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THE IDENTITY OF THE TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS

A Critical Monograph on Revelation 4:4
Abridged by the Author

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"And round about the throne were four and twenty seats. And upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment. And they had on their heads crowns of gold."

The vision of the Apostle John of Revelation four and five is one of the most majestic of the entire Word of God. His description of it begins as follows. "And after this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven. . . ." A throne is then seen in the process of being set and the one sitting on it is described as one "like a jasper and a sardine stone" to look upon. The person on this throne is not named; however from the thrice repeated "holy" of verse eight, it might be concluded that this one is the triune God himself. The purpose of the throne is both that of salvation and of judgment but primarily one of judgment. In fact, in the light of verse five, it would seem that the entire purpose of chapters four and five in the outline of the book is to set up a throne of judgment from which the seven seals, the seven trumpet judgments and the seven vials of divine wrath of Revelation six to nineteen proceed. Around this central throne are twenty-four "seats" or more properly, "thrones," on which are seated "four and twenty elders" who are clothed in white raiment and crowned with crowns of gold.

Immediately then we are brought face to face with these "four and twenty elders." Who are they or what do they represent? Needless to say, a wide diversity of opinion prevails represented by almost every conceivable theological and eschatological persuasion. For example, men who hold to a partial rapture say that these elders represent the overcomers of Revelation two and three. Men who hold to the amillennialist position, represent them as the principalities and powers of Eph. 1:21, Col. 1:16, while others say that they are angels or the authorities of 1 Pet. 3:22. Some posttribulationists dismiss them as being incapable of any identification. Premillennialists almost without exception see in these heavenly elders representatives of the redeemed, resurrected and enthroned Church. Thus the problem is one of immense importance involving far more than a mere arbitrary identifying of a vague and insignificant symbol, for it involves a discussion of that peculiar relationship of the Church to that period of time known as the tribulation. Beyond this, the answer to our question involves one's view of history and the future as well as one's attitude toward the daily walk and conduct of the believer. Suffice it to say, the subject at hand is one of keen importance.

In dealing with the problem at hand, the writer has had to reject views which are held by every conceivable eschatological persuasion as well as some within the premillennial school. The writer does not mean to imply that every view rejected is wholly without support or that every problem has been solved. Rather, we have arrived at our conclusions because they seem most adequately to support the facts. The writer will not be dealing with every viewpoint held by the various authors within the confines of this paper, but will attempt to handle only the more common ones.

The problem then is: Who are the twenty-four elders of Revelation 4:4?

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS WITH EVALUATION

The Angelic Beings View

The view that these elders are angelic beings is stated by Reese in his volume on The Approaching Advent of Christ. He says, "They are glorious heavenly beings taking the lead in the praise and worship of God..."¹

By way of refutation of this view, it is the feeling of the author of this paper that those who would interpret in this way are guilty of twisting the facts and are attempting to evade the implications involved by taking the plain literal sense of the passage. The reason for this is that such an identification would be contrary to their preconceived system of thought. I am confident that if the plain sense of this passage or any passage were understood, such an interpretation would never have arisen. This we may say in general. To be more specific in our rebuttal, however, we want now to examine the immediate context of the passage as well as several companion passages of importance.

In the first place, we reject this view because in the verse under consideration the twenty-four elders are seen wearing crowns of gold and arrayed in white apparel, both of which are rewards for endurance according to Alford.² Later on in defense of our own position we shall treat in full the word rendered "crowns" (stephanos) in our English Bibles, but suffice it to say at this point that the Bible seems to distinguish carefully between the word stephanos which is used of a crown of reward for faithful endurance and diadema which is the crown of royalty. As much as could be determined, the Scriptures never speak of angels wearing crowns to say nothing of stephanoi or victors' wreaths gotten as a reward for faithful endurance. In what sense could angels have received such rewards for faithful endurance? It is obvious from this consideration alone that these could not be understood as angels.

Secondly, we reject this view because our verse pictures the elders as seated on "thrones" (thronoi) which speak of royal dignity and prerogative. Again, angels are never spoken of as seated on thrones elsewhere in the Scriptures according to Stanton.³ If this be true, these elders cannot be construed to be angelic beings.

Thirdly, these beings are called "elders" and nowhere else in the Bible are angelic beings ever called "elders" but there are many instances where men are so designated; Gen. 50:7; Ex. 3:16; Lev. 4:15; Num. 11:16; Deut. 5:23; Ps. 107:32; Isa. 37:2; Ezek. 8:1; Mt. 15:2; Lk. 7:3; Acts 4:5; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 11:2; 1 Pet. 5:1. In the light of these references, it would seem best to reject the idea that these are angelic beings.

