

Thrones in the Book of Revelation

Part 3: Thrones of God's Allies

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Along with the numerous references that associate the throne motif with God and the Lamb in the book of Revelation, in several texts other figures or groups are pictured as seated on throne(s). They belong either to the category of God's allies or his adversaries. The sharp division between the groups is implied in the location of these thrones. While the thrones of God's adversaries are always confined to the earthly context, the thrones of his allies are generally pictured in heaven. These two clusters of thrones make two sub-motifs within Revelation's throne "motif-network" that stand either in a supportive or an antithetical relationship with the throne of God and the Lamb.

In this study the throne texts related to God's allies will be examined. Three groups are represented in this sub-motif: the overcomers (3:21), the twenty-four elders (4:4; 11:16) and the judges (20:4). It has been noted by Williamson that all the throne references related to the groups allied with God are short and undeveloped.¹ These groups are either given only corporate names ("overcomers" [3:21]; "elders" [4:4]) or categorized on the basis of their function ("those with authority to judge"; 20:4). They embody either the totality of the redeemed or act as their representative groups.

¹ Ricky L. Williamson, "Thrones in the Book of Revelation" (Ph.D. Dissertation; The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993), 130.

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1. Enthronement of the Overcomers (3:21)

The first text in Revelation in which beings other than God are related to throne is 3:21. At the same time, this text is the only in the entire book in which God, Christ and the group named ὁ νικῶν (“overcomers”) are depicted within a single verse as sitting on thrones. As will be demonstrated, this enthronement reference as a concluding statement of the Seven Messages vision is of major significance for the theological outlook of the epistolary part of Revelation, but also more widely for the development of some of John’s key motifs.

1.1. Contextual and Structural Considerations

The statement of the overcomers’ enthronement is located at the end of the last of the Seven Messages, preceding the universal exhortation to listen to the Spirit. Although there is no consensus on the general literary structure of the messages,² it is widely held that the climax of each individual letter is reached in the concluding promises to the overcomers.³ Therefore, it seems that the location for introducing the throne motif in reference to God’s allies is a strategic choice on the part of the author. Namely, it has been demonstrated that the rewards of the seven churches are appropriate to the character of the communities’ background, but it has at the same time been noted that the concluding promise in 3:21 goes a step beyond and as a climactic expression of the eternal life with Christ it summarizes all the prior promises of salvation.⁴

² For example, M. Eugene Boring (*Revelation* [IBD; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989], 86-91) argues for eight features of the messages, Paul Sevier Minear (*I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse* [Washington: Corpus Books, 1968], 41-61) for seven, Robert L. Muse (“Revelation 2–3: A Critical Analysis of Seven Prophetic Messages,” *JETS* 29 [1986], 147-61[149]) for five, while Gregory K. Beale (“The Hearing Formula and the Visions of John in Revelation” in *A Vision for the Church: Studies in Early Christian Ecclesiology in Honour of J. P. M. Sweet*, eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Michael B. Thompson [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997], 167-80[169]) besides a seven-part division considers also the possibility of four broad sections.

³ In contrast, Craig R. Koester (“The Message to Laodicea and the Problem of Its Local Context: A Study of the Imagery in Rev. 3.14-21,” *NTS* 49 [2003], 407-24[411]) suggests an arrangement of thoughts in concentric circles in the last message. This view challenges the climactic function of 3:21. The major objection to Koester’s thesis is that the suggested parallels between 3:16 and 3:20 are unconvincing, and at the same time the correspondence between 3:14 and 3:21 is to be viewed only as an *inclusio*.

⁴ Jürgen Roloff, *Revelation* (trans. J.E. Alsup; CC; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 65; Gerhard Krodel, *Revelation* (ACNT; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), 145; Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews

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Lohmeyer rightly notes: “Dieser Spruch verheisst die letzte und höchste Würde; er schliesst so wirkungsvoll den Kranz der 7 Ueberwindersprüche wie der 7 Sendschreiben.”⁵

The enthronement promise of 3:21 is most often dealt with within contextual discussions. Paulien observes a particular literary technique of Revelation according to which the key to the meaning of major sections of the book often lies in the concluding statement of the preceding section. These key texts are called “duo-directional passages” by Paulien, since their role is to conclude the preceding section and at the same time to introduce a new unit.⁶ 3:21 functions as a duo-directional passage providing an interpretive clue for understanding the following larger sections. The text mentions the enthronement of the overcomers as an eschatological reward which is paralleled to Christ’s sitting on the Father’s throne. While ch. 4 elaborates God’s throne, and ch. 5 Christ’s enthronement, the eschatological victory and reward of the overcomers is the topic of 7:9-17.⁷ In line with Paulien, Osborne rightly concludes that these larger sections could be considered in some sense as a commentary on 3:21.⁸

1.2. Background

The use of the throne motif in 3:21 shows a strikingly close parallel with the throne texts related to great characters and pious figures in Jewish literature. I suggest that these materials can be categorized into two groups: (1) the heavenly enthronement of the Old Testament heroic figures; and (2) the references to the possession of thrones on the part of patriarchs and the pious. The purpose of the enthronement of these figures lies usually in indicating vice-regency with God (Moses in *Exag.*), authorization to a specific task as participating in eschatological judgment (the Elect One in *1En.* 37-71), or initiation into the heavenly

University Press, 2002), 150.

⁵ Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT, 16; Tübingen: Mohr, 1926), 40.

⁶ Jon Paulien, *The Deep Things of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2004), 115. Ranko Stefanovic (“Finding Meaning in the Literary Patterns of Revelation,” *JATS* 13 [2002], 27-43[27-28]) calls the same literary technique a “springboard principle.”

⁷ Paulien, “The Seven Seals” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (DARCOM Series, 6; Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 199-243(202-03); cf. Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 161.

⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 218.

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secrets (Enoch in *2En.*). On the other hand, the short references to the heavenly thrones may point to the idea of judgment (*T. Ab.*), but the dominant notion is that of imperishable eschatological reward (*T. Isaac*; *T. Job*). In some of these texts the idea that heroic figures hold thrones is broadened to include all the pious (*Asc. Isa.*).⁹ Since in the Old Testament heavenly thrones different from God's throne are only specifically mentioned in Dan. 7:9-10, in the Jewish literature we have an entirely new development with the appearance of these different thrones. This development is reflected also in Qumran literature, in which besides the reference to the chariot-throne of God (4Q400-07) appear also thrones of human beings (4Q491) and the idea of thrones as eschatological reward for the pious (4Q521).¹⁰

Also are significant the parallels with the synoptic tradition, where the notion that the followers of Jesus will occupy thrones is clearly stated in Lk. 22:29-30 and Mt. 19:28. Vos, the author of the most detailed comprehensive study on the synoptic tradition in Revelation, persuasively argues that the nature of the relationship of these texts with Rev. 3:21 is more in "similar thoughts and ideas than in the identical wording of these thoughts."¹¹ This view is almost unanimously accepted, especially with regard to Luke. However, in spite of the close similarity, significant differences can be observed also. First, the promise of the eschatological reign is shared, but while the synoptic sources agree almost verbatim on the limited application to the twelve, the saying is universalized in Revelation.¹² Second, the purpose of the enthronement in synoptic tradition is taking part in the judgment, while in Revelation it is not specified. Third, Rev. 3:21 is in a close structural-thematic parallel with the Lucan tradition, since in both contexts the enthronement motif appears with the promise of enjoying an eschatological meal with the

⁹ For a detailed discussion of these passages see, Laszlo Gallusz, "The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation" (Ph.D. Dissertation; Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, 2011), 65-80.

¹⁰ For a discussion, see Carol A. Newsom, "Throne" in *EncDSS*, II, 946-47

¹¹ Louis A. Vos, *The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1965), 101. Only two words are common between the two traditions: *θρόνος* and *καθίζω*. Vos suggests that 2 Tim. 2:11-12 may also possibly reflect the same Jesus logion, but no substantial argument is provided in support of this hypothesis.

¹² In spite of this significant difference, there is a thematic connection concerning the character of the heirs of the throne(s): in Luke the promise is given to those who continue with Jesus in his temptation (22:28), in Matthew to his followers (19:28), while in Revelation to the overcomers (3:21) (Vos, *Synoptic Tradition*, 101).

Lord.¹³ Fourth, there is a major difference concerning the relation of the saints to Christ's throne, since Revelation's concept of saints as Christ's σύνθρονοι goes beyond the synoptic idea of the twelve's separate thrones.¹⁴ Vos persuasively argues that the same primitive tradition is behind both forms and "to determine which of these. . . is the more original is an impossibility."¹⁵ Still, in spite of the differences, the synoptic tradition remains besides Rev. 20:4 the only close parallel in biblical literature to the enthronement promise in 3:21.

