Reflections on Worship in Revelation 4 and 5

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Worship is a crucial issue in the Book of Revelation. The theme occurs in various places culminating in the Apocalypse’s center vision, the vision of the satanic trinity that is engaged in war against God’s people (Rev 12-14). There the conflict is about worshiping God or worshiping the dragon, the beast, and its image. Worship is expressed in various ways. The Apocalypse mentions among others prostration (Rev 4:10; 5:8, 14; 7:11; 19:4), prayers (Rev 4:5; 8:5), and the singing of hymns. Seven hymns are found in the seal vision (Rev 4:1-8:1), five of them in Revelation 4 and 5. We will now concentrate on these five hymns in their context. However, there are a number of other hymns sung in Revelation.

I. The Five Hymns of Revelation 4-5

In Revelation 4 one encounters different heavenly beings: God who sits on the throne, twenty-four elders, four living beings or cherubim. The main topic of Revelation 4 is God and his throne. No other New Testament book mentions the throne more frequently than the Book of Revelation, and no other chapter employs the term as often as does chapter 4. Revelation 4 describes God and his activities. The two hymns or songs toward the end of this chapter are addressed to the one sitting on the throne. In chapter 5 one again finds God the Father, the four cherubim, and the 24 elders. However this time, the group is enlarged. The Lamb appears, also angels, and finally all living creatures. While Revelation 4 focuses on the throne, Revelation 5 concentrates on the Lamb with the scroll.

The first hymn is presented by the four heavenly beings around the throne: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” (Rev 4:8). After the four beings have sung their “Holy,” the twenty-four elders worship God—second hymn: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (Rev 4:11). Interestingly enough, the third hymn is no longer addressed to God the Father but to the Lamb, Jesus. It is called a new hymn and is delivered by the elders, maybe also by the cherubim: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (Rev 5:9-10). The group of those who praise the Lamb increases. Millions of angels turn toward the Lamb and sing with a loud voice—the fourth hymn: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Rev 5:12). The fifth song is presented by the entire creation and is directed toward God the Father and the Son—Revelation 5:13b: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever!”

A tremendous crescendo is observable as one progresses from one hymn to the next. A heavenly quartet is followed by a chamber choir consisting of twenty-four persons. Probably, both groups unite, forming a larger choir, and they present the longest praise among the five hymns. Next the choir of the heavenly host, consisting of millions of angelic singers, begins to sing the perfect praise of the Lamb. Finally, the entire creation participates. All beings in all spheres of creation glorify God and the Lamb. What else can be done than to respond with “Amen,” to prostrate before the Lord, and to worship God? This is precisely what is described in Revelation 5:14.

II. Theological Insights
These hymns together with their context furnish a number of interesting theological details on worship. This is not all that can and needs to be said about worship. Revelation 4 and 5 reflects a specific situation. Yet principles of worship derived from this passage are important, although a comprehensive theology of worship is not provided. Nevertheless, it would serve humans well to live up to the principles found here.

1. True Worship is Theocentric

The worship scenes of Revelation 4-5 are clearly focusing on God, his “majesty and sovereignty.” Although other beings are mentioned in these chapters, attention is not given to them. The center of worship is God. In addition, the language of Revelation 4 may have political overtones, stressing that not the Roman emperor but only God is Lord. In the Bible and in Revelation, worship is only due to God. Even angels may not be worshiped. When John mistakenly twice tries to worship an angel, this heavenly messenger exclaims: “Do not do it! Worship God!” (Rev 19:10; 22:8-9). Especially in chapter 12-14 the great conflict centers around the issue of worship.

The issue in worship is not primarily whether created beings feel good about it and benefit from what they are doing, whether they are blessed with a memorable experience or are entertained; worship takes place for God’s sake and must be directed to God only. Otherwise it becomes some sort of idolatry.

It is true that the hymns in Revelation 4-5 do not include elements such as petitions, intercession, and confession. These are important, even though they are not included in this specific act of worship. To some extent, they may be reflected in the prayers of the saints (Rev 4:8) which are administered before the throne of God. But no matter what, true worship is theocentric. When the heavenly beings praise the Almighty as the Lord of the universe and fall down before him, laying their crowns before the throne (Rev 4:9-10) they provide an example for humans to emulate.

