praise God for his multicoloured virtues revealed in creation and in salvation and for the salvation merited and carried out by the Lamb!

d. The division of chapter 4

Revelation 4:1-6a reveals God's throne in heaven in eternity as the contrast the Church on earth in time (chapter 1-3).

Revelation 4:6b-8 reveals the first sign of the coming things (the last days)¹ in God's history of salvation in time. The last days *begin* with Christ's first coming.

Revelation 4:9-11 reveals all creation: all his creatures and all his people worshipping God for all eternity. The last days *end* with Christ's second coming.

3 THE CONTENTS²

a. Visions (4:1-2a)

'Visions' in the Bible are often related to the ordinary visible things and events on earth. But a vision sees through the visible reality of this world and sees other things that belong to a higher order.

If the Church would only see the reality of everything as God sees it, she would realise how weak Satan and his demons have become now that they have been cast out of heaven and she would walk with the assurance of the ultimate victory.

But the Church is still in this world and the things and events in this world tend to present themselves much more forceful than the deeper and higher reality of the victory of Christ. Yet God does not want our eyes to be prisoners of seeing things only from the perspective of this world (through its newspapers and TV

¹ 'The last days' in the Bible refer to the following:

- a. the first coming of Christ (Hebrews 1:2; 9:26; 1 Peter 2:17)
- b. the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17)
- c. the whole New Testament period (2 Timothy 3:1; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3; 1 John 2:18)
- d. the resurrection of Christians at the second coming of Christ (John 6:39,44; 11:24; 12:48).

'The end of the age' in the Bible refers to the following:

- a. the whole New Testament period (1 Corinthians 10:11; Ephesians 1:10)
- b. the harvest at the second coming of Christ (Matthew 13:39; 24:3)

² cf. Bavinck, chapter 3

documentaries). That is why Christ gives to the Church a vision of the invisible reality of heaven and its throne!

b. The message of God's throne (4:2b-3)

On earth we see God's footstool (chapter 6), but let us not forget God's throne in heaven (chapter 4)! Not only will Christians be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12), but also all things that happen on earth will work together for the good of Christians (Romans 8:28)! In the midst of persecutions and trials the gaze of Christians should remain riveted on God who sits on his throne. The God of the Bible is the King of kings and the Lord of lords! The universe is not governed by any human being, by any government, by any evil spirit or by blind fate. No, it is governed by the God of the Bible who sits on his heavenly throne (Psalm 99:1; cf. Ephesians 1:20-22)!

The message of the throne is that God on his throne in heaven is the centre of everything. His throne stands immovable! God on his throne should be the focal point of all Christians (Colossians 3:1-4). The centre of the Christian worldview is not man or anything in creation, but God himself. God rules over everyone and everything from his heavenly throne through Jesus Christ.

c. The message of the lightning and thunder (4:5a)³

The first sign of the coming things in God's history of salvation are the lightning and thunder (4:5a), the sevenfold Holy Spirit coming into action (4:5b), the four living creatures and twenty-four the elders (4:6b-11).

Things in God's universe could no longer continue as they did, because the contrast between the serene rest of heaven and the restless struggle on earth was too great. The unravelling of history must follow; the events in history must come to their final goal, namely, the goal that God has planned for history (cf. Ephesians 1:10)! The events in God's history of salvation must begin to move and the great events in "the ends of the ages" must begin. Like the lightning and thunder these events have their origin in heaven, but take place on earth! God is on the throne and everything that happens is under his sovereign control and for the good of those who have put their trust in him (Romans 8:28)!

The message of the flashes of lightning and the rumblings of the thunder is that a unique historical event was about to take place – the first coming of Christ!

d. The message of the four living creatures (4:6b-8)⁴

In the Old Testament (Ezekiel chapter 1) the four living creatures are angels of a high order, cherubim that carry and protect God's throne. The cherubim around God's throne praise the holiness of God and say that the whole earth is full of God's glory (Isaiah 6:3).

In the New Testament the four living creatures praise the holiness of God and say that God is the One who controls history.

The four living creatures are heavenly beings that represent God's creation in all its fullness directly before God's throne throughout the history of the Bible. They represent *God's creation*, but worship God as the *God of history*. God's creation is the backdrop for God's history of salvation. And the creation or nature is much more interested in the events of history than we might think. See the four living creatures in the explanation of chapter 4.

The message of the living creatures is that God is the One who controls history: "who was, and is, and is to come". He was before creation and history; he now controls creation and history; and he will bring everything in creation and history to the goal he purposed for it! He will bring everything in creation and history to a meaningful end!

