

STUDY 6

In Heaven a Throne

Ian Pennicook

In this study I want to make a suggestion and, to a certain extent, it doesn't really matter whether it is technically correct or not. The suggestion is this: the book of the Revelation is describing the reality that is elsewhere represented pictorially in the life and institutions of Israel.¹ Usually the suggestion is put the other way round, that Revelation is a book of vivid imagery and so, of course, it is. But it is more than that, and I suspect that the language John uses is, in a strange way, perhaps more obvious than we may previously have thought.

Take, for instance, the description of the bride of the Lamb in chapter 21:16. The bride, the city, is described as being a cube of 2,400 kilometres in each direction, but having walls only about seventy two metres high. According to 21:11 it 'has the glory of God', and those two factors, its shape and the presence of the glory, suggest that something quite simple is being described:

The interior of the inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high; he overlaid it with pure gold. He also overlaid the altar with cedar (1 Kings 6:20).

And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD (1 Kings 8:10).

So could it be that John is saying that to see the bride of Christ, the church, is to see all that the holy of holies in the temple in Jerusalem typified and that the glory which filled both tabernacle and temple in Israel is now, because it was always, found in this city? This is far more than a rhetorical device. John says this because he has seen it! 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb' (21:9). John has been given to see and to record the reality which lies behind the institutions of Israel. So in chapters 4 and 5 he tells us that he was given to see the true, heavenly sanctuary where all is complete and rich with pure worship. This is the way it was intended to be and this is the way it is! It is not that he is using temple imagery to reach his goal, and I think he is, so much as that the temple and

¹ The vast amount of material dealing with Revelation demonstrates that being dogmatic about technical details will only involve us in debates at various levels, with little likelihood of any final resolution being reached. See, for example, the many commentaries on Revelation which are being produced. As time goes by they seem to demand more and more of writers and readers, with two recent more academic works alone, by Aune, *Revelation* (WBC, vols 52A, 52B, 52C, Word,) and G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998), having a combined 3,000 or so pages. That is not to imply any criticism of these works.

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the tabernacle were themselves images of the real worship, the real throne room of God.

When Moses was on the mountain (Exod. 24:15; cf. Rev. 21:10) he was shown the way he was to construct the tabernacle, the tent where the worship activities were to take place; he saw ‘the pattern of the tabernacle’ (Exod. 25:9). The times he spent there on the mountain were so transforming that later we are told that:

As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him (Exod. 34:29–35).

The presence of God was so overwhelming that it was fearsome to those who were not participants in the worship (cf. Exod. 33:17–34:8). Moses was there, even if a direct vision of the face of God was still denied him, and so the tabernacle was built to express within Israel that great ‘heavenly’ worship. Hence Israel was given the worship (Rom. 9:4). So Israel’s worship, with its cultus, that is, its whole system for worship, with priests and sacrifices and special days and special colors and special clothing and so on, was by no means the final form. It was only the shadow of the substance. Thus Hebrews 8:1–5 says:

Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ²a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. ³For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.’

The heavenly sanctuary is the real sanctuary. It is not merely ahead of us in history; it is always the reality and faith actually participates in it, albeit working through the visible and tangible forms we use. But John, like Moses, saw it and in seeing it he saw all things. He saw true worship; he saw angels and the redeemed and all living creatures overwhelmed in enraptured adoration of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb.

ALWAYS THERE IS THE THRONE

‘There in heaven stood a throne.’ This was not a new observation. Anyone reading the Old Testament scriptures would have realised that the throne of God is repeatedly said to be in the heavens:

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The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all (Ps. 103:19).

Thus says the LORD: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place? (Isa. 66:1).

By ‘heaven[s]’ was not meant the sky, although Ezekiel 1:26 uses that language;² it means that God reigns over all things and, in particular, he reigns over the nations. ‘God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne’ (Ps. 47:8). Also, ‘The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all’ (Ps. 103:19).

But the Old Testament also describes the throne of God from another perspective. Conspicuously, Isaiah says that he saw the LORD sitting on a throne and that his train filled the temple (Isa. 6:1). That the throne was in the temple was not the surprise for Isaiah, as much as was the awareness that the whole earth was full of God’s glory (Isa. 6:3). Ezekiel’s vision of the renewed land and temple included the following:

As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, ⁵the spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. ⁶While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me out of the temple. ⁷He said to me: Mortal, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will reside among the people of Israel forever (Ezek. 43:4–7; cf. 44:4; Isa. 6:5).