1.3. Interpretation

1.3.1. The Identity of the Overcomers

The Seven Messages of Rev. 2-3 are historically addressed to seven Christian communities in Asia Minor (1:11). It is generally accepted that "in a sense the whole book is about the way the Christians of the seven churches may, by being victorious within the specific situations of their own churches, enter the new Jerusalem."¹⁶ The messages reveal that many of the churches are unprepared. The need for awaking, prompted by the appeal to the emotions of "shame and emulation,"¹⁷ is particularly blatant in the message to the believers in Laodicea, the recipients of the promise of enthronement.

The condition for receiving the reward in all messages is overcoming (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21), but in the final message to Laodicea it is uniquely highlighted that the analogy for this need is Christ's overcoming (ὡς καὶ γὼ ἐνίκησα; "as I also overcame"). Therefore, Strand

¹³ This connection is widely acknowledged (e.g. Vos, *Synoptic Traditions*, 103; Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* [trans. Wendy Pradels; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001], 220). While Richard Bauckham (*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993], 107-08) does not deny it, he rather views the parable of the Watching Servants (Lk.12:37) as the primary source behind the imagery of Rev. 3:20-21. However, it is difficult to imagine that a text without a throne motif would be primarily behind a so crucial throne-text of Revelation.

¹⁴ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 63; Vos, *Synoptic Traditions*, 102; Osborne, *Revelation*, 214.

¹⁵ Vos, *Synoptic Traditions*, 103.

¹⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 14.

¹⁷ For the analysis of John's strategic appeals to emotions in the Seven Messages, see David A. deSilva, "The Strategic Arousal of Emotions in the Apocalypse of John: A Rhetorical-Critical Investigation of the Oracles to the Seven Churches," *NTS* 54 (2008), 90-114.

rightly notes that the concept of overcoming as applied here to the believers in Laodicea cannot be separated from the theme of “Christ as the Overcomer *par excellence*.”¹⁸ Namely, the joining of Christ to the Father on his throne after his overcoming provides a model for the Christians, whom are similarly promised joining Christ on his throne following their overcoming.¹⁹ The different tenses employed for indicating Christ’s and the believers’ experience is enlightening in interpreting the analogy. While the references to Christ’s victory (ἐνίκησα) and enthronement (ἐκάθισα) are both in a historical aorist, the believers’ overcoming is expressed by a present participle (νικῶν) followed by the promise of enthronement in the future tense (δώσω). Thus, Christ’s victory and enthronement are referred to as past experiences, while the believers’ overcoming is pictured in terms of an ongoing process climaxing in enthronement with Christ in an eschatological context.²⁰ As Smalley notes, the text expresses a tension peculiar to Johannine eschatology, since it conveys the message that “what takes place in eternity cannot be completely detached from

¹⁸ Kenneth A. Strand, “‘Overcomer’: A Study in the Macrodynamic of Theme Development in the Book of Revelation,” *AUSS* 28 (1990), 237-54(251). The close association of Christ with the overcomers is further emphasized by the repeated use of the preposition μετά in 3:20-21 in regard to joint sitting at table (δειπνήσω μετ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὸς μετ’ ἐμοῦ) and joint sitting on the throne (καθίσει μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ). Another μετά connects Christ and the Father in the same context (ἐκάθισα μετὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου).

¹⁹ There have been some attempts to distinguish the throne of Christ from the throne of the Father on the basis of 3:21 (e.g. Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse: The Day of the Lord* [London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 2nd edn, 1909], 229; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* [Chicago, IL: Moody, 1966], 99). The idea of separate thrones, however, ignores the notion of the overcomers’ becoming σύνθρονοι with the Father on the basis of Christ’s sharing the throne both with the Father and them. Also it does not do justice to the Father’s oneness with Christ and Revelation’s throne theology as a whole in which this idea is expressed climactically in 22:1, 3.

²⁰ There is no unanimity concerning the time of realization of the enthronement promise of 3:21. While the majority view favors eschatological interpretation, there is a trend among some of the recent interpreters to view the inauguration of this promise in the present reality (e.g. Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 220; Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 310). I rather align myself with the majority view, because of the future tense (δώσω), but even more the wider throne theology of Revelation which envisions the saints only during the millennium (20:4) and in the new creation on thrones or in a reigning position (22:3).

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Christian faith and praxis, on the part of the Laodicean community, in the present.”²¹

There have been some attempts to argue the idea of the universal martyrdom of the overcomers in 3:21. This view is reflected in the designation “martyr-conquerors,” coined by Franzmann.²² A comprehensive argument in defense of this interpretation has been provided in a dissertation by Reddish.²³ His position is summarized as follows:

First, . . . on the basis of 2:26-27 and 3:21, ὁ νικῶν is used in the letters to refer to a special group of Christians—the martyrs. They conquer like Christ conquered—through their deaths. Second, the author of Revelation views all believers to be potential martyrs. He does not, however, expect the entire church to suffer martyrdom. This is evident from the general promises contained in the letters (2:10; 3:4; 3:10; 3:20). These general promises are given to all the believers who remain faithful to Christ.²⁴

While the observation of Reddish is correct in regard to the second point, the first suggestion is vulnerable for two reasons. First, the conclusion is supported only by single evidence based on his interpretation of 3:21 which is projected to 2:26-27, a text thematically connected to 3:21. Second, it is not noticed that the purpose of the analogy between the overcomers and Christ lies not in emphasizing the identical fate, but rather the content of the promise, the σύνθρονοι idea.

²¹ Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 103.

²² Martin H. Franzmann, *The Revelation of John* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1986), 132. Klaus Berger (*Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums: Theologie des Neuen Testaments* [UTB für Wissenschaft; Tübingen: Francke, 2nd edn, 1995], 326-31) goes even further, arguing for a general tradition in the early church that equates the following of Jesus with martyrdom. He claims that according to this tradition the martyrs are rewarded with eschatological power. For a critique of this view, see Hanna Roose, “Sharing in Christ’s Rule: Tracing a Debate in Earliest Christianity,” *JSNT* 27 (2004), 123-48(124 n. 2).

²³ Mitchell G. Reddish, “The Theme of Martyrdom in the Book of Revelation” (PhD Dissertation; The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), 132-60. Reddish refers to the following two works that are in line with his viewpoint: George B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (BNTC; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1966), 32-34; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (MNTC; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1947), 63-64.

²⁴ Reddish, “Martyrdom,” 149.

This short critique suggests a point of view similar to that of Sweet, who argues that “a man is constituted *conqueror* by his continuing attitude and behavior, rather than by the circumstances of his physical death.”²⁵

1.3.2. The Enthronement Promise in the Light of the Overcoming Motif

It has been widely recognized that the overcoming motif is of major significance for the structure and theology of Revelation.²⁶ As stated by Swete, “The book is a record and a prophecy of victories won by Christ and the Church.”²⁷ The word *νικάω* occurs seventeen times in ten chapters of Revelation, out of the twenty-eight references in the New Testament.²⁸ Since this data indicates at least partially that a certain development of the overcoming motif occurs “in a progressive and integrated fashion” throughout the entire scope of the book,²⁹ the promise of becoming Christ’s *σύνθρονοι* in 3:21 needs examination against the unfolding of this motif.

The overcoming motif serves as one of the crucial aspects of the holy war theme in Revelation. Bauckham notes that this connection is often ignored by interpreters, who fail to notice the relation of the motif with the language of battle (11:7; 12:7-8, 17; 13:7; 16:14; 17:14; 19:11, 19).³⁰ Three different groups or individuals are characterized as conquerors in Revelation: Christ is depicted as the most important and the ultimate conqueror, but also the conquering experiences of his allies and the forces of evil are described. In chs. 2-3, the immediate context of the text under consideration, the emphasis is on the overcoming of an unspecified group of God’s human allies. The object of the conquest is undefined until 12:11. Bauckham persuasively argues that the reason for this delay

²⁵ John Sweet, *Revelation* (TPI New Testament Commentaries; London: SCM; Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press, 1990), 83.

²⁶ E.g. Ragnar Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror: Ideas of Conflict and Victory in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1954), 212-38; Strand, “‘Overcomer,’” 237-54; Bauckham, *Theology*, 88f.; Daniel K. K. Wong, “The Johannine Concept of the Overcomer” (Ph.D. Dissertation; Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995); Reddish, “Martyrdom,” 132-60.

²⁷ Swete, *Apocalypse*, 29.