³ cf. Bavinck pp. 125-127

⁴ cf. Bavinck pp. 127-131

e. The message of the twenty-four elders (4:4a,9-11)⁵

The twenty-four elders are heavenly beings that represent God's Church directly before God's throne throughout the history of the Bible. They represent *God's Church*, but worship *God as the Creator*: "who created all things by his will" and keeps them in existence (4:11).

God's Church is the result of God gathering his Church throughout the history of salvation and judgement within creation. The whole Church worships the God who reigns over all creation within which he accomplishes his history of salvation. The Church throughout the history of salvation responds to the praises of creation, praising God that he realises his purpose, plan and will within creation and one day will bring it to perfect completion! While the creation looks at God's history of salvation resulting in the Church, the Church looks at God's creation as the reality in which God realises his plan. The elders look at God and worship him as the One who willed everything (including the Church) he created (4:11). The Bible does not separate the material creation and the spiritual realm. Both have reality and significance!

The message of the elders is that the Church is as it were lifted out above creation because her God is the Almighty Creator and Ruler of the whole creation. When the Church is brought to final completion she will no longer feel the struggle and misery of the present earth. But in anticipation of her final perfection she feels her priceless calling to worshipfully dedicate everything she received from God to God. She casts her crowns of victory before God's throne and falls down to worship God.

f. The distance between heaven and earth⁶

Heaven is not so far away that what happens on earth is of no account. The lightning and thunder emanate from God's throne and is seen and heard on earth as a sign that final unravelling of history within creation is about to take place.

The unravelling of history within creation results in salvation and judgement up to Christ's second coming. The four living creatures look forward to the moment when all things have been subjected under God's feet. The twenty-four elders look at this as already an accomplished fact and that God is radiating his sovereign kingship in all its glory over everyone and everything!

But this is just the beginning. Beneath on earth the throne of Satan is still standing and the synagogue of Satan is still gathering her people. The dragon is still pursuing the woman and the woman is still fleeing in the desert. One might be tempted to think that God does not care what happens on earth. But the moment of liberation has arrived. That is unfolded in chapter 5.

4 THE BACKGROUND

a. A door (4:1)

Only a few people have seen an open door in heaven:

Jacob in his dream saw a stairway with God standing at the top revealing and renewing the great covenant to him. Jakob experienced this as the house of God, the gate of heaven (Genesis 28:12-18).

Ezekiel in his vision saw the heavens open so that he could see visions of God (Ezekiel 1:1).

John the Baptist saw heaven opening and the Spirit descending onto Christ. He heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (Matthew 3:16-17).

Jesus promised that the disciples would see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. They would see that *Jesus Christ is the Mediator between God the Father in heaven and the people on earth* (John 1:51).

⁵ cf. Bavinck pp. 131-133

⁶ cf. Bavinck pp. 133-134

Stephen saw heaven open and the glory of Christ at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55-56).

The apostle Peter saw heaven opening and God revealing to him why he should not despise the non-Jews, but proclaim the gospel to everyone (Acts 10:11-16).

The apostle Paul saw heaven open. He was caught up to heaven, to paradise, and heard inexpressible things (2 Corinthians 12:1-5)

Now the apostle John saw heaven opened. God says, "Come up here (4:1)!" The door to heaven is open. And John was led into the heavenly sanctuary by the hand of Christ whose death on the cross had made atonement for all his sins. From now on God can and may be approached with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). John stood face to face with God. He does not describe God, but describes God's radiance.

This is the third time Christ speaks of 'a door' in Revelation:

Christ first gives an open door to the missionary congregation of Philadelphia to enter and penetrate the lost world (3:8).

Then he stands at the door of the nominal congregation of Laodicea ready to enter whenever anyone repents (3:20).

And now *he opens a door in heaven to the world so that Christians may see things as they really are* (4:1). They may see the invisible, eternal, divine reality as God sees it.

The visible things and events on earth are not as they seem to be. The Church in the world (as she appears in the world) is not what she really is (as she is in the eyes of God)! The invisible reality is the reality which God planned for us and his creation for eternity.

Therefore Christians fix their eyes not on what is seen in creation and in human history, but on what is unseen and revealed by Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18; cf. 4:7)!

b. The throne (4:2)

(1) The Old Testament description of God's throne when he reigns is the following:

God sits on his throne with all the heavenly beings standing around him (1 Kings 22:19).

The angels came to present themselves before the LORD (Job 1:6).

The LORD says to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet' (Psalm 110:1).

The LORD Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before its elders, gloriously (Isaiah 24:23).

(2) The Old Testament description of God's throne when he exercises justice and judgement is the following:

Thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. ... Thousands upon thousands attended him. ... The court was seated and the books were opened (Daniel 7:9-10).