The throne in the temple is further defined in the description of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies:

The cherubim spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings. They faced one another; the faces of the cherubim were turned toward the mercy seat (Exod. 37:9).

The cherubim, guardians against access to the sanctuary of Eden (Gen. 3:24), and of the holy of holies (1 Kings 6:23–28) in the temple, stand over the mercy seat, the place where the blood was sprinkled once a year on the day of atonement (Lev. 16:15–16). So while access to the paradise of God is barred,³ when there is propitiation the barrier does not apply for the high priest, the representative of the people (cf. Heb. 6:19–20; Rev. 2:7).

This is what makes the reign of God unique: he reigns from the mercy seat, the place of propitiation:

So the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is *enthroned on the cherubim*. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God (1 Sam. 4:4; cf. 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron. 13:6; Ps. 80:1).

So when John was given to see the throne room, is it possible that what he saw was the archetypal sanctuary, all that in Israel was represented by the tabernacle and temple? If so, that would explain the symbolism of the lampstands. It is not that John has badly explained what he saw but that he saw the sevenfold church, which in Israel

² [æyqir;1 (*laraqī’a*) ‘dome’ or ‘firmament’, cf. Gen. 1:6 etc.

³ Note that the cherubim are placed at the east of the garden. Entry to the temple was from the east (Ezek. 43:4).

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was expressed in the seven-branched menorah. Then there is the altar, not the altar of sacrifice but the altar of incense, the place from which prayer ascends as a sweet odour to God:

Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. ⁴And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake (Rev. 8:3–5).

Of course, the ark of the covenant is there also:

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail (Rev. 11:19).

The ark is there because that is the throne.

If this approach is valid, then we may be able to answer the question concerning why 'the sea was no more' in Revelation 21:1. Certainly there is an evil connotation in Revelation 13:1, where the first beast rises out of the sea, but that is not the only way the word is used. To begin with, in Revelation 4:6, 'in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal'. Then, in 5:13, the sea is as much a source of creaturely worship as the earth, for God made it (Rev. 14:7). Those who conquer the beast also are standing beside a sea of glass mixed with fire, and they are engaged in singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (Rev. 15:2–3). But while John does not apparently define which sea he means, the temple language could cause us to see that he means 'the molten sea' (2 Kings 7:23–26), which 2 Chronicles 4:6 says was for the priests to wash in. It stresses that the washing was so serious a matter that if priests did not wash prior to entering the tent of meeting or engaging in their duties they would die.

Revelation speaks of people dressed in white robes.⁴ Speaking to the church at Sardis, the high priest says:

Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels (Rev. 3:4–5).

The church at Laodicea is counselled to buy white robes to clothe themselves (3:18), while the elders around the throne are dressed in white robes (4:4). I presume that these two churches, Sardis and Laodicea, are being urged to be consistent with the truth of what is required to live in the presence of God.

Another picture is in Revelation 19:11–16. Again, John announces that he is seeing into heaven (Rev. 19:11). There, the rider on the white horse, 'Faithful and True', 'the

⁴ Dan. 7:9 refers to 'the ancient of days' being dressed in white. The significance of Dan. 7 to Rev. 4–5 is dealt with in G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 76–99 and especially pp. 314–16; '[It] is the structure of Daniel 7 that dominates the whole of the Revelation 4–5 vision' (p. 315).

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Word of God' and also identified as 'King of kings and Lord of lords', is shown as putting down the rebellious nations by means of the sharp sword from his mouth. With him are the armies of heaven,⁵ also on white horses, but they are conspicuously different in appearance from their leader. While he wears a robe dipped in blood, they are wearing fine linen, white and pure (Rev. 19:14). The battle is not theirs to fight and win. The description 'fine linen, white and pure', is evidently a reference to the true nature of the armies. Although many take the armies to be angelic beings, in the Revelation only the saints are dressed in white.⁶ The description of the bride in Revelation 19:8 is almost identical, with 'bright' instead of 'white'. Whose blood spatters the rider's robe? We can only speculate, but I suspect that the possibility that it is his own blood is as likely an explanation as others (cf. Rev. 12:11).

What perhaps clarifies the question is Revelation 7:9–14:

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. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' ¹¹And 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, ¹²singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.' ¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' ¹⁴I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out⁷ of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

There is only one way that one can have robes made white, sufficiently white to enter the presence in heaven, and that is by means of the blood of the Lamb. That is why the next sentence indicates that those with white robes are:

... before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them (Rev. 7:15).