²⁸ As noted by Otto Bauernfeind (‘νικάω’ in *TDNT*, IV, 942-45[942]) the basic meaning of *νικάω* designates “‘victory’ or ‘superiority,’ whether in the physical, legal, or metaphorical sense, whether in mortal conflict or peaceful competition.” See Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 11, 21(2x); 5:5; 6:2(2x); 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7; Mt. 12:20; Jn 16:32; Rom. 3:4; 12:21(2x); 1Jn 2:13; 2:14; 4:4; 5:4(2x); 5:5.

²⁹ Strand, “‘Overcomer,’” 237.

³⁰ Bauckham, *Theology*, 69.

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is intentional, since “it is only in chapters 12-13 that the principal enemies of God, who must be defeated to make way for his kingdom, are introduced.”³¹

The Seven Messages vision is fundamental for the development of the overcoming motif in Revelation. Each of the messages ends with promises given to this group (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). The significance of this series needs to be evaluated against the New Jerusalem vision (chs. 21-22) which records the reappearing of the individual promises without exception.³² It has been rightly noted by Strand that the glories set forth in the concluding vision of the book go in their “vastness and grandeur” even beyond the promises in chs. 2-3.³³ The development of the overcoming motif climaxes in the only *νικᾶω* passage of the vision (21:7), in which the promise of granting the overcomers all things harks back to the Seven Messages indicating the climactic fulfilment of all the promises. Strand persuasively argues for the relevance of the following verse (21:8) for the clarification of the overcoming motif in which a characterization of a group contrasted to the overcomers is provided. The comparison of the characteristics listed for the sufferers of “the second death” with the problems peculiar to the churches in the Seven Messages leads us to the conclusion that the “categories of non-inheritors in Rev. 21 reflect the very same characteristics as the non-overcomers in the churches.”³⁴ This indicates that at the end only two categories of people exist: the overcomers and the non-overcomers. Thus, Revelation’s first and last visions stand in close thematic relation and the drama unfolding between them is framed and encircled with the admonitions and promises set out there.³⁵

It seems appropriate to go a step beyond these observations and suggest a more profound relation of 21:7 and 3:21. A basic parallel between these two statements lies in their climactic nature. As the promise of 3:21 forms the high point of the Seven Messages vision,

³¹ For an in-depth analysis of the overcoming motif in Rev. 12–13, see Bauckham, *Theology*, 88-94.

³² For a detailed list of promise-fulfilment correspondences, see Minear, *I Saw a New Earth*, 59-60.

³³ Strand, “Overcomer,” 249 n. 21.

³⁴ Strand, “Overcomer,” 251; cf. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth*, 61; Bauckham, *Theology*, 92.

³⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 52.

similarly the climax of the overcoming motif's development in the visionary part of the book is reached in 21:7. A thematic similarity between the two statements can be established. While in 21:7 the essence of the inheritance is expressed by the well-known covenant formula "I will be his God and he will be my son,"³⁶ the essence of the σύνθρονοι promise in 3:21 is a corresponding idea of a highest possible honour which appears as the most intimate expression of the covenant relationship.³⁷ Thus, the promise of sitting on the throne is a magnificent conclusion to the Seven Messages and an appropriate introduction to the visionary part of the book, which develops in apocalyptic fashion the theme of cosmic conflict over the ruling authority. Williamson rightly notes that the throne imagery "seems almost inevitable" at this strategic location in the book.³⁸

After the introduction of the group of overcomers in the earthly context (chs. 2-3), the twenty-four elders as another group of God's allies is depicted, but in a heavenly setting (ch. 4). While the enthronement of the overcomers is a future promise, it is stated in the present that the twenty-four elders possess individual thrones in God's presence. These heavenly thrones, which encircle God's central throne, will be discussed as follows.

2. Thrones of the Twenty-four Elders (4:4; 11:16)

The mysterious group of God's allies named "the twenty-four elders" (οἱ ἑξήκοσι τέσσαρες πρεσβύτεροι) appear twelve times in Revelation.³⁹ In two texts it is stated that they occupy heavenly thrones (4:4; 11:16). These thrones are in two respects different from the throne in 3:21. First, no sense of sharing is indicated, since the elders occupy their own thrones—4:4 clearly states that the number of their thrones is twenty-four. Second, the reason for the elders' throne occupation is not specified,

³⁶ This expression sums up both the Abrahamic and the Davidic covenants (Gen. 17:7; 2Sam. 7:14). Significantly, the "father" of 2Sam. 7:14 is changed to "God" in Rev. 21:7. The probable reason for the alteration is seen in the fact that the father-son relationship is reserved for God and Christ in Revelation (1:6; 2:27; 3:5, 21; 14:1). See Sweet, *Revelation*, 300; Heinz Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 1997), 458; Osborne, *Revelation*, 740.

³⁷ This parallel confirms the thesis that the Seven Messages are "the literary microcosm of the entire book's macrocosmic structure" (Beale, "Hearing Formula," 168).

³⁸ Williamson, "Thrones," 132.

³⁹ Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4.

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whereas in 3:21 a condition of sitting on a throne is overcoming. On these grounds it may be concluded that the thrones of the twenty-four elders are of a “different sort”⁴⁰ from those of the overcomers.

2.1. Contextual and Structural Considerations

The twelve references of Revelation to the twenty-four elders may be grouped into three categories according to their function. The elders are six times pictured as part of heavenly worship scenes,⁴¹ four times are referred to when indicating a specific location in heavenly context,⁴² while twice they function in the role of interpreters as they converse with John.⁴³ Although the thrones of the elders are specifically mentioned only in 4:4 and 11:16, they are presupposed in the other texts where these heavenly figures appear. This is evident not only in the throne-room vision to which the elders are related in 4:4, but also in worship scenes other than in chs. 4-5 which share the same setting of the heavenly temple.

While the elders are regular participants in the different heavenly throne scenes, their prominence is most clearly indicated in Rev. 4-5. Two observations lead us to this conclusion. First, seven out of the twelve occurrences of πρεσβύτεροι in the book appear in the heavenly throne-room vision.⁴⁴ Second, the elders’ thrones are not merely insignificant pieces of furniture in the description of the heavenly realm in ch. 4, since their introduction immediately follows the picturing of God’s heavenly θρόνος (4:4). It has been suggested that the introduction of the elders and their thrones interrupts the logical flow of the heavenly realm’s description. Charles views in this literary feature evidence for the author’s poor literary skills.⁴⁵ However, his thesis is convincingly refuted by Hurtado, who argues for intentionality on John’s part:

The author’s failure to describe the figures in the scene in concentric circles outward from the throne. . . does not necessarily mean that the author was simply illogical or careless. Again, his demonstrated skill

⁴⁰ Williamson, “Thrones,” 136.

⁴¹ Rev. 4:10; 5:8, 14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4.

⁴² Rev. 4:4; 5:6, 11; 14:3.

⁴³ Rev. 5:5; 7:13.

⁴⁴ Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14.

⁴⁵ He suggests (*Revelation*, I, 115) that the description of the elders in 4:4 is a later addition by the hand of the author.

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elsewhere in modifying apocalyptic imagery suggests that the irruption of the elders into the description of the heavenly scene right after the reference to the throne of God was deliberate, and conveys something of the author's own message and purpose in delivering his vision.⁴⁶

While Hurtado's conclusion is sound, I suggest refining his view that the elders themselves "may be the point of emphasis in the scene, second only to the throne of God."⁴⁷ It is more appropriate to hold the function of the elders, closely tied to "the One sitting on the throne," as a point of significance here. As will be demonstrated later more profoundly, the appearance of the elders' thrones around God's central throne is of particular significance for the development of the throne motif, since their subordinated nature brings the theological perspective underlying the vision to the center of attention.

2.2. Background

The twenty-four elders are unparalleled in early Jewish and early Christian sources. While the plurality of thrones in the context of theophanic visions is characteristic to Dan. 7:9-10, still it seems that John's imagery shows the closest similarity with *Asc. Isa.* 8:26 and 9:7-18, where the Old Testament saints are portrayed as wearing robes and receiving crowns and thrones after Christ's death and resurrection.⁴⁸ The picturing of the saints with crowns and sometimes with glorified garments in the age to come is characteristic of numerous texts of Jewish literature.⁴⁹

The term *πρεσβύτερος* has a rich background. Its use in Judaism and Christianity poses a peculiar problem, because of the twofold meaning of the word: *πρεσβύτερος* can point to age, but also to an office—and the two meanings are not always clearly distinguishable.⁵⁰ In ancient Israel

⁴⁶ Larry W. Hurtado, "Revelation 4-5 in the Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies," *JSNT* 25 (1985), 105-24(111-12).

⁴⁷ Hurtado, "Revelation 4-5," 112.

