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# The Seven Hymns of Revelation 4, 5 and 7

MARK S. KRAUSE

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## Preliminary Considerations

*Hearing is addressed by the intangible and the invisible.*

Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep*<sup>1</sup>

There was a belief in the ancient world among both the Greeks (e.g., Pythagoras) and Romans (e.g., Cicero) that the created universe was filled with music. It was called “celestial harmony” or “the music of the spheres.” Pythagoras in particular tied music in to his theories of mathematics and even color. In Cicero’s *De Re Publica*, book six, there is a remarkable scene in which the narrator is given insight into this hidden musical universe. He is told that the human situation is like the people who live next to the cataracts of the Nile River. The thunderous roar has caused them to be deaf, unable to hear anything. Likewise, he is told, we have become deaf to the beautiful harmony of the universe and cannot hear it.<sup>2</sup>

A recent twist on this is found in the work of neurologist Oliver Sacks.<sup>3</sup> Sacks is an admitted atheist,<sup>4</sup> but maintains a scientific fascination with various phenomena involving people who hear music in their minds. One of the most striking of these cases is that of Dr. Tony Cicoria, an orthopedic surgeon who, after surviving a lightning strike, began to hear music in “an absolute torrent.” Neither Sacks nor Cicoria is able to account for this, although Cicoria refers to it as “the music of heaven.”<sup>5</sup>

Malina and Pilch suggest that this may play into John’s vision of heaven.<sup>6</sup> Just as this spiritual world is hidden from sight and can be seen only with spiritual eyes through a vision, the harmonious world is also muted and can only be heard through spiritual ears, an auditory experience (a vision and an audition). This may be partially in view when John arrives on the scene at the throne room of heaven in Revelation 4 and hears glorious, unending music. While this is overwhelming, it may also have been what he expected to hear. He expected that heaven would be a place of music.<sup>7</sup>

We should understand the Seven Hymns of Revelation 4–7 as contributors to John’s spiritual experience. He was not able to record this with a video camera, but could only use words to communicate with his readers. These words had to give them a sense of the visual and the audio elements of what he saw and heard. Revelation is a series of audio/visual “visions.” This is epitomized in Revelation 5.11 where the author says, “I looked . . . and heard.”

Many students of Revelation seem hesitant about this musical aspect of the book. At the center of this is the word used to introduce each of the seven hymns in chapters 4, 5 and 7: *legontes*. The use of *legontes* (or a similar form) should not be translated “saying” here, even though this is the base meaning of the Greek

1. Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 1892), 352.

2. Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 97, 98.

3. Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

4. Sacks, 35.

5. Sacks, 7.

6. Malina and Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary*, 97.

7. Note the contrast in Revelation 8.1, “. . . there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”

verb *lego*. In these instances, it is used in the sense of “relating accurately,” or “giving a direct quotation.”<sup>8</sup> When used this way, *legontes* is unrelated to the meaning of the sentence, but merely a structural, deictic marker to indicate that a direct quotation is to follow.<sup>9</sup> This misunderstanding has led some to render *legontes* as “chanted.” An example of this is the analysis of one scholar who claims “chanted” represents more accurately the way ancients performed songs.<sup>10</sup>

### STARTING POINT

There are many different theories as to how Revelation should be interpreted. With the rise of the literary approaches to the Bible, we should note that the book is a narrative, a story. Even the celebrated “Letters to the Seven Churches” in chapters 2 and 3 are presented as part of the narrative, for they are being actively dictated to John. With this in mind, we should understand the Seven Hymns as part of the narrative also. This means that John is using them to help tell the story he wants to tell.<sup>11</sup>

### BASIC PREMISE

Chapters 4–7 of Revelation portray the second vision of John as identified by the phrase, “I was in the Spirit” in 4.2. John’s initial vision is of a hole/door in the sky with the result that he is transported into *heaven*. He finds himself in the throne room of God (cf. 1 Kings 22.19). There, he witnesses a great scene of worship by the residents of heaven.

We should not understand this as just another day in heaven, though. It is a day for something unique to take place. The one seated on the throne (God) has prepared a scroll with his decrees for the future. John has arrived just in time to witness this drama. We are to understand that he has been invited by the Risen Christ, for the voice that beckons him to “Come up” is said to sound “like a trumpet.” This is the same voice he heard from the Son of Man as he stood among the lampstands (1.10–13).

John experiences two strong emotions as he observes the throne room scene:

1. An urgent desire to know what is written in the scroll.
2. A keen disappointment because initially there is no one on the heavenly stage who is “worthy” to break the seven seals and open the scroll.

