

Newsletter October 2017

In our newsletter of April 2017, we began a series of studies in the book of the “Revelation of Jesus Christ,” beginning with an exposition of the text contained within Chapter 1. In that chapter, The Apostle John saw a vision of the glorified Christ as He stood in the midst of seven candlesticks representing a totality of his Church on earth. The Church was depicted in John’s day (near the end of the first century AD) by seven churches existing in what is present-day Asia minor (cf. Re.1:13,20). In our subsequent newsletters, we discussed Jesus’ messages to each of these seven churches in some detail.

In our Newsletter of September 2017, we moved on to study Chapter 4 of the book of Revelation in which the Apostle John was spiritually transported into Heaven. There he immediately saw the radiated multi-colored glory of God, the Father, who sat upon a majestic throne. God was attended by twenty-four elders, who were seated before Him, and by four very extraordinary living creatures all of whom praised and worshiped God as the great Creator of all things.

Also in our September Newsletter, we discussed dispensationalism, an interpretative method of Scripture proposed by John Nelson Darby in 1830 AD. While this method has much to recommend it over or in combination with covenantalism, some of Darby’s premises associated with it become problematic when compared directly with Scripture. That fact came to fore when we attempted to determine the earlier earthly identity of the twenty-four elders that sat before God’s throne in Heaven. Darby insisted these men must represent the Church, which had been caught up into Heaven in a period of time between the texts of Chapters 3 and 4 of the Revelation. This is a very important issue, because if it can be proven that these elders represent the Church, it means that the rapture must have taken place before the Antichrist is allowed to come to power on earth, which is recorded in Chapter 6. (We shall discuss this event and its consequences for mankind in some detail when we continue this study in our November 2017 Newsletter). Conversely, if the elders cannot be proven to represent the Church, it could very well indicate that the Church must endure the rule of the Antichrist on earth. For many believers, it is far too painful to contemplate the true Church remaining on earth during the reign of the Antichrist. Even so, Church history attests to the fact that the Church has had to survive the fierce persecutions of many other evil rulers in the past, such as the Roman Caesars Domitian and Nero, not to mention Roman Popes who condemned devout Christians to be burned at the stake during the Reformation era. The Antichrist will likely turn out to be the most fierce persecutor of all, but he will most certainly be the last. The Church is only unambiguously observed to be in Heaven in Chapter 7. We shall have cause to discuss the elder’s identities again, as we delve into our study, but for now lets begin with Chapter 5, verse 1:

“And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals” (Re. 5:1).

The “right hand” of “him that sat upon the throne” must be seen as an anthropomorphic expression that John used to facilitate our understanding, inasmuch as the One whom John saw on the throne had no recognizable physical form. The “book” as it is rendered here in the *Authorized* text is *biblion* in the Greek, which was translated “scroll” in later translations inasmuch as a book with a codex volume of pages first appeared in the early second century AD and would have been unknown to John. However, the contents of this sealed document is what is all important, not its precise construction. Some scholars have referred to it as the “title deed” of the earth, but much more than real estate is implied; every living thing including mankind is encompassed by the absolute authority contained within this sealed document.

“And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon” (Re. 5:2,3).

Adam had been instructed by God to exercise complete dominion over the earth and all that is within it, but his rebellious fall into sin rendered that directive impossible for him to attain. As a consequence of the fall, no man in Adam’s long line of descendants has had the perfect wisdom necessary to rule over the earth. As a consequence, God has forcibly withheld that authority. In this verse we find that a document granting that authority has been protected by a powerful angel until that worthy man can be found. The

phrase “under the earth” refers to the many that have aspired to attain this authority, but are now dead and buried. Although many men such as Alexander the Great have made the attempt to seize it by force, all have failed in the end as a consequence of insidiously prevailing sin in their lives. Only a perfect sinless man having unending life could achieve that goal, and Adam’s direct line could never produce such a man.

“And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon (Re. 5:4).

John was greatly disturbed by the angel’s words and the discovery that no man was found worthy to contemplate this scroll. Even the writing visible on its outside was forbidden to look upon, and no man dare consider breaking the seals to open it and read its content without incurring God’s wrath from this powerful angelic being that guarded it. Without someone worthy to open the scroll, the earth and all upon it must forever exist in a state of complete futility and sorrow without any hope of deliverance.

“And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof” (Re. 5:5).