⁴⁸ Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982), 224.

⁴⁹ E.g. 1QS 4:7; 1QH 9:25; *T. Benj.* 4:1; *b. Ber.* 17a.

⁵⁰ The age is clearly the only sense in numerous passages as e.g. Gen. 18:11f.; 19:4, 31, 34; 24:1; 35:29. For a New Testament use of the term in the same sense, see e.g. Jn 8:9; Acts 2:17; 1Tim. 5:1-2; 1Pet. 5:5. *πρεσβύτεροι* designates forefathers in Heb. 11:2, the bearers of the normative doctrinal tradition in Mt. 15:2; Mk. 7:3, 5, while in 1Pet. 5:5 and *1Clem.* 1:3 it refers to the status of a dignitary in the community.

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the term “elder” (זקן) was used for designating a position of authority and leadership on various levels: in social groups⁵¹ and cities,⁵² and also at a national level.⁵³ De Vaux notes that the elders or heads of families were traditionally the leading citizens who dealt with community affairs in council sessions and served as judges for the people.⁵⁴ In the Qumran community the elders were given the highest status after the priests.⁵⁵ Also those who held religious or political authority in early Judaism were generally known as “elders.” In early synagogue organization the πρεσβύτεροι were members of the γερουσία (“council”) of local Jewish communities, though Schürer points out that the earliest dated evidence for the use of πρεσβύτερος as a title is dated to the mid-third century C.E.⁵⁶ In early Christianity πρεσβύτερος is often used to designate the members of the community in a leadership role.⁵⁷ Interestingly, in Ignatius the college of elders is referred to by πρεσβυτέριον (“presbytery”),⁵⁸ an expression employed also for the Jewish Sanhedrin.⁵⁹

It has been argued by Yarbrow Collins that the *Sitz im Leben* throws the decisive light on the interpretation of the concept of elders in Revelation. She notes that Revelation’s πρεσβύτεροι need to be viewed against “the fact that many social organizations of the time were ruled by councils of elders—the Roman provinces of Asia Minor in cooperation with the Roman governor, the synagogues, and the local Christian churches.”⁶⁰ While the value of this point should not be denied, it is more appropriate to view the primary background for the interpretation

⁵¹ The title appears in reference to families, clans and tribes (e.g. Judg. 11:5-11).

⁵² Judg. 8:14; 11:3; Ruth 4:1-4.

⁵³ For the expressions “elders of Israel” or “elders of the people,” see Exod. 3:16, 18; 4:29; 12:21; 18:12; Num. 11:14-17; Josh. 7:6; 8:10.

⁵⁴ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. John McHugh; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), 152-53.

⁵⁵ 1QS 6:8; CD 9:4.

⁵⁶ cf. Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, eds. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar and Martin Goodman (4 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, rev. edn, 1973-87), III, 102 n. 56.

⁵⁷ Acts 11:30; 14:23; 20:17; 1Tim. 5:1, 17, 19; 1Pet. 5:1, 5; Jas 5:14; 2Clem. 17:3, 5; Hermas, *Vis.* 2.4.2, 3.

⁵⁸ E.g. Ignatius, *Magn.* 2:1; 3:1; 6:1; 7:1; *Trall.* 3:1; 7:1.

⁵⁹ Lk. 22:66; Acts 22:5.

⁶⁰ Adela Yarbrow Collins, *Apocalypse* (New Testament Message, 22; Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1979), 35.

of Revelation's elders in the Old Testament.⁶¹ Of the numerous uses of זקן, two texts in which elders appear as a group in the presence of Yahweh are particularly significant for our purpose. In Isa. 24:23 they are pictured as witnesses of Yahweh's glory within a description of an eschatological event, while in Exod. 24:9-10 they accompany Moses up to Sinai and experience there a vision of God. It has been convincingly argued that these two texts serve together as the primary influence behind John's concept of the twenty-four elders.⁶² However, Schlatter's observation also merits consideration, since he calls our attention to the tradition according to which seventy golden thrones have been arranged around Solomon's throne reserved for his elders as his co-assessors.⁶³

2.3 Interpretation

2.3.1 The Identity of the Elders

The identity of the twenty-four elders has been widely discussed, but without achieving a consensus. The ambiguity of the question springs from the lack of clear identification of this group in Revelation. The fact that the noun πρεσβύτεροι is anarthrous in its first appearance (4:4) seems to indicate the assumption of the author that this group is unknown to his readers.⁶⁴ The numerous interpretive suggestions can be broadly divided into three main categories with further sub-variants:⁶⁵ (1) glorified human beings,⁶⁶ (2) angels,⁶⁷ and (3) figures derived from astral

⁶¹ See John L. McKenzie, "The Elders in the Old Testament," *Bib* 40 (1959), 522-40.

⁶² For a persuasive argument in favour of this view, see André Feuillet, "Les vingt-quatre vieillards de l'Apocalypse," *RB* 64 (1958), 5-32(13-14). The elders in Exod. 24:9-10 are clearly human beings, while the interpretation of the elders in Isa. 24:23 as Israel's human leaders is supported by the Jewish tradition (e.g. *Targ. Isa.* 24:23; *Sifre Num.* 92; *m. Ab.* 6.8; *B. Bat.* 10b; *b. Ab.* 6.8; *Kalla* 54a-b).

⁶³ Adolf Schlatter, *Das Alte Testament in der johanneischen Apokalypse* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1912), 40.

⁶⁴ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 287; Smalley, *Revelation*, 118.

⁶⁵ For an extensive analysis of the weaknesses and strengths of the different options, see André Feuillet, *Johannine Studies* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1964), 194-214.

⁶⁶ The main sub-variants of this position are the following: (1) the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles; (2) the saints of the Old Testament; (3) martyr Christians; and (4) the twenty-four authors of the Old Testament. The interpretation of some of these sub-variants is supported according to Osborne (*Revelation*, 228) by Swete, Alford, Walvoord, Feuillet, Sweet, Kraft, Ford, Wall, McDonald and Harrington.

⁶⁷ This view has two sub-variants: (1) angels; and (2) angelic representatives of the community of the redeemed. According to Osborne (*Revelation*, 229) the angelic interpretation is argued by Beckwith, R. Charles, Moffatt, Ladd, Beasley-Murray, Morris,

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mythology.⁶⁸ Although no answer is free from difficulties, an argument will be offered here in favor of the identification of the elders with glorified saints, who function as the representatives of the Old Testament and New Testament people of God.

First, the details in the elders' description point to their identity as glorified human beings. The white garments (ἱματίοις λευκοῖς) they wear are consistently related in Revelation to people faithful to God.⁶⁹ Similarly, the golden crowns (στεφάνους χρυσοῦς) are never ascribed to angelic beings in the book. John's careful choice of word for designating the crowns of the elders (στέφανος) also points in this interpretive direction. Namely, instead of διάδημα, a term with a limited reference to royal authority alone is used, which is capable of expressing more concepts simultaneously such as the idea of victory.⁷⁰ It seems that the imagery characteristic to this eminent group (white garments, golden crowns and thrones) tie the elders to the overcomers of chs. 2-3, to whom these items are promised as a reward for conquering (2:10; 3:4-5, 11, 21).

Second, the content of the elders' speeches and praise point to their strong tie with the elect. Thus, in the hymn of 5:9-10 they are singing of redemption as a personal experience. On the other hand, they appear in a royal-priestly role, which in Revelation is the function of the redeemed throughout eternity. The elders' participation in the drama of Revelation in announcing the victory of the slain Lamb (5:5), identifying the elect (7:13-17) and praising God at the announcement of his eschatological triumph (11:15-19) also indicate a role closely tied to the interests of humanity.

Third, the term πρεσβύτεροι is more easily applied to humans than to angelic beings. As has been pointed out above, in Old Testament texts that portray elders in the presence of Yahweh the reference is to human beings (Exod. 24:9-10; Isa. 24:23). In Jewish literature the term is used

Mounce, Johnson, Roloff, Krodell and Thomas.

⁶⁸ Russell S. Morton (*One Upon the Throne and the Lamb: A Traditional Historical/Theological Analysis of Revelation 4-5* [SBL, 110; New York: Peter Lang, 2007], 109) as a proponent of this theory refers to Gunkel, Bousset, Malina, Yarbrow Collins, Murphy and Giesen as supporting this interpretation.

⁶⁹ Rev. 3:4-5, 18; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14.