2. True Worship is Trinitarian

The five hymns consist of three groups. The first two are addressed to God the Father, the next two to the Lamb, and the last one to God as well as the Lamb. There are some similarities between the hymns. Especially the second hymn is similar to the third. Both start the same way: “Worthy are you . . . “ In addition, the same attributes are assigned to the Father and Son. Bauckham points out that the worship of Jesus “leads to the worship of God and the Lamb together (5:13). John does not wish to present Jesus as an alternative object of worship alongside God, but as one who shares in the glory due to God.”

At first glance, the Holy Spirit seems to be missing in this worship setting. But this is not true. He appears in Revelation 4:5 in connection with God the Father, the Creator, and in Revelation 5:6 in connection with Jesus, the Savior. “And I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and the elders, a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth” (Rev 5:6).” Actually the Holy Spirit is so closely linked to Jesus that whenever Jesus is addressed the Holy Spirit is included.

So in reality the hymns of Revelation 4 and 5 seem to take account of all three persons of the Godhead.

Trinitarian worship is important because it is only through the concept of the Trinity that we understand God’s self-sufficiency and love, his creation and salvation.

3. True Worship Maintains the Tension between God’s Immanence and His Transcendence

In Revelation 4 God is pictured as the transcendent God. He is the potentate of the universe. He is almighty and powerful and out of reach of humans unless he chooses to come close and reveal himself. One can only prostrate before him and worship him. He is not a buddy whom humans can tap on the shoulder.

In Revelation 5 God is portrayed as the imminent Lord. He came very close to humanity. Actually, he became one of us, limited, dependent on others, and vulnerable. Again, he deserves all the praise. His self-
condescension and sacrifice are astonishing and puzzling. But humans can lean at his breast and be very close to him. They can choose to be his children and his friends. They may call the Lord Abba. Bauckham points also to Revelation 21 stating that “his nearness to his creation in the language of 21:3-4 is as striking as his transcendence in the vision of chapter 4.”

God is both transcendent and immanent, far and close, the sovereign Ruler and the dearest brother. Aloofness and closeness belong together. Divine transcendence and divine immanence should not be separated. Believers may have an intimate relationship with God while still maintaining awe, reverence, and respect.

4. True Worship Extols the Character and Nature of God

Some of the five hymns of Revelation 4-5 provide insights into God’s character and his very being, praising God for who he is. In Revelation 4:8, God’s holiness is stressed as a foundational divine quality: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.” As in Isaiah the seraphim present a threefold “Holy,” so in this case the cherubim sing a threefold “Holy.” Along with the threefold “Holy” come three different names for God. They stress his covenant faithfulness, his omnipotence, and the fact that in God there is no beginning and end. “The ‘holiness’ of God here points to his separation from the created order. He is the ‘Wholly Other,’ standing above this world and soon to judge it.”

The description of Jesus in the third hymn as slain Lamb, as having purchased humans and as having made humans a kingdom and priests reminds the readers of Revelation of a similar statement in the prolog of the book (Rev 1:5-6). There, the work of Jesus is attributed to his love. The fourth hymn points also to divine qualities of Christ. According to Revelation 4-5 love and holiness are major characteristics of God as well as other divine qualities such as “exclusive power,” eternity, and perfection want to be expressed in a worship setting.

5. True Worship Praises God for His Mighty Works

When the “power” (Rev 4:11; 5:12) of God is praised, reference is made to his mighty works. Two major works of God are highlighted in the five hymns, namely creation and salvation. The second hymn praises God as the Creator. The third addresses the work of salvation. The worthiness of the Father consists in being the Creator. The worthiness of the Lamb consists in being the Savior. The third hymn is called a new hymn. As important as creation is, salvation is a new, breathtaking, shaking event. Those who believe in Jesus are free, no longer slaves to sin and their own ego, no longer tortured by guilt, no longer in fear of death or in horror of God. They live in happiness, contentment, and peace. Their salvation has been assured. They have a new status. Why shouldn’t they sing and praise the Lord?

Nevertheless, creation and salvation belong together and are inseparable. One cannot have one without the other unless one creates logical and biblical inconsistencies. Without creation no salvation! Without salvation no new creation! “Where faith in God the Creator wanes, so inevitably does hope for the resurrection, let alone the new creation of all things. It is the God who is the Alpha who will also be the Omega.” True worship will concentrate on both. This becomes evident when the last message for this world is being presented beginning with Revelation 14:6-7. The eternal gospel appears in the context of the creation account.