The throne in heaven is the centre of all things. Our God reigns! But the significant point is that he reigns from the throne which can only be expressed as the place of atonement, the mercy seat, the place of propitiation. That is why only those made white by the blood of the Lamb, the priestly community freed from their sin by his blood, can stand there and worship him day and night. They can 'pray without ceasing'. They need no 'sea' to cleanse them before they enter for they are clean.

⁵ Literally, 'the armies in the heaven', τα στρατεύματα τα ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (*ta strateumata ta en tō ouranō*). Given that Rev. 19:11 has already referred to John seeing 'the heaven' opened the translation 'heavenly armies' may be presuming more than is permitted. These are armies in the heaven: whether they are angelic or human is determined from other sources.

⁶ Beale comments: '... in the Apocalypse, with one exception (15:6), only saints wear white garments (3:4–5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13–14) ... The saints' garments here and throughout the Apocalypse should also be understood as priestly garments, since the same garments, worn by the heavenly beings, are also apparently priestly in Rev. 15:6; Dan. 10:5; 12:6; and Ezek. 9:2, as are the similar garments worn by Christ in Rev. 1:13. The saints with white robes in 7:9, 14–15 also have a priestly function. Likewise, the "bright, pure linen" of 19:8 is associated with priestly connotations. Christ's followers reflect their representative's priestly character as they accompany him when he executes judgment' (*Revelation*, pp. 960–1).

⁷ Literally, 'are coming out', οἱ ἐρχόμενοι (*hoi erchomenoi*). The translation 'have come out' is as much a theological interpretation as a legitimate translation.

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THE HEAVENLY PLACES

It is possible that, after all this, the language of Revelation may still confuse some of us. That is not a crime, especially given the distance between us and the first readers. But to fail to see the issues involved is tragic for the church in any age. Perhaps that is why we are not dependent on the Revelation to see them.⁸ Apart from Hebrews, there is also the letter to the Ephesians, with its unique phrase, ‘the heavenly places’⁹:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3).

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:20).

... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6).

... so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10).

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12).

The ‘heavenly places’ may tend to sound a bit ‘other worldly’, but when put with all of the material above, we may see that heaven is not a place ‘up there’ or whatever. It is the realm of which our earthly existence is but a part visible to and tangibly experienced by us. The disciples who saw the ‘ascension’ of Jesus did not, surely, see him rise as a person into the sky until he was imperceptible because clouds interrupted their view. They saw, rather, the clouds of glory (the most common use of ‘clouds’ in the Old Testament) hide him from their sight. It was not that he had left them; he had promised not to do so (see Matt. 28:20), but that he was now known only by faith.

The language of Ephesians, then, says that that realm, the unseen real realm, is where all the blessings, or the whole blessing, of God is known. That is because we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. He has been seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly places and we are sharing his exaltation. That we do not see it yet is a matter of some indifference, because the battle we are engaged in is taking place not against human enemies but against enemies who are active in the unseen realm. Like the churches in Asia, we do go through very real and painful attacks, but they are only to be understood from the perspective of the throne of God. Our God reigns! Twice it is promised that we will reign in life (Rom. 5:17; Rev. 5:10), but for the present we are secure in the reign of Christ. We are the declaration by God that the

⁸ It is perhaps surprising to learn that Revelation, along with Hebrews, was very late (4th century) in being accepted as canonical (i.e. part of the authoritative scriptures). Its uncertain authorship and strange style made many hesitant. For a discussion of this process, see chapter 1 of D. W. B. Robinson, *Faith's Framework* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1996).

⁹ The adjective ἐπουράνιος (*epouranios*) occurs 18 times, but 5 times in the phrase ἐν τοῖς ἐπουράνιοις (*en tois epouraniois*) which is translated as ‘in the heavenly places’ and these are found only in Ephesians.

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rulers and authorities in the heavenly places have been defeated and the weak and apparently defeated church stands as evidence of that defeat. Hence their hostility.

But always there is the throne. The accuser of the brethren has been thrown down, because the throne of God is the place where the atonement, the work of propitiation, is central and eternal. And far from us gazing at the holy of holies from a distance, as Israel did, we are now in the presence itself, and not just in the sanctuary but we are that sanctuary. And all the redeemed are a kingdom, priests serving our God and Father.