⁷⁰ For an excellent study on the background and meaning of the crown imagery in Revelation, see Gregory M. Stevenson, "Conceptual Background to Golden Crown Imagery in the Apocalypse of John (4:4, 10; 14:14)," *JBL* 114 (1995), 257-72.

sometimes for designation of the chief priests as elders.⁷¹ As noted by Beale, the priestly character of the twenty-four elders indicated by their mediating functions (5:8) and participation in the heavenly liturgy (4:10, 14; 11:16; 19:4) is intelligible against this background.⁷² Additionally, the expression *πρεσβύτεροι* is in Heb. 11:2 applied to the great Old Testament saints.

Fourth, the meaning of twenty-four as the number of the elders also suggests human identification. Various interpretations have been advanced in attempting to explain the choice of this number.⁷³ I hold most convincing the view of scholars who argue with plausibility that the number twenty-four is derived from the twenty-four priestly orders of 1Chron. 24:7-18, who function as Israel's representatives in the temple service.⁷⁴ This interpretation seems to be most in line with the cultic character of Revelation's temple scenes in which the elders generally appear. However, it does not rule out taking the number twenty-four as twelve doubled, a significant number in Revelation for designating God's people. Thus, the twenty-four has been often seen as including the twelve apostles and the twelve patriarchs, who represent the unity of the two historical components of the church.⁷⁵ This interpretation finds support in John's vision of the New Jerusalem in which the names of the twelve patriarchs are inscribed on the twelve gates of the city, while on its twelve foundations stand the names of the apostles (21:12-14). The

⁷¹ E.g. *m. Yom.* 1.5; *m. Tam.* 1.1; *m. Mid.* 1.8.

⁷² Beale, *Revelation*, 324.

⁷³ Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 291-92) refers to the following main suggestions: (1) the twenty-four hours of the day; (2) the traditional twenty-four authors of the Old Testament; (3) symbols of the cosmos; and (4) the twenty-four lictors of Domitian. Edmondo F. Lupieri (*A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John* [trans. Maria P. Johnson and Adam Kamesar; Italian Texts & Studies on Religion & Society; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006], 134) connects the number with the "about twenty-five men" of the vision in Ezek. 8:9-16, who are accused of committing abominable acts of idolatry in the Jerusalem Temple. He interprets the twenty-four elders as the holy counterparts of this group.

⁷⁴ E.g. George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 114; Robert H. Mounce, *Revelation* (NICNT, 17; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 135-36; Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible: The Biblical-Contextual Approach* (Sarasota, FL: First Impression, 1997), 109. The twenty-four courses of the priesthood served in the Jerusalem Temple twice a year for one week at a time, from Sabbath to Sabbath (Josephus, *Ant.* 7.365-66). In contrast, the priesthood of the Qumran community was divided into twenty-six courses (1QM 2:2), probably as the result of their own calendar (Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 289).

⁷⁵ This is an old view advocated already by Victorinus, *Comm. Apoc.* 4.3.

decision over the meaning of the precise composition of the elders lacks any further evidence; however, the picturing of the group in terms of a royal priesthood and the specification of its number as twenty-four suggests the representation of the Old Testament and the New Testament people of God.⁷⁶

Finally, our argument is supported indirectly by evidence indicating the unlikelihood of the angelic interpretation. The designation of angels as “elders” is unparalleled in biblical and Jewish apocalyptic literature of the time.⁷⁷ Also angels never sit on thrones, nor do they wear white crowns or white clothing in Revelation. This description is rather characteristic of the saints either in the heavenly setting (7:13-15; 19:7-8, 14) or in indicating eschatological reward (2:10; 3:4-5; 3:21; 20:4). Therefore, the sitting of the elders counts against an angelic interpretation, since the angels generally stand in God’s presence expressing the idea of service through their posture.⁷⁸

While I have offered here an argument in favor of the interpretation of the twenty-four elders as glorified human beings, it must be noted that the question of identity is not the central concern regarding this group. Aune rightly notes that John was simply not concerned with specifying more closely the identity of these mysterious figures.⁷⁹ The reason probably lies in the fact that in his mind the function of the elders was far more important than speculation over their identity.

2.3.2. Function and Significance of the Elders and their Thrones

The twenty-four elders form the most prestigious part of the heavenly council in Revelation. The fact that they possess their own thrones arranged so that they immediately encircle the central throne implies a status of honor. This elevated position is clearly unique to created beings in Revelation, denied even to the living creatures.⁸⁰ The

⁷⁶ For an argument that only Old Testament people of God are included in the elders, see e.g. Feuillet, *Johannine Studies*, 194f. For a critique of this view as too narrow, see Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 185-86.

⁷⁷ Elders appear rarely as angelic figures in later literature (e.g. *2En.* 4:1). In *Mart. Per.* 12, written about 200 C.E., it is stated that an unspecified number of elders encircle God in his throne room and that they probably constitute his angelic court.

⁷⁸ For a similar line of argument against an angelic interpretation, see Feuillet, *Johannine Studies*, 193-94; Ford, *Revelation*, 72.

⁷⁹ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 288.

⁸⁰ Hurtado, “Revelation 4-5,” 113.

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description and the activities of the elders indicate a function of royal priesthood. While the crowns and thrones point to royal status, their primary task is cultic in nature. This is suggested by their function as the leaders of the heavenly worship (4:10-11; 5:9-10, 14; 11:16-18; 19:4) and by presenting the prayers of the saints to God (5:8). In two other texts the elders serve as interpreters interacting directly with John(5:5; 7:13).

It has been rightly observed that the primary significance of the elders lies in the acts they perform: vacating their thrones (4:10), laying down their crowns before God's throne (4:10) and ascribing attributes to God (4:11). Stevenson rightly notes that the elders' performance is to be interpreted against the Roman background as the expression of vasallage:

In antiquity a common sign of vassalage was the taking off of the diadem (symbol of royalty) by the conquered ruler and the placing of that diadem at the feet of the conqueror (Cicero, *Sest.* 27; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.29). The performance of the elders should be understood as an imitation of such an act of subordination. By vacating their thrones and casting their crowns at the feet of the one on the central throne, the elders testify either that they have no right to possess for themselves what these objects represent or that they recognize one with greater right. The behavior of the elders thus functions to show that whatever is symbolized by the thrones and crowns belongs to God.⁸¹

Bornkamm similarly recognizes that though the elders hold symbols of royalty, they do not exercise dominion. Their function is related rather to the adoration of "the One sitting on the throne."⁸² The thrones they possess are not specified as different in size from the central throne, but it is clear that no rivalry exists between the throne at the center and those encircling it. The elders' thrones function as "sub-thrones"⁸³ expressing "delegated authority,"⁸⁴ since the elders' performance clearly implies that only God is worthy to possess what the thrones represent.

The thrones of the elders throw significant light on the dynamic of Revelation's throne motif. I would like to suggest a threefold theological

⁸¹ Stevenson, "Golden Crown," 268-69.

⁸² Günther Bornkamm, "πρόβυς" in *TDNT*, VI, 651-83(668).

⁸³ R. Dean Davis, *The Heavenly Court Judgment of Revelation 4-5* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 122.

⁸⁴ Mounce, *Revelation*, 139.

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function that points to these thrones' significance in relation to God, the overcomers and his adversaries. First, the elders' sub-thrones are inseparably tied to the throne of God. They hold significance only in relation to the central throne. This is evident in the fact that in all appearances of the elders the throne of God is involved either directly⁸⁵ or indirectly by its centrality in the scene⁸⁶ or a circumlocution reference.⁸⁷ It is also significant that the sub-thrones are never at the center of attention. Moreover, they are vacant in five out of the twelve references to the elders in the book, as these characters give up their place on the thrones by prostrating themselves.⁸⁸ It is rightly concluded by Mealy concerning the significance of the repeated throne-vacation: "Effectively then, the elders are pictured as continuously receiving, yet continuously releasing. . . symbols of their authority. The paradoxical image evoked is of an uninterrupted reciprocation between divine giving and creaturely giving back of authority. No one in the scene (not even God) stakes a claim to autocratic rule."⁸⁹ Second, there is a correspondence between the characteristics of the elders in 4:4 and the promises to the overcomers in chs. 2-3 which suggests a close relationship.⁹⁰ The shared motifs are: the thrones (3:21; 4:4), the white garments (3:5; 4:4) and the crowns (3:11; 4:4). While the throne appears climactically as the last item in the line of the promises in the Seven Messages, it is at the first place in the introductory description of the elders. This feature highlights the throne's eminence among the other items and points to the assurance concerning the promised status of the elect. Third, the thrones of the elders function in a polemical role against the throne of the beast, a false claimant of authority, who appears later in the book as the major antagonist of God and his allies (13:2; 16:10). Whereas a throne and authority are claimed arrogantly by this power for himself, the repeated vacating of the elders' thrones in rendering homage

⁸⁵ Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:6; 5:11; 7:11; 14:3; 19:4.