The appearance of the Lamb is not intended to be chronologically tidy with regard to the original life setting of the readers of the Apocalypse. In chapter 1, John has seen the Risen Christ, still on earth, perhaps newly risen (Rev 1.18). In chapter 5, this Risen Christ (now the Lamb) makes a triumphal entry into heaven. In

8. It should be noted that *legontes* is used to introduce the “Song of Moses” in the Septuagint (Exod 15.1).

9. It is interesting to note how *legontes* has been translated in the various versions to introduce the seven hymns. The KJV and NASB are consistent (if misleading) by consistently translating *legontes* with a form of “say.” The NRSV is nearly as consistent by its translation of *legontes* with a form of “sing,” its inexplicable exception being at 7.10 where the NRSV reverts to “saying.” The NIV and NLT both claim middle ground by three instances of a form “say,” three instances of a form of “sing,” and one instance where *legontes* is not directly translated (7.10).

10. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (WBC 52a, Dallas: Word, 1998). Aune claims, “‘Chanted’ here represents both the verb ἄδουσιν (a historic present and so rendered as a past tense) and the redundant present ptcp. *legontes*, ‘saying,’ which, like ὅτι *recitative*, can function to introduce direct discourse. The term ‘chant’ more accurately represents the way ancients performed songs” (p. 325, n. 9a). However, we should note that redundancy is a subjective category in language analysis. The author of Revelation is consistent in using *legontes* to introduce each of these hymns.

The failure to understand the function of *legontes* in context led one author to comment, “Interestingly, although the Apocalypse implies that music is a significant feature of the life of the Church in heaven . . . music as such is not mentioned at all in Revelation, and many of the hymns are said rather than being sung.” See Stephen Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2005), 136. I guess it depends on what your definition of “music” is. The cognate accusative construction of 5.9 (ἄδουσιν ᾠδὴν καινὴν) is clearly a musical reference. A similar reference comes in 14.3.

11. Koester sees this when he ties the throne scenes of Revelation 4–7 to the letters of 2–3, saying, “. . . the vision invites those in the seven churches to join in the cosmic song of praise.” Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 80.

God's timing, this comes at the occasion of the appearance of the scroll. The opening of the scroll by the Lamb is portrayed in chapter 6, and chapter 7 has a renewed worship scene. Within this section (4.1—8.1) we find seven brief songs or hymns.<sup>12</sup> Each hymn has an identified group of singers, and each contains elements of praise.

### THEMES

*We have three great converging and overlapping themes in these chapters: **worship, revelation and worthiness.***

### THE SEVEN HYMNS

Heaven is revealed to earth as the homeland of music . . .

Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep*<sup>13</sup>

#### HYMN 1: REVELATION 4.8

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing (*legontes*),  
 "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty,  
 who was and is and is to come."<sup>14</sup>

#### *Theme of Hymn 1*

This hymn recognizes God's holiness, omnipotence, and eternalness. This is the opening hymn, the "Call to Worship" for what follows.

#### *Observations*

The four living creatures have the function of ceaseless litany concerning the one seated on the throne. The three-fold "holy" (*trisagion*) is also found in Isaiah 6.3, and is a highly emphatic way of emphasizing God's unique holiness.<sup>15</sup> John must have been impressed that he had been allowed to view the center of all holiness. The words of the living creatures tie this to John's initial description of God as the ageless one (Rev 1.4).

In 4.9 we begin to understand the function of the four living creatures more clearly. They serve as leaders of worship for the heavenly throng. There are four aspects to their words of worship:

1. They ascribe *glory* to God. God's greatness and power must be recognized.
2. They *honor* God. This can be construed as royal language. To honor God admits God's kingship.
3. They *give thanks* to God. John is shown that the need to give thanks to God will never end, even extending to heaven.
4. They recognize God's *eternity*. God is the one who "lives forever and ever."

#### HYMN 2: REVELATION 4.10–11

[T]he twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing (*legontes*),

"You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
 to receive glory and honor and power,  
 for you created all things,  
 and by your will they existed and were created."

12. For insistence that 4.1—8.1 be seen as a unit, see Alan Johnson, *Revelation* (EBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:465.

13. Rossetti, 352.

14. All scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted. Additions or modifications to this are bracketed.

15. Another example is found in 1 Clement 34:6, ἅγιος, ἅγιος, ἅγιος, κύριος, σαβαώθ, πλήρης πάσα ἡ κτίσις τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ. This *trisagion* is of note because it is from a Christian source roughly contemporary with Revelation.

*Theme of Hymn 2*

God's is worthy to be worshiped because he is the Creator of all.

*Observations*

This is the baseline hymn from which the next five take their cues. It can be described as a "doxology" in light of its ascription of worthiness and glory to God.