An elder approached John and told him that he need not despair, because there is one man who has prevailed and is worthy to open the scroll by loosing its seals. This elder is one of the twenty-four that we encountered in Chapter 4. When he speaks to John about this worthy man, he speaks using Old-Covenant terminology, which suggests that he may be one of the Old-Covenant saints. The “Lion of the tribe of Juda, the root of David” specifically identifies the man of whom the elder speaks as the Jewish Messiah. Of course, we as Christians clearly understand this Jewish terminology as referring to Jesus, the Christ, the resurrected God-man, who for us is also the “bright morning star,” which will appear in the heavens to call us up to be with Him just before the dawn of the kingdom age on earth.

“And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth” (Re. 5:6).

Likely expecting to see the glorified Christ, who had appeared to him in great power in the earlier vision of Chapter 1, John sees instead a little lamb as it had been slain standing in the very midst of this magnificent heavenly gathering before the throne of God. The standing lamb indicates its resurrection from the dead. The seven horns indicates complete power, while its seven eyes correlates with the seven flames of fire that ever burn before God’s throne. Again, we view this scene from a Jewish perspective. This is indeed the Lamb of God who humbly submitted himself to a shameful death on a Roman cross and in doing so carried away the sins of the world to be buried with Him. When He arose in great power, our sins remained buried in the grave forever. Jesus once died for our sins, but He lives forevermore.

“And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne”(Re. 5:7).

Through this momentous act, the Father has imparted to his Son full authority over the earth; the slain Lamb becomes the glorified Christ, whom John saw in Revelation 1 verses 13 thru 18. In taking this scroll, Jesus Christ receives his just inheritance of the earth and all that is upon it. He now has the authority and power to direct earth’s history such that it ultimately becomes a region of the heavens under the direct rule of God. Jesus, the God-man, alone has the absolute power to judge mankind, to put down all their rebellion, and to ultimately bring into being his kingdom of peace on a fully redeemed and restored earth.

“And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints” (Re. 5:8).

At this point the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders redirect their praise toward the Lamb. Here again we encounter the twenty-four elders, whom we discussed in last month’s newsletter. They fall down before Him as they earlier had done before the Father on the throne. In doing this, they recognize his deity – one with the Father in the Godhead. The “vials,” so described in the *Authorized Version*, are better

translated “bowls.” These golden bowls contain incense, which are the prayers of many saints who have long prayed and looked forward to this great day.

“And they sung a new song, 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” (Re. 5:9,10).

This “new song” that the twenty-four elders sing is a song directed to the Lamb of God for his work of divine redemption. Whereas they had previously sung a great creation hymn, God’s glory received in his astounding creative activity is greatly multiplied in his even greater work of redemption. It has all come about through the blood of the slayed Lamb, Jesus Christ, who alone through perfect obedience and human suffering is now found worthy to take the scroll from the right hand of God, his Father.

From this text comes the dogmatic insistence by strict dispensationalists that the twenty-four elders represent the raptured Church. In Revelation 5 verse 9 above, we find the pronoun “us,” (Greek: *hēmas*) which asserts that the twenty-four elders are specifically included among those who were redeemed by the blood of Christ, and in verse 10 the pronoun “us” asserts that they have also been made priests and kings. Loosely interpreted, this could be seen to identify them as a “kingdom of priests” – a term that would identify them as members of the Church (cf. 1Pe.2:9). This would appear to settle the identity controversy once and for all in favor of the dispensationalist position; nevertheless, the last phrase “and we shall reign on earth” is problematic for that conclusion. The word “shall” indicates that theirs is to be a future reign on earth, presumably in a coming kingdom age. In the millennial Kingdom Age that follows the Church age, the raptured Church will oversee and judge the earth from Heaven; only believing Jews will physically reign in mortal bodies as “kings and priests” upon the earth.

The *King James Authorized Version* as is quoted above and used throughout this work, was translated from an early Greek text published by Desiderius Erasmus in 1516 AD (cf. *CRC Book III*, page 224) and after a few later updates became known as the *Textus Receptus* or *Received Text*. This text was in extensive use by the reformers and as such it shaped the spearhead for the reform effort during the Protestant Reformation era. The *King James Authorized Version* and/or the *Textus Receptus* is very likely the text that Darby used when formulating his dispensational system of Bible interpretation.