⁸⁶ Rev. 5:5, 8.

⁸⁷ Rev. 5:14; 7:13; 11:16. The reference in 5:8 differs, because the Lamb, who is enthroned in the same chapter, is involved instead of God.

⁸⁸ Rev. 4:10; 5:8, 14; 11:16; 19:4.

⁸⁹ J. Webb Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20* (JSNTSup, 70; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 104.

⁹⁰ Hurtado, "Revelation 4-5," 113; Jeffrey Marshall Vogelgesang, "Interpretation of Ezekiel in the Book of Revelation" (Ph.D. Dissertation; Harvard University, 1985), 382-83; LaRondelle, *End-Time Prophecies*, 109-10.

to God highlights his sole sovereignty, as the only one possessing a legitimate right to hold whatever the thrones and the crowns symbolize.⁹¹

I turn now to the third component of the sub-motif of the thrones of God's allies, which is set in a different temporal context from the references discussed so far. While the enthronement promise to the overcomers and the thrones of the twenty-four elders appear in the context of salvation history, the thrones of the judges in 20:4 are set up at the beginning of the millennium.

3. Thrones of the Judges (20:4)

The single reference to the thrones of the judges in Revelation is found in the passage known as the *locus classicus* of the millennial controversy (20:4-6). It is well known that the thousand-year kingdom was for a long time the most controversial issue debated concerning the book of Revelation and the text under consideration is accordingly loaded with controversy.⁹² Nevertheless, our interest in the throne necessitates only the consideration of the issues that throw light on the development and function of the motif within the immediate and the broader context of the passage.

3.1. Contextual and Structural Considerations

The passage with the reference to the thrones of the unnamed judges (20:4-6) is part of the larger vision of the final judgment and reward in 19:11-21:8. The *parousia* is first portrayed in terms of a final battle in which the King of Kings and Lord of Lords defeats the beast, the false prophet and their allies (19:11-21). The description of the conquest is followed by a discussion of the fate of Satan (20:1-10), whereas the scene of the final judgment (20:11-15) and the new creation (21:1-8) focus on the conclusive termination of the old age and the ushering of the new order. The chronological relationship, particularly between 19:11-21 and 20:1-10, has been a matter of vigorous debate.⁹³ For the sake of our

⁹¹ Krodel, *Revelation*, 158; Stevenson, "Golden Crown," 269.

⁹² Rev. 20:4-6 caused probably more confusion than any other passage in Revelation. Boring (*Revelation*, 202) rightly notes that the topic has received an amount of attention disproportionate to its place in the book.

⁹³ The list of the verbal parallels between 19:11-21 and 20:1-10 is extensive (see e.g. Ekkehardt Müller "Microstructural Analysis of Revelation 20," *AUSS* 37 [1999], 227-55[251-52]). However, this feature does not contribute much to the clarification of the chronological relationship between the two sections. Scholarly opinion generally divides

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research, it is sufficient to establish that the throne scene of 20:4-6 lies at the heart of 20:1-10 as the central section of the narrative.⁹⁴

Müller is correct in identifying three phases in 20:1-10 in reference to the millennial kingdom: before (20:1-3), during (20:4-6) and after it (20:7-10).⁹⁵ The throne scene is sandwiched in the center between the two sections which emphasize Satan's defeat: the binding and throwing into the abyss at the beginning of the millennium and the final destruction at the end of it. Boring notes that 20:4-6 is for John a "way of picturing the eschatological triumph of God."⁹⁶ The contrast between the defeat and the enthronement highlights the definite nature of "the exchange of world-sovereignties,"⁹⁷ which ushers in the quality time of the millennium, since the occupants of the thrones spend it "with Christ" (μετὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ).

3.2. Background

It is generally acknowledged that the basic background of the millennial judgment vision of Rev. 20 lies in the Jewish apocalyptic concept of a temporary messianic reign on earth between the end of history and the eschatological new creation. This concept is seen as an attempt to reconcile two very different eschatological ideas in ancient Judaism: the prophetic and the apocalyptic views. According to the prophetic eschatology the golden future is expected to take place on the current earth, within time and space, involving people living at the time of its arrival. On the other hand, in the apocalyptic eschatology the golden future necessitates a new creation, beyond time and space as we know them, and it involves only those resurrected from the dead. The concept of a temporary messianic reign appears as a kind of synthesis

into two views, with further sub-variants: (1) chronological progression; and (2) recapitulation. For a discussion, see the following sources and the literature cited in them: Marko Jauhiainen, "Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John's Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective," *NTS* 49 (2003), 543-59; Charles E. Powell, "Progression Versus Recapitulation in Revelation 20:1-6," *BSac* 163 (2006), 94-109.

⁹⁴ William H. Shea, "Parallel Literary Structure of Revelation 12 and 20," *AUSS* 23 (1985), 37-54 (42); Müller, "Revelation 20," 235.

⁹⁵ Müller, "Revelation 20," 230.

⁹⁶ Eugene M. Boring, "Revelation 19-21: End Without Closure," *PSB Supplementary Issue* 3 (1994), 57-85(70).

⁹⁷ Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 104.

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between the current age and the age to come as it combines characteristics of both worlds.⁹⁸

Bailey in his influential article on the topic of the temporary messianic reign demonstrates the variety in points of view of the writers from different periods.⁹⁹ While the hope for the messianic kingdom is strongly expressed, besides in Revelation, in two Jewish apocalypses composed roughly at the turn of the first century C.E. (*4Ezra* 7:26-33; *2Bar.* 29:3-30:1; 40:1-4; 72:2-74:3),¹⁰⁰ the idea of an interim kingdom, not messianic in nature, is already found in the pre-Christian era as attested in *1En.* 91:12-14.¹⁰¹ The time span for the reign is given by only two works, which differ significantly: *4Ezra* anticipates four hundred years, while Revelation speaks of a millennium. Evidently, there was no traditional, fixed length to the reign.

Bailey also discusses Samaritan beliefs referring to the works of Cowley, Montgomery, Gaster and Bousset. He points out that the messianic thinking of the Samaritans included the concept of a temporary reign of the *Ta'eb*, the restorer and prophet. It was expected that the *Ta'eb* would restore the nation to the favor of God for a thousand years, which would be followed by his death until the time of the general resurrection. Josephus bears witness to a similar belief in his description of the story about a person who was a pretender to the *Ta'eb* office. It is

⁹⁸ David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (WBC, 52C; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1105.

⁹⁹ J. W. Bailey, "The Temporary Messianic Reign in the Literature of Early Judaism," *JBL* 53 (1934), 170-87(170-72); cf. T. Francis Glasson, "The Temporary Messianic Kingdom and the Kingdom of God," *JTS* 41 (1990), 517-25.

¹⁰⁰ The thought of these apocalypses is not close to Rev. 20 in spite of the fact that they envisage the dawn of a new age. *4Ezra* 7:26-33 anticipates a Messianic rule of four hundred years with the Messiah's death that will be followed after seven days by the resurrection, together with the judgment of the world. The texts of *2Bar.* claim that the Messiah's future coming will result in the destruction of the powers of evil, but also in a time of plenty as marked by grapevines which produce thousands of shoots and clusters (29:1-8). This is expected to be followed by Christ's return to heaven, together with the rising of the righteous and the destruction of the ungodly (30:1-5).

¹⁰¹ It has been argued that besides the three mentioned Jewish apocalypses the temporary messianic kingdom is to be found in *2En.* 32:2–33:1 and *Jub.* 1:27-29; 23:26-31 (e.g. David S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 200 BC-AD 100* [London: SCM, 1964], 293-94), but the evidence for this hypothesis is weak. For a critique of this suggestion, see Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1105. For the possibility of the presence of the concept in Pauline literature, see Seth Turner, "The Interim, Earthly Messianic Kingdom in Paul," *JSNT* 25 (2003), 323-42.