The elders follow the lead of the living creatures, and now offer their own worship. They do this with a remarkable, unforgettable act of worship: bowing before the throne and offering their crowns to God. In so doing, they release any claim to their own separate authority and autonomy. They are utterly, completely devoted to the service of God.

This is first place in Revelation that anyone is said to "worship."<sup>16</sup> In the New Testament, the primary word for "worship" (*proskuneo*) implies giving obeisance, to bow down. Thus "worshipping" can be a physical position (see Matt 4.9). Our English word "worship" has the connotation of "giving worth to someone," or "counting someone to be ultimately worthy." Worship here is not an emotion. It is an acknowledgement and commitment. We worship that which is superior and worthy of our honor.

To say "You are *worthy*" is the very heart of worship: acknowledging the Worthy One. In an absolute sense, God is the only one "worthy to be praised" (Psalm 18.3). When we understand worship as spiritual submission to God and count God as worthy of any possible praise, he is then our King and Master, and we are his blessed servants.

**HYMN 3: REVELATION 5.8, 9**

When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp (*kitharan*)<sup>17</sup> and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing (*aidousin*) a new song, [singing] (*legontes*):

*"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
for you were slaughtered  
and by your blood you ransomed for God saints  
from every tribe and language and people and nation;  
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,  
and they will reign on earth."*

*Theme of Hymn 3*

The Lamb's worthiness to open the scroll is revealed in light of his sacrifice on the cross and his formation of a new people of God on earth.

*Observations*

Revelation 4 is a scene of worship in the heavenly throne room of God. Revelation 5 continues in that venue, but worship has ceased temporarily. The reasons for its pause and for its resumption are the key elements of this chapter.

This is the hymn to introduce the Lamb. With the appearance of the Lamb on the scene, the worship resumes. Now, however, the Lamb himself is the object of worship, as signified by the elders bowing before him.

There are two added elements. Now we can imagine the beautiful strains of a heavenly harp orchestra (*kithara*). Also present are the prayers of believers, which add the smell of sweet incense to the worship and to John's spiritual experience (Should this be called an odoration? fragrancation?).

16. Although see Revelation 3.9 where there is a promise that those of the synagogue of Satan will be compelled to bow down (*προσκυνέω*) before the believers in the church of Philadelphia.

17. See the references to harps at Revelation 15.2. In Revelation 14.2, there is a triple reference to "harpers harping on their harps." Revelation 18.22 has a strong musical picture, but not in the context of worship. In describing the fall of Babylon, the author says there will be no more "harpists," "ministrrels" (*μουσικῶν* = musicians, a NT *hapax legomenon*), "flutists" and "trumpeters."

The earlier image of the elders as being white robed and wearing crowns is believed by some to signify their dual role as kings and priests (cf. 1.6). In this hymn, the king/priest motif reemerges, recognized in the hymn as being made possible by the Lamb's victory.

Further evidence of the level of worship given the Lamb is found in the singing of a "new song."<sup>18</sup>

This great worship celebration for the Lamb is motivated by two things. Most basically, he appears in heaven as the Redeemer for the people of God. He has been slain as an atoning sacrificial victim. The price of his blood has brought redemption to many people, both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus' death is not seen as a defeat, but as a victory (Rev 5.5, he has "prevailed"). Second, he is acclaimed because his triumphant sacrifice has made him worthy to solve the current crisis: break the seals and open the book.

#### **HYMN 4: REVELATION 5.11, 12**

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing (*legontes*) with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

##### *Theme of Hymn 4*

The Lamb's worthiness to be worshiped is on a par with God.

##### *Observations*

This is the hymn most full of attributes, all pointed to the Lamb.

The song of the elders is now joined by the infinite host of heavenly angels. Saying 10,000 x 10,000 is not a mathematical formula, but like our expressions "gazillions" or "bajillions." They are innumerable. John's witness to this glorious scene is beyond our imaginations.

The worship from the angels is seven-fold, the perfect combination. It encompasses every possible qualification for worthiness: **power** (authority), **wealth** (riches), **wisdom** (intellect), **might** (empowerment), **honor** (esteem), **glory** (personal splendor) and **blessing** (praise).

#### **HYMN 5: REVELATION 5.13, 14**

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing (*legontas*), "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.

##### *Theme of Hymn 5*

Universal and eternal worship is both for God and for the Lamb.

##### *Observations*

The worship chorus is now joined by all creatures. The celebration is so great that even heaven cannot contain it for it has spread to earth. The acclamation of the creatures is four-fold, symbolic of the entire world, repeating four of the items from the angelic song.

18. In the Old Testament, the "new song" was sung to God as an act of worship (e.g., Psalm 98.1). Leonard Thompson sees the "new song" as a "Christian song," one known and comprehended only by Christians. This is in contrast to the first two songs, which are phrased in Old Testament language. See Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 59. Another suggestion is that this "new song" can be seen in contrast to the "old song," the creation hymn of 4.11. See Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1997), 98.