Fourth, in refutation of this view, note carefully that the elders are carefully distinguished from both the four living creatures and the angels in Revelation 5:11 and 7:11. Certainly this is more than a mere repetition of words. If we believe that each word of the Scriptures was carefully chosen by the Holy Spirit to convey the exact meaning intended, then surely this distinction must be maintained.

Fifth, in Rev. 5:9 the elders are seen singing a song of redemption. Such a thing is not true of angels because they could not join with the song of redemption in this personal sense. The angels

which fell have no redemption and the unfallen angels do not need any. Further, note that in the song of the elders in which they sing of their own personal redemption they say in verse ten that God has made them to be kings and priests and they have been redeemed out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation. In what sense are angels kings and priests? Angels are never spoken of as being associated in a priestly act in the Bible.⁴ In what sense are angels redeemed from every kindred and tongue and people and nation? The answer is obvious. These cannot be angelic beings but are members of a redeemed company of believers.

On the basis of these considerations therefore, we reject the interpretation which makes these elders angelic beings.

The Partial Rapture View

This view, held by many otherwise good scholars of the Word of God is perhaps best stated by Selss in his volume on the book of Revelation.

They are "Elders," not only with reference to their official places; for that term is expressive of time, rather than office. The elder is the older man; and in the original order of human society, he was the ruling man because he was the older man. These enthroned ones are elders, not because they are officers, but they are officers because they are elders. They are the older ones of the children of the resurrection. They are the first-born from the dead--the first glorified of all the company of the redeemed--the seniors of the celestial assembly; not indeed with respect to the number of their years on earth, but with respect to the time of their admission into heaven. They have had their resurrection and their translation, in advance of the judgment tribulations, and are crowned and officiating as kings and priests in glory, whilst others, less faithful, are still slumbering in their graves or suffering on the earth. They do not represent, by any means, the whole body of the redeemed, as some have supposed, but exactly what their name imports--the seniors of them--the first-born of the household--the oldest of the family--and hence the honored officials.⁵

According to this view not all believers will be taken at the translation of the Church but only those who are watching for that event who have reached some degree of spiritual attainment that makes them worthy to be included.⁶

Again we are forced to reject this interpretation as false. Our arguments opposing this view, however, are not drawn so much from the context itself as from the broad doctrines of the faith with which it is in conflict.

First of all, the basic argument of this viewpoint as it relates to this particular context is the word "elder" which these men understand to mean "seniors" or "elders" in the sense of advanced spiritual position and condition. We hasten to admit that such an interpretation or translation of the word presbuteros is allowable. The word is used adjectivally to denote seniority several places in the Word of God. However whereas it is true that the word presbuteros may have this meaning, we must not ignore the fact that the word is used more often in the Old and New Testaments in a technical sense. The word "elder" is used over two hundred times in our English Bibles and is to be understood most often, at least in the New Testament, in a technical sense. Pentecost says in this regard,

"In the New Testament the basic concept of elder is that of a representative of the people, one who rules or judges on behalf of God over the people. . . ." ⁷ Hence, to make this word mean "senior" and completely ignore its technical sense and usage in the New Testament is to read a preconceived theological prejudice into a passage rather than formulate one's theological ideas from the text itself.

Secondly, if Selts and his colleagues are right in saying that there is to be a succession in the order in which the saints are to be gathered into glory--some escaping tribulation, some being taken out of it, some being brought in at a later time--we would expect that the symbolical number twenty-four would be increased as each new group was added to the body already in heaven. Yet in examining the usage of this term, "twenty-four elders," we discover an interesting thing. As late as Rev. 19:4 which chronologically must be placed at the close of the tribulation period the elders are still just twenty-four in number. The number is complete throughout the tribulation period (4:4, 10; 5:8, 14; 11:16; 19:4), suggesting that there is not a succession in the order in which the saints are gathered into glory but that they are raptured all at the same time and their number is complete before a single seal of the little book of chapter five is broken.

Thirdly, we believe the partial rapture theory is in conflict with the broad doctrine of salvation itself. "This is more than a mere argument about prophecy," says Walvoord. Salvation is by grace apart from works or human merit and this concept must be taken over into the doctrine of the rapture and resurrection. The partial rapturists transfer both translation and resurrection from a work of grace to a reward for faithfulness. The entire partial rapture theory is based on a works principle which is in opposition to the Scriptural teaching of grace. To accept such a works principle is to undermine the whole concept of justification by faith through grace, the sealing of the Spirit unto the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30). ⁸ The partial rapturist thus minimizes the perfect standing of the child of God and presents himself before God the Father in his own experimental righteousness. The position of the sinner who comes to Christ is thus made something less than perfect in Christ. Surely this kind of works principle is completely antagonistic to the Biblical concept of grace.