Modern-day versions of the Bible are translated from later Greek texts compiled from many later discovered but older manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts placed together and compared in their original language. For that reason, they are judged by many to be more accurate than the *Textus Receptus*. These texts are the *Westcott and Hort Greek Text* first published in 1881 and the second is Eberhard Nestle’s *Novum Testamentum Graece* first published in 1898 (cf. *CRC Book I*, page 32). Although no major doctrines are altered by these composite texts, some variations are notable. It must be mentioned that the authors of these composite texts have been accused by some of harboring personal Roman Catholic bias that affected textual integrity. Some have even viewed this later effort as a Roman Catholic conspiracy to intentionally adulterate the text, inasmuch as many of the underlying Greek text fragments and manuscripts used were found within Monasteries and even in the Vatican itself.

Modern-day English translations, which are commonly translated from one or both of these later Greek texts, essentially replace the first person plural pronoun “us” (Greek: *ἡμᾶς* or *hēmas*), as is found in Revelation verses 9 and 10 of the *King James Authorized Version*, with the third person plural pronoun “them” (Greek: *αυτούς*). To quote but two examples of the result of this alteration, the *New American Standard Bible* reads, “And they sang a new song, saying, Worthy art Thou to take the book and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain and didst purchase for God with Thy blood **men** from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou hast made **them** to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and **they** will reign upon the earth” (emphasis added). Similarly, the *English Standard Version* reads, “And they sang a new song, saying, Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed **people** for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made **them** a kingdom and priests to our God, and **they** shall reign on the earth” (emphasis added). In both

of these translations the twenty-four elders are clearly seen as external observers and are not specifically described as being a part of that redeemed people who have been made a kingdom of priests to their God through the blood of Christ.

Although these newer translations certainly do not prove that the twenty-four elders were not among the redeemed constituting the Church, they strongly imply that they are a separate group of men. This translation perplexity is easily resolved if we consider that verse 9 refers to a separate group of redeemed men than does verse 10. A better translation could be, "...for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed **men** (them) to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation, and thou hast made **us** unto our God kings and priests: and **we** shall reign on the earth." Since only Jews will reign on earth during the future kingdom age, we must conclude that the elders in verse 10 are Jews, which were indeed redeemed by the blood of Christ, yet were separated in time from the later Church-age saints of verse 9.

Assuming that to be true, the question still remains regarding who these Jewish elders are in a mortal sense. They could, of course, be ancient men such as Job and Abraham who in believing and trusting God were declared to be righteous in his sight. Alternatively, the first half of these elders could be the first leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Nu.1:21-26), and perhaps the second half could be the twelve judges who ruled over Israel during the time of the Judges. (It is important to note regarding this latter assumption, however, that Deborah was a woman, who judged Israel (cf. Jg.4:4). She cannot be properly referred to as an elder, all of whom must be men by definition). Moreover, there were eighteen Old Testament prophets of record in the Scriptures, whose number obviously falls short of the required total of twenty-four and is greater than twelve, but at least some of them could be included in this heavenly council. It has also been noted by some that the number twenty-four is indicative of the Levitical priesthood of Israel. Levitical Priests served within twenty-four courses in the Temple, each course serving for one week at a time (1Chr.24:1-19). Whoever these elders may be with respect to their earthly origins, it seems apparent from their own words at the end of verse 10 that they are elect men being prepared in Heaven to serve as priests and kings on earth during the coming millennial kingdom age.

Having done the best we can in sorting out the meanings of these two verses, let us now set aside this rather lengthy discussion and move on in our study in the book of the Revelation.

"And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing" (Re. 5:11,12).

John suddenly saw an innumerable number of angels surrounding the throne, the four living creatures, and the elders. To give us some idea of this great multitude John used the Greek word *myriad*, which in ancient times meant ten thousand. Ten thousand times ten thousand equals one-hundred million, and to that John added thousands of thousands more. Then John heard their unified voices saying with a loud voice "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing." Angels had attended Jesus birth and had served Him during his life here on earth; now, they herald his victorious return to heaven to receive his inheritance.

"And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever" (Re. 5:13).

All creation had suffered decay, corruption, and death when Adam sinned (cf. Ro.8:22), but now through the victory gained by the second Adam, Jesus Christ, it will soon be restored to all its former glory. John heard every creature, including those that fly in the heaven above the earth, those who exist upon the earth's surface, those who burrow under the earth, as well as those creatures who live in the sea, praising Christ with a unified voice saying, "Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever." © Arthur J. Smith October 2017