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stated that this person led a movement among the Samaritans in the time of Pilate which called forth such a reaction from the Roman procurator that occasioned his recall in 36 C.E.¹⁰² This evidence supports the presence of the Samaritan tradition by the first half of the first century C.E. Bailey logically concludes: “If this phase of Samaritan thought can be dated as early as suggested it gives the earliest known use of the thousand years for the duration of the messianic era. But if the Samaritans are leaning on old Jewish thinking at this point the idea must be still older.”¹⁰³

The calculation of the duration of the Messianic age was a topic of great interest among the early rabbis. Extensive evidence in this regard is most completely presented by Strack and Billerbeck.¹⁰⁴ The wide variety of opinions with differing scriptural bases for their determination indicate a lack of orthodoxy and settled tradition on the question.¹⁰⁵ The oldest known rabbinic authority arguing for the period of a thousand years is rabbi Eliezer, who belonged to the generation after the fall of the Temple.¹⁰⁶ However, it could be supposed that his view is derived from an earlier source, since he claimed as a disciple of Jochanan ben Zakkai: “I never. . . in my life said a thing which I did not hear from my teacher.”¹⁰⁷ For this reason it can be safely concluded that John in his vision of the millennial reign builds on the accepted views of his time, but modifies them to fit to his purpose of depicting “an essential aspect of his concept of the victory,” the triumph of his people who are depicted as ruling with Christ.¹⁰⁸

The other significant background of 20:4-6 is the early Christian tradition of the saints taking part in the judgment (Mt. 19:28; 1Cor. 4:8; 6:2-3). A belief of similar nature is attested in the early Judaism. In *T. Abr.* each person is judged by Abel, Abraham and by the twelve tribes of Israel which is expected to be followed by the finalizing judgment of the

¹⁰² Josephus, *Ant.* 18.85-89.

¹⁰³ Bailey, “Temporary Messianic Reign,” 179-80.

¹⁰⁴ Str-B, III, 823-27. The whole idea of the future is given with elaboration and minute detail in IV, 799-1015.

¹⁰⁵ George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (3 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927-30), II, 376.

¹⁰⁶ Yitzak Dov Gilat (“Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus” in *EncJud*, VI, 322-24) cautiously dates his activity to the end of the first and the beginning of the second century C.E.

¹⁰⁷ *Suk.* 28.a.

¹⁰⁸ Bauckham, *Theology*, 108.

sovereign God (*T. Abr.*[A] 13:3-10). Similarly, it is claimed in 1QpHab 5:4 that “God will execute the judgment of the nations by the hand of his elect.” The same idea is found also in Wis. 3:7-8; Sir. 4:11, 15; *Jub.* 24:29.

3.3. Interpretation

3.3.1. The Identity of the Thrones’ Occupants

There is a scholarly disagreement concerning the identity of the thrones’ occupants in Rev. 20:4. The reason for the division lies in the lack of clear specification, since the aorist third-person plural ἐκάθισαν (“they sat”) is not accompanied by a subject. While it is stated that John saw thrones and they were occupied by figures that were given judgment (ἐκάθισαν ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς καὶ κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς), the impersonal use of the third-person plural leaves room for some ambiguity.¹⁰⁹ The following suggestions have been made with their sub-variants for identification of the unnamed figures: (1) the twenty-four elders;¹¹⁰ (2) angels along with additional occupants;¹¹¹ (3) Christ with the saints or the apostles;¹¹² (4) victorious and vindicated martyrs;¹¹³ and (5) all the saints as members of the heavenly court.¹¹⁴ I will offer here an argument in favor of the last view based on three lines of evidence: the connection of 20:4a with other parts of the book, the link with Dan. 7 and the exegetical evidence from the text itself.

First, there is a strong thematical connection between the description of the throne occupants in 20:4a and the other parts of the book.

¹⁰⁹ G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek, as Used in the Apocalypse of St. John: A Study in Bilingualism* (NovTSup, 27; Leiden: Brill, 1971), 231. Such a construction can be used instead of the passive voice and it occurs in the Old Testament with some frequency (GKC §144f.).

¹¹⁰ Walvoord, *Revelation*, 296; Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 109.

¹¹¹ Beale (*Revelation*, 996) argues for exalted believers together with angelic beings, while Bullinger (*Apocalypse*, 613) suggests that the occupants are the seven angelic assessors with Christ, God and the apostles.

¹¹² Swete, *Apocalypse*, 258; Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation* (SP, 16; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 199.

¹¹³ Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1967), 739; Bauckham, *Theology*, 106-07; Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (NLT; Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2009), 364-65.

¹¹⁴ Mounce, *Revelation*, 365; George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 263-64.

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Particularly relevant here is the promise of the eschatological enthronement to the overcomers in 3:21. Whereas this group, representing the church militant, is assured of sharing Christ's throne, in 20:4, 6 the saints are depicted as seated on thrones and reigning with Christ. Thus, the millennium throne scene functions as the fulfilment of the promise in 3:21. At the same time it also seems to be the realization of the promises of crown and rule from the Seven Messages (2:10, 26-27; 3:11), which evoke concepts that show affinity with the throne.

Second, the thrones of the judges in 20:4 are closely related to the judgment scene of Dan. 7. Several links are of particular significance for our interest. In both contexts the plurality of thrones is mentioned. However, it is not clear why God's throne is not represented with the other thrones in 20:4-6 as in the heavenly court setting of Dan. 7:9 in which thrones are set up in the presence of the enthroned Ancient of Days.¹¹⁵ The two contexts also share parallels central to the theme of both visions, the heavenly judgment. The phrase κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς ("judgment was given to them") in 20:4 shows verbal parallels with κρίμα ἔδωκεν ἁγίοις ("judgment was given to the saints") in Dan. 7:22. Also shared is the idea of kingdom bestowed on the saints (Dan. 7:27; Rev. 20:6). While αὐτοῖς in Rev. 20:4 can be taken as an indirect object implying that God has given the saints "authority to judge,"¹¹⁶ it could also be interpreted as a dative of advantage stressing the idea of judicial vindication "in favor" of the thrones' occupants.¹¹⁷ While the later possibility would be in line with Dan.7:22, more likely is the emphasis on the saints' judging authority. White rightly concludes that the giving of κρίμα to the heavenly court in Rev. 20:4 "signifies their authorization for that judicial mission in which they will serve as executors of God's decree to avenge the martyr's blood."¹¹⁸ Thus, progress is brought to the

¹¹⁵ Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 107.

¹¹⁶ Lohmeyer, *Offenbarung*, 161-62; Adolf Pohl, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (2 vols.; Wuppertal Studienbibel; Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1983), 266; Osborne, *Revelation*, 705 n. 11.

¹¹⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott: Studien zum Herrschafts-und Priestermotiv in der Apokalypse* (NTAbh, 7; Münster: Aschendorff, 1972), 303-06; Roloff, *Revelation*, 227; Beale, *Revelation*, 997.

¹¹⁸ Randall Fowler White, "Victory and House Building in Revelation 20:1-21:8: A Thematic Study" (Ph.D. Dissertation; Westminster Theological Seminary, 1987), 133.

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attention in relation to the cry of martyrs in 6:9-11: whereas in 6:11 vengeance is delayed, in 20:4 it is imminent.¹¹⁹

Third, the exegetical evidence from 20:4 points in the direction of identifying the thrones' occupants with the saints. Namely, the function of the *καί*, preceding the reference to *τάς ψυχάς*, is exegetical. Thus, a further specification of the occupants, who appear clearly as human figures, is introduced. There is a discussion whether only a single group of martyrs are in view here¹²⁰ or room is made for genuine "confessors" of Jesus, whose experience does not include martyrdom.¹²¹ As a further interpretive option, it has been suggested that the martyrs exclusively are in view here, but they function as representatives of the whole church, which has persevered in faith.¹²² The interpretation that favors a single group is, however, problematic for several reasons. The use of the indefinite relative pronoun *ὅστις* suggests that room can be made in 20:4 for two groups. Beale rightly concludes: "*ὅστις* ('those who') occurs eight times elsewhere in the Apocalypse, seven times clearly introducing a further description of what precedes it. But only one of those seven have *καί* preceding. That lone exception is in 1:7, where the construction introduces a group that appears to be a subset of the preceding group ('every eye will see him, *even those who* pierced him')." ¹²³ This evidence is further supported by the gender difference between *τάς ψυχάς* referring clearly to the martyrs and *οἵτινες*, which introduces a new clause. The difference between the feminine and masculine forms indicates that *ὅστις* does not function as an adjective. It has been further noted by Beale that if *οἵτινες* were dependent on *τάς ψυχάς*, it should be accusative as a

¹¹⁹ Numerous verbal parallels are shared between 6:9 and 20:4. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*Revelation: Vision of a Just World* [Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991], 108) rightly interprets the meaning of the connection as a message that "now, the number of those who have still to die according to 6:9-12 is complete. The end is here!" Beale (*Revelation*, 997-98), on the other hand, does not deny the connection, but persuasively argues that 20:4-6 is not the first answer to the petition of the martyrs.

¹²⁰ Charles, *Revelation*, II, 183; Caird, *Revelation*, 252; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priestess für Gott*, 305-06.

¹²¹ Swete, *Apocalypse*, 259; Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 569; Müller, "Revelation 20," 247.