Fourthly, to accept the partial rapture view, says Walvoord, is to ignore certain texts which plainly teach the translation of all true believers. ⁹ First Corinthians 15:51 is a good example of this where Paul writes, "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." Since not all living saints are to be included in the rapture of the Church according to the partial rapturists, then logically not all of the dead in Christ are to be resurrected inasmuch as many of them must have died "spiritually immature." Yet Paul says, ". . . we shall all be changed. . ." Again, in 1 Thess. 4:16 the identity of those raised and translated is said to be those who "believe that Jesus died and rose again" (v. 14). Hence, on the basis of these clear texts and many others like them, it is impossible to admit to a partial rapture.

To summarize, may it be said that we have not attempted to be exhaustive in our treatment of this system. This subject is a monograph in itself. However, we believe that on the basis of the propositions presented, this viewpoint is false and without Biblical support.

The Old Testament and New Testament Saints View

Ironside summarizes this view:

The elders in heaven represent the whole heavenly priesthood--that is, all the redeemed who have died in the past, or who will be living at the Lord's return. . . . The

church of the present age and Old Testament saints alike are included. All are priests. All worship. There were twelve patriarchs in Israel, and twelve apostles introducing the new dispensation. The two together would give the complete four and twenty.¹⁰

This viewpoint links Israel and the Church together into one group with no apparent distinctions at the time of the rapture. Whereas this view is based on many other texts than the one under consideration, the principle argument in relation to our text is the symbolism of the number twenty-four. E. Schuyler English, who holds to this view, says that the number twenty-four is twice twelve, the Biblical number of administration, and may signify here the saints of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Such correspondence between the redeemed people of God is seen again in the description of the New Jerusalem. On its twelve foundation stones of the wall of the city are written the names of the twelve apostles.¹¹ Thus in a word this view sees in the twenty-four elders the redeemed of all ages including Old Testament saints as well as believers belonging to the New Testament body of the Church. This view is widely held among many fundamental scholars including many staunch pretribulationists.

Before presenting our arguments which we believe refute this view, perhaps one further word needs to be said. Men who hold this view also, by the very nature of their position, believe that the rapture of the Church has taken place possibly at the beginning of chapter four or somewhere between chapters three and four of Revelation. The elders are viewed as already resurrected, translated and enthroned. In our treatment of this view we shall assume therefore that such an event has taken place and we will attempt to meet these men on their own ground.

First of all then, assuming that the rapture has taken place as these men uniformly hold, these elders cannot represent both Old and New Testament saints because on the basis of I Thess. 4:16 the rapture includes only those who are "in Christ." We believe that the phrase "in Christ" is a technical term of the New Testament that refers to that living indissoluble union with Christ which became possible only from the day of Pentecost onward. From that day onward, it has been the ministry of the Spirit of God to baptize men into the body of Christ so that they are spoken of as being "in Christ." Such was never true of Old Testament saints. Stanton in his analysis of this problem writes:

...Israel, though redeemed is never said to be "in Christ," nor is her eschatology identical with that of the Christian. Such distinctions are glossed over by those who identify rapture with revelation for their view requires that Israel and the Church be raised at the same time.¹²

Hence, if the words "in Christ" are a precise definition of New Testament saints apart from Old Testament believers, then on the basis of this text alone they have no part in the rapture and the elders of Rev. 4:4 cannot include these Old Testament believers.

Secondly, these twenty-four seated elders cannot include Old Testament saints because the Church and its relationship to resurrection and translation is spoken of as a "mystery" and is nowhere taught in the Old Testament Scriptures (I Cor. 15:51-54).

The word for "mystery" is mysterion. In our modern usage of that term, we relate it to that which is mysterious or unknown but the Scriptures use it in a far different sense. Pentecost again gives us some valuable help on the twenty-seven New Testament usages of this word when he writes:

During the New Testament era the early church borrowed this term and its technical sense of an office and infused it with new meaning. Its original meaning of one who is an elderly person or one who is the older of two individuals is never lost, however, and it is used in this way a few times in the New Testament. In the New Testament, however, the basic concept of the word "elder" is that of a representative of the people, one who rules or judges on behalf of God over the people. Normally in the New Testament, the word presbuteros carries with it the idea of an office in the church. As such the "elders" in the New Testament church functioned as pastors (Eph. 4:11), bishops and overseers (Acts 20:28), leaders and rulers (Heb. 13:7; 1 Thess. 5:12) of the flock. They were the regular teachers and it was their duty to expound the Scriptures and to administer the ordinances.¹⁴ Hence, the word presbuteros in its New Testament usage came to designate in particular the highest elected officials in the Church who functioned as overseers in spiritual matters primarily. As such they functioned as representatives of the people.