The One enthroned in heaven laughs and scoffs at the godless and wicked nations and their kings who gather against the LORD and his Anointed One. Christ inherits the nations and the ends of the earth and will judge them by dashing them to pieces like pottery (Psalm 2).

c. The lightning and the thunder (4:5a)

These signs in nature occurred in the following situations in the history of the Bible:

During the revelation of the law (the Ten Commandments) (Exodus 19:16; 20:18)

During the revelation of grace through events in nature (Job 37:2-7,13b)

During the revelation of his judgements in world history (8:5; 11:19; 16:18; cf. Job 37:8-13a; Isaiah 29:6).

During the revelation of his reign in the universe (Revelation 4:5a).

His reign is a reign of grace (cf. 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 6:1-2; John 1:14,16-17) and a reign of judgement (cf. 2:5,16; 3:3; chapter 8-9).

Whenever God *reveals* his grace or judgements it is accompanied by awesome phenomena in nature! These phenomena announce that great things are about to happen in world history.

d. The seven lamps (4:5b)

In the Old Testament tabernacle (temple) stood one lampstand with three branches extended from its side to the left and to the right (Exodus 25:31-32). These seven lights had to be kept burning day and night (Exodus 27:20-21). This was a symbol of the Holy Spirit during the Old Testament.

In the New Testament heavenly temple are seven lamps before God's throne. This represents "the seven spirits" in the heavenly sanctuary (4:5b). It is a symbol of the fullness and divine perfection of the one Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works in the seven congregations on earth and is a symbol that the eternal God lives in his Church on earth through the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:22; cf. John 14:16-18).

e. The sea (4:6a)

The 'sea' is used in three different ways as a symbol in the book of Revelation:

(1) The sea symbolises *the nations*.

In the Old Testament, *the sea* represents the unruly nations on earth that are controlled by demonic powers (13:1; 17:15; cf. Psalm 89:7-10; 93:2-4; 144:6-7; Isaiah 8:7; 17:12-14; Daniel 7:17,23; Zechariah 10:11). These unruly nations make the earth an unsafe place and threaten to destroy God's sanctuary (God's people) on earth.

It is possible to say that in Revelation 4:6a the sea in heaven is as smooth and quiet as glass, representing the Christians from all the nations on earth that are living in perfect peace and harmony with God in heaven (of course after atonement had been made for their sins).

(2) The sea of glass clear as crystal (4:6) symbolises *God's salvation*.

In the Old Testament *the brazen sea* was a basin of water that stood between the altar of burnt offering and the temple in which the Old Testament priests washed their hands and feet before they approached the altar or before they entered the temple (Exodus 30:18-21; 1 Kings 7:23-26).

In the New Testament the sea of glass clear as crystal (4:6a) symbolises the blood of Christ in which Christians symbolically wash their clothes and make them white (7:14). It thus symbolises the just and transparent salvation of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by which people may approach him and enter his New Testament community (temple). It has this meaning in Revelation 4:6a.

(3) The sea of glass mixed with fire (15:2) symbolises *God's judgement*.

In the Old Testament *the Red Sea* was the place where God executed his final judgement on the Egyptians that persecuted God's Old Testament people. The sea covered all the enemies and not one of them survived (Genesis 14:26-28).

In the New Testament the sea of glass mixed with fire looked like a transparent sea stretched out before the throne. The victorious believers stood beside it. It symbolises the place where God executed his final judgement on all the followers of the beast that had persecuted God's New Testament people. After God's final judgement, the sea will be crystal clear as glass.

Fire is a symbol of God's holy and righteous indignation by which he executes his final judgements against sin and unleashes his wrath against the beast and his image. Glass is a symbol that his holy and righteous indignation which he executes will be completely transparent and clear. After God has executed the final judgement of the godless and wicked people on earth, his holiness and righteousness in judgement remains untainted and becomes manifest for everyone. Nothing will be hidden. Nothing will be questionable. It has this meaning in Revelation 15:2.

f. The four living creatures (4:6b-8a)

Sometimes the Bible makes use of material derived from ancient cultures, but gives them a new meaning! The four living creatures are probably associated with the known star constellation: the ox, the lion, the scorpion and the waterman. The eagle is used instead of the scorpion because it lies close to the waterman.

Because these constellations mark the course the sun moves every year, they received much attention in ancient history. These four figures indicate the most important stations of the course of the sun and point to the four seasons on earth.

In the Old Testament (Ezekiel chapter 1) the four living creatures are angels of a high order, cherubim that carry and protect God's throne. They are related to the wings of the wind (Psalm 18:10) blowing in four directions (cf. 7:1). But in Revelation chapter 4 there is no evidence that they are the same creatures as in Ezekiel. The symbols are related, but not the same.

In the New Testament the four living creatures are heavenly beings that *represent God's whole creation* before God's throne and that worships God who reigns over all history and especially the history of salvation.