Human beings are assumed to be present among the creatures, but they are not the center of the worship exercise. They are on the outer ring.<sup>19</sup>

This song is also reminiscent of the original song of God's worthiness in Revelation 4.11, with one key difference: the worship now includes the Lamb. Christian worship includes the Lamb, Jesus Christ the Risen One. The Redeemer of Humankind is worthy of worship, and no human king is similarly deserving.

The scene ends on a high note with the worship of the four beasts and the twenty-four elders (5.14). They worship unreservedly, counting the Lamb as worthy as the One who sits on the throne.

### **HYMN 6: REVELATION 7.9, 10**

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying (*legontes*), "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

#### *Theme of Hymn 6*

Recognition of the great salvation has been given to God's people, and this should be attributed to both God and the Lamb.

#### *Observations*

Chapter 6 has the breaking of the first six of the seven seals. This serves as a prophetic vehicle for the things that were to take place in the future (cf. 1.1, 4.1). The opening of the seventh seal is delayed for the resumed worship scene of chapter 7.

The NRSV translates *legontes* here as "saying," apparently acknowledging the powerful expression, "cried out with a loud voice." Here, indeed, there is a sense of the multitude doing more than singing. The NLT renders this "shouting with a mighty shout." The context, however, does not preclude a musical sense to this thunderous cry.

This hymn has been called a "Proclamation of Victory."<sup>20</sup> "Salvation," then, may not carry the sense of spiritual deliverance but of military conquest.<sup>21</sup> The conquest is celebrated by the saved from all the nations of the earth. This great multitude reminds us of the immense throng of the fifth hymn. As in that hymn, the celebration includes both God on the throne and the Lamb. Worship is now incomplete without the inclusion of the Lamb.

### **HYMN 7: REVELATION 7.11, 12**

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing (*legontes*), "Amen!

*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever!  
Amen."*

19. This goes against what we often do, placing ourselves in the center of the worship service. See Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 33.

20. See Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1998), 164.

21. Cf. Psalm 18.46–48, "The LORD lives! Blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my **salvation**, the God who gave me vengeance and subdued peoples under me; who delivered me from my enemies; indeed, you exalted me above my adversaries; you delivered me from the violent." Coming after the violent images of the six seals, this acclamation gives the reader the sense of the triumph of God and his people. This is the result of the outpouring of the judgmental wrath of God (Rev 6.17).

*Theme of Hymn 7*

Now a final, unified song of all the cast of heavenly characters attributes to God a seven-fold blessing.

*Observations*

The “Amen” brings a sense of finality, and appropriately is used to begin and end the last hymn of this section (cf. 5.14).

This final hymn of the section also has a seven-fold ascription of attributes to God in a doxological fashion. The seven are identical to those of the third hymn with the exception that “wealth” has been replaced by “thanksgiving.”

The singers of this hymn retrace the progression of the earlier hymns. The hymnic worship began with the four living creatures, passed to the twenty-four elders, expanded to the combined creatures and elders, progressed to the angel throngs, and climaxed with the chorus of all creation. In chapter 7 it is narrowed to an uncountable human multitude for the sixth hymn. In this final hymn for the section, the angels, elders and living creatures are represented. This is almost like a rough chiasmus, walking into the content then walking out to the original position. This indicates that the music of this section of the book is now complete.

**CONCLUSION**

*What will it be in heaven to be singer, musician, listener?*

Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep*<sup>22</sup>

The issue of false and true worship is at the core of this book. As much as anything, worship of false gods and idols is something that cannot be tolerated or sanctioned in any way. One must repent of this (Rev. 9.20). Some of the most chilling words of the book come when we are told “the whole earth” is led into false worship of the dragon and the beast (Rev 13.3, 4). Even the seemingly logical mistake of worshipping a good but lesser being like an angel cannot be condoned (Rev 19.10).

The ultimate test of loyalty in the book is, “Whom do you worship?” The answer is that we should worship the One who is worthy; we must worship God. John is shown that this is not merely an earthly deduction, but a heavenly reality. Yet the worship of God is not as straightforward as we may believe, for it is revealed to John that right worship includes adoration of the Lamb, the Christian Savior, for the Lamb has been accorded worthiness by the throngs of heaven. Thus the three themes converge: It is *revealed* that the Lamb is *worthy* and must be *worshiped*.

The lesson of heaven is that we should sing what we believe, and believe what we sing. Doctrine in songs is important. Doctrine cannot be separated from worship. “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain” (Rev 5.12, KJV). We, the readers, should count him no less worthy.

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<sup>22</sup>. Rossetti, 352.