Inasmuch as elders were the highest elected officials of the New Testament Church and inasmuch as elders were representatives of Christian believers, therefore we conclude that such a designation for the twenty-four elders is particularly befitting such a body as the Church. We are not saying, of course, that this argument in itself is conclusive and that it isolates our view from all the others presented, but we are saying that the term presbuteros better fits the Church than it fits angels, created heavenly beings or some other such beings.

A second argument in favor of our view which sees these elders as representatives of the New Testament Church is their mysterious absence prior to Rev. 4:4. As English points out, Isaiah in his vision of chapter one did not see the twenty-four elders. Ezekiel in his vision of chapter one did not see the twenty-four elders, yet such details as the four living creatures are mentioned. Prior to Rev. 4:1 John exiled on Patmos saw a vision but the twenty-four elders are conspicuous by their absence. Why? Because they were not yet in heaven. These who occupy the twenty-four thrones are a new body and not hitherto present until the rapture of the Church and Rev. 4:4.¹⁵

Thirdly, in favor of this view is the position of the elders. The picture may be described as follows. In the middle, conspicuous and majestic beyond description, is the central throne. In a wide circle around the central throne are twenty-four thrones distinct and glorious but smaller and lower than the central throne. The translators of the Authorized Version rendered this word (thronoi) "seats" but this seems to be a particular kind of seat. These are regal thrones, seats of majesty, dominion and judgment. Back in verse two we saw the erection of this central throne. The imperfect tense of the verb (ekelito) is used here indicating that the throne is in the process of being erected. For this reason this cannot be the eternal throne of God but seems to be a special throne of judgment from which the judgments of the tribulation proceed.

Note further that the same word for "throne" is used of both the central as well as the lower twenty-four. This suggests that there is co-enthronement here with those seated on the lower thrones. To the Church and to the Church alone has been promised this position of co-enthronement. In support of this statement is Rev. 3:21, "To Him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne." By reason of the context the one to whom this promise is given must be a member of the church. Note further a clear passage in 1 Cor. 6:2, "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters?"

As far as can be determined, this promise is never given to the angels. However, the Church will some day be given authority of judging angels according to I Cor. 6:3. Furthermore, it is rather doubtful whether even the Old Testament saints as a body will be privileged to sit on thrones in God's kingdom, because Israel will be subjected to the authority of the throne, not associated with it.¹⁶ We conclude therefore that the ones seated on these thrones must be members of the redeemed and raptured Church.

Fourthly, we believe that these elders are representatives of the Church because they are seen wearing victors' wreaths of gold or rewards achieved through faithful service. The translators of our English versions rendered the word stephanoi by the word "crowns." Our English word "crown," however, translates two Greek words. The one is stephanos. The other is diadema. A stephanos was a wreath made of laurel, oak leaves, ivy, parsley, myrtle, olive, violets or roses. This was the crown that was given to the victor in the Greek athletic games. The runner who first crossed the goal or hurled the discus the farthest or who pinned his opponent to the mat was awarded this wreath of victory. It was given to the servant of the State who was deserving of honor. It was worn at marriage feasts. Thus a stephanos was a symbol of victory, of deserved honor and of festal gladness. The basic meaning of this word then seems to mean a victor's wreath or a crown which had been won in conflict.

The other word translated "crown" in our English versions is the word diadema. It occurs but three times in the New Testament and all three times in the book of Revelation. This is the word from which we get our word "diadem." Its root is the verb diadeo meaning "to bind around." It referred to a blue band of ribbon marked with white which the Persian kings used to bind on a turban or tiara. It was a kingly ornament for the head and was a symbol of royalty. Hence stephanos is a victor's crown and diadema is a royal crown.

In the New Testament this distinction seems to be carefully maintained. The rewards of believers are always spoken of as stephanoi and the crown of royalty is always diadema. That this distinction is carefully maintained at least in the New Testament is pointed out by Trench.