6. True Worship is Objective, not only Subjective

That the hymns of Revelation 4 and 5 are not just recited but actually found in a musical setting is evident in Rev 5:8-9. The third hymn is called “a new song” and harps or lyres are mentioned. The concept of objective versus subjective worship is closely related to our first point, the theocentricity of worship. Undoubtedly, worship includes music, especially vocal music. However, when it comes to hymns and songs
they can be either objective or subjective. Objective music and worship focuses on God only. Sorrows and problems of humanity are blended out and are not reflected. A good example is Revelation 4-5.

Subjective music and worship relate the joys and challenges that humans face, reflect upon them, and ask for God’s help and intervention. Both types are important, and it is essential not to lose sight of the objective ones. Today humankind has become the ultimate goal in itself and the ultimate authority. So Christians may also tend to concentrate more on themselves, on their problems and difficulties instead of focusing on the Lord. However, by doing this the inner peace and serenity is lost. The two chapters Revelation 4 and 5 remind the readers of the Apocalypse and that at times it may be very helpful and proper to concentrate on God and the Lamb only.

7. True Worship is Universal and All-Encompassing

Worship has a private and corporate side, even a universal and cosmic dimension. Worship is not limited to individual devotion, although personal worship is crucial. Worship is not even limited to corporate worship as, for instance, experienced in church. In some way, worship connects the worshiper to the heavenly worship and the heavenly worshipers. While in Revelation 4 and 5 worship begins close to the throne of God and extends from there to the entire heavenly realm, all creatures are finally included, obviously even those living on planet earth. One could argue that Revelation 4 and 5 may point to the final eschatological worship, but Revelation 5 seems to focus on Christ’s enthronement as heavenly priest-king. “Commentators generally understand Revelation 5 as an enthronement scene . . .” So by worshiping the Godhead here and now worshipers may know that they are part of a larger worshiping community.

The passages may also affirm that it is impossible and improper to exclude people from worshiping God. As the gospel is accessible and available to all, so is worship. Paul’s statement may apply here, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Worship in Revelation 4 and 5 has a past dimension as it is linked to Christ’s enthronement subsequent to his ascension. Yet the hymns have been used and are still used in Christian worship. Some of the five hymns are, for instance, found in G. F. Handel’s Messiah. So they are applied to another situation and have a present dimension; and who knows if they have also a future dimension.

8. The Completion of the Plan of Salvation is Set into a Worship Setting

The seven seals are closely related to Jesus. The One who is exalted through the hymns in Revelation 5 is the One who opens the seals and allows them to take place. When John initially saw the sealed scroll that nobody was able to open until the Lamb was found who was worthy to do so, he wept. It is hardly perceivable that John wept for curiosity sake. Obviously the opening of the scroll had something to do with the completion of the plan of salvation. The seals describe human history after the cross. Subsequent events on earth take place, beginning with the proclamation of the gospel—represented by the rider on the white horse (first seal)—that finally leads to the heavenly signs of the Second Coming and the parousia itself (sixth seal), as well as the time thereafter (seventh seal).

The completion of the plan of salvation is placed into a worship setting as the hymns in Revelation 5 and the hymns in Revelation 7 indicate. Indeed, the sixth hymn of the seal vision is expressed by the redeemed who “cry out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’ ” (Rev 7:10), followed by the angelic choir—seventh hymn—saying: “Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanks giving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen” (Rev 7:12). So, salvation is expressed by the third, fourth, and sixth hymn. Beale observes that the redeemed “ . . . celebrate an eschatological feast of
tabernacles in heaven to commemorate joyfully their end-time salvation which is attributed to ‘God , who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’ . . . The ‘overcomers’ acknowledge that their victory is really God’s victory . . . “

Here we have unmistakably a future dimension of worship, although the verb “to cry out” [in praise] is used in the present tense. This is a historic present. While here referring to the future, the present tense also points to continuing action. God/Jesus will be praised for final salvation, and most likely this exultation will continue in eternity.

Believers are called to appreciate salvation already here and now, as a present and yet also as a future reality. Their lives may be permeated by the constant remembrance of the fact that they are already saved and will finally be saved. It was the Lamb who has conquered and won the decisive victory (Rev 5:5). Therefore they live their lives