¹²² Krodell, *Revelation*, 334. Osborne (*Revelation*, 705) similarly argues that the martyrs "are the focus throughout 20:4 but . . . all the saints are also intended in the larger context" (cf. Charles Homer Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy* [GNS, 34; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 187).

¹²³ For the complete argument of Beale, see *Revelation*, 999-1001.

second object of the implied εἶδον, but the change in case indicates a new group.¹²⁴

3.3.2. The Role of the Thrones' Occupants

The life and role of the participants in the millennium is pictured in 20:6 in terms of the dual office of priesthood and kingship rooted in the promise of Exod. 19:6. The priestly role is further supported by the possible allusion to Isa. 61:6, a reference to the eschatological restoration of God's people in which the entire nation "will be called the priests of the Lord."¹²⁵ Still, the main emphasis of 20:4-6 seems to be on kingly rule. The saints' reign is related to Christ's rulership, since they do not appear apart from him in reigning function (ἐβασίλευσαν μετὰ τοῦ χριστοῦ ... βασιλεύσουσιν μετ' αὐτοῦ).¹²⁶ It is rightly suggested by Boring that the basic conviction of the scene is that "Christ shall ultimately reign . . . and his faithful people shall reign with him."¹²⁷ However, in light of the relationship with the promise of 3:21 the picture of the millennial reigning appears only as "an intermediate stage,"¹²⁸ "a step along the way to the true climax."¹²⁹ While the events of 20:4-6 are confined to the heavenly temple, the goal of Revelation's eschatology is the recreation of the heaven and earth (21:1-8). Therefore, the appropriate context for the elects' eternal reign is the new creation (βασιλεύσουσιν εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων; 22:5), in which man's original purpose of reign over the earth is completely restored (Gen. 1:26, 28).

The function of the thrones in 20:4 lies in indicating the ruling authority of their occupants. The idea of the elects' ruling is stated twice in the passage, apart from the employment of the throne motif (20:4, 6). These two concepts are directly linked also in 16:10, but in a negative

¹²⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 1001.

¹²⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott*, 336-38; Jan Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development* (JSNTSup, 93; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 113-16.

¹²⁶ Prigent (*Apocalypse*, 570) rightly notes the significance of pairing the verbs ζῆσαν and ἐβασίλευσαν in 20:4. The combination indicates that the saints follow the model of Christ, who himself lives (1:18) and reigns (19:16).

¹²⁷ Boring, "Revelation 19-21," 70.

¹²⁸ Jonathan Knight, *Revelation* (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 132.

¹²⁹ Frederick J. Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon: The Revelation to John* (The New Testament in Context; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 397.

setting as related to the beast. Bauckham convincingly argues that the theological significance of the emphasis on reigning in 20:4-6 is to be understood against the broader context of conflict with dragon and his allies. He calls our attention to the following contrasts between the saints and the satanic forces: (1) the kingdom has been taken from the beast and his allies and it is given to the saints; (2) the beast's universal regime is limited to forty-two months, while the saints' rule lasts thousand years; (3) the beast, responsible for the death of martyrs, has been cast into the lake of fire, but the second death has no power over the saints.¹³⁰ These contrasts indicate additionally that the major purpose of depicting the saints on thrones lies in emphasizing their victory and exaltation.¹³¹ For this reason raising the question who the saints reign over is unnecessary, since "the picture is complete in itself."¹³² Thus, the thrones of 20:4 function as emblems of royal rule and point to the saints' eschatological triumph.

The saints' reigning in 20:4-6 also includes a judicial aspect. It is clearly stated in the text that their sitting on thrones is related to judging function, but the description of the activity itself is notoriously restrained (εἶδον θρόνους καὶ ἐκάθισαν ἐπ' αὐτοὺς καὶ κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς). As Yarbro Collins aptly states, "Like what the seven thunders said (10:4), these details remain shrouded in mystery."¹³³ The fact that there is no mention of the accused, nor any verdict proclaimed, strengthens further the emphasis on the saints' co-reign with Christ. On the other hand, the judging role lies probably in "agreeing with and praising his judicial decisions," therefore "their witness becomes a basis for Christ's judgment of the ungodly at the end of the age."¹³⁴ It has been

¹³⁰ Bauckham, *Theology*, 107.

¹³¹ Charles H. Giblin, "The Millennium (Rev. 20.4-6) as Heaven," *NTS* 45 (1999), 553-70[566]. In contrast, Mathias Rissi (*The Future of the World: An Exegetical Study of Revelation 19.11-22.15* [SBT, 2/23; London: SCM, 1972], 33) argues that John is here not concerned with the triumph of the believers over unbelievers, but rather with the kingship of the believers "in the sense of . . . their absolute freedom from all human and superhuman forces." James T. H. Adamson ("The Concept of the Millennium in Revelation 20:1-10" [Ph.D. Dissertation; University of Ottawa, 1990], 80) persuasively points out the deficiency of Rissi's suggestion claiming that "there is a sense in which this is true of the believer's kingship," but "perhaps a little more is intended. Christ rules over the others, and it is to this co-rule that the martyrs are admitted."

¹³² Boring, "Revelation 19-21," 71.

¹³³ Yarbro Collins, *Apocalypse*, 140.

¹³⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 997.

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persuasively argued that κρίμα in 20:4 follows the משפט concept of the Old Testament, which includes at the same time the notions of ruling and judging. Against this background the merging of the saints' reigning and judging role can be established.¹³⁵

4. Conclusion

Our investigation has revealed that three groups, positive towards God's kingship, are presented as possessing thrones in Revelation: the overcomers (3:21), the twenty-four elders (4:4; 11:16) and the judges (20:4). Their thrones are bound into a sub-motif within Revelation's throne motif (thrones of God's allies). It is clearly implied that these thrones do not appear in an independent role apart from God's and Christ's throne. Thus, in 3:21 not only the overcomers, but also God and Christ are sitting on a throne. In 4:4 the thrones of the elders are arranged immediately around the divine throne which is at the center of attention in the vision. In the millennial judgment of 20:4-6 the unnamed judges sit on their thrones, but their reign is joint to Christ's. I suggest that the repeatedly emphasized close relation indicates that the thrones other than God's and the Lamb's receive significance only in the light of the central divine throne.

In the climactic statement within the line of the promises of the Seven Messages the overcomers are presented as σύνθρονοι with Christ and indirectly with God on the basis of the throne-sharing relation between the two central figures of Revelation (3:21). Since the promise given to the church militant is of eschatological orientation, 3:21 does not state the overcomers' enthronement as a present reality, only envisages it. I have offered an argument against the suggestion concerning the universal martyrdom of the overcomers. I have also addressed the role of 3:21 in the macrodynamic of the overcoming motif in Revelation with contributing a suggestion of a parallel between the νικάω texts of 3:21 and 21:7. These texts not only share a climactic nature, the first within the promises of the Seven Messages and the other

¹³⁵ Mounce, *Revelation*, 364. This idea is advanced also by Richard A. Horsley (*Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993], 199-208) concerning the saints' judicial role in Mt.19:28 viewed against the background of the book of Judges, in which "judging" is applied to the role of general governance.

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in the development of the overcoming motif, but thematically point in the same direction: the ultimate realization of God's covenant promises.

The twenty-four elders appear as the most prestigious part of the heavenly council in Revelation, since their individual thrones are pictured in 4:4 as immediately encircling God's throne. Similar to the other important figures in Revelation, the throne motif is directly involved in the introduction of this eminent group. I have offered an argument in favor of the identification of the elders with glorified human beings. However, it has been stated that in John's mindset the function of the elders is far more important from speculation over the question of identity. Their primary significance as a royal priesthood lies in the act they perform as the leaders of the heavenly worship. The praise scenes of Revelation reveal clearly that the twenty-four thrones function as sub-thrones in relation to God's throne which is at the center of the reality. The vacating of these thrones five times in the book in liturgical contexts indicate the acknowledging that the authority the elders possess is delegated and points to the unrivaled quality of God's throne.

The unnamed group of occupants of the heavenly thrones in the millennium judgment is portrayed similarly to the twenty-four elders in a kingly-priestly role. However, this is not compelling evidence for identifying the two groups as the same. Whereas the elders are portrayed as an eminent group around God's throne, an argument has been presented in favor of the identification of the enthroned judges with all the redeemed participating in the millennium. While the reigning of the saints in 20:4-6 includes a judicial aspect, it has been demonstrated that the function of the thrones points primarily to the ruling authority of their occupants recalling also the notions of victory and exaltation. Their reign is practiced alongside Christ's rulership, since the figures on the thrones do not appear separate from him in this function.

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