We must not confound these words because our English "crown" stands for them both. I greatly doubt whether anywhere in classical literature... (stephanos) is used for the kingly or imperial crown... In the New Testament it is plain that the... (stephanos) whereof St. Paul speaks is always the conqueror's and not the king's (I Cor. 9:24-26; II Tim. 2:5)... The only occasion on which... (stephanos) might seem to be used of a kingly crown is Matthew 27:20; Cf. Mark 15:17; John 19:2.

Even Robertson and Vincent in their word studies, though doubting whether this careful distinction continued into later Greek, admit that the Apostle John uses the word diadema consistently of kingly crowns and maintains such distinctions. Arndt and Gingrich whose work is the latest in the field of Greek and English lexicons give support to the idea that such a distinction was made between these two words. Stephanos is the victor's crown and diadema is the royal crown.

In the light of these facts, observe that the elders of Rev. 4:4 are wearing stephanoi not diademata. They are wearing victor's crowns which had been won in conflict. Only the redeemed are promised such crowns (II Tim. 4:8; Ja. 1:12).

We conclude therefore that the crowns of these elders and the use of the word stephanos best fits the New Testament Church. Nowhere are angels pictured as wearing crowns. In fact there

would be no reason for their wearing crowns of this sort, since as much as we are able to tell, the angels have no opportunity to earn rewards for spiritual conflicts. It is doubtful as well whether such awards will be made to Old Testament saints inasmuch as the tenor of the Old Testament in relation to the subject of rewards is earthly. The hope of Israel was always one which was directly related to the earth and hence this symbol best fits the New Testament Church.

Fifthly, we understand these elders to be redeemed men because of the white raiment they are said to wear. The expression is periblebemenous en himatiois leukois and seems to be everywhere typical of the righteousness of the saints (Isa. 61:10).

The identical expression en himatiois leukois occurs in Rev. 3:4, 5, where this promise is given to the church at Sardis.

Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; (en himatiois leukois) and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life but I will confess his name before my Father and before the angels.

By reason of the context the ones to whom this promise is given are members of the Church, and hence the white raiment of the twenty-four elders is further proof of their identity as representatives of a redeemed company of believers. They certainly cannot be angelic beings or this verse would have no meaning, for the ones wearing the white raiment are clearly distinguished from the angels.

We are not saying that this argument completely isolates our viewpoint, because it is clear from the Old Testament passage in Isaiah that this same figure is applied to redeemed Israel. A similar expression is used for the tribulation saints in Rev. 7:9, 13, 14. However, if we will remember that God has but one means of saving men we will not be too surprised to see this figure of imputed righteousness remain the same throughout the Bible. This argument does however clearly refute all viewpoints which see these elders as anything but redeemed men.

Therefore, on the basis of these arguments let it be demonstrated that these elders represent the Church as suggested by the song they sing and the important claims that are therein made. Such a song could not be sung by some unknown celestial being but by only those who have experienced for themselves the cleansing power of the blood. That which they sing about can only be true of the Church.

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages we have attempted to show at great length that these twenty-four seated and enthroned elders represent the New Testament Church. These arguments have not been without point however, and now one thing needs to be said to conclude our discussion.

First of all, note that these twenty-four elders who represent the Church are seen by the Apostle John in heaven, not on the earth, sitting on thrones, wearing crowns on their heads, and clothed in white raiment, all of which is proof that they have been resurrected, translated and rewarded. It is

5. J. A. Seiss, The Apocalypse (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Ltd., n.d.), p. 104.
6. J. Dwight Pentecost, op. cit., p. 158.
7. J. Dwight Pentecost, op. cit., p. 252.
8. John F. Walvoord, The Rapture Question (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham Pub. Co., 1957), p. 106.
9. John F. Walvoord, op. cit., p. 125.
10. Harry H. Ironside, Lectures On The Book of Revelation (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1920), p. 82.
11. E. Schuyler English, Re-Thinking the Rapture (Traveler's Rest, South Carolina: Southern Bible Book House, 1954), p. 96.
12. Gerald B. Stanton, op. cit., p. 87.
13. J. Dwight Pentecost, op. cit., pp. 134, 135.
14. Merrill F. Unger, Unger's Bible Dictionary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), p. 296.
15. E. Schuyler English, op. cit., pp. 93-95.
16. J. Dwight Pentecost, op. cit., p. 256.
17. Richard Chenevix Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (London: Macmillan and Co., 1865), pp. 75-78.
18. Alva J. McClain, "The Pretribulation Rapture and the Commentators," Understanding The Times, eds. William Culbertson and Herman B. Centz (Grand Rapids, Mich., Zondervan Pub. House, 1956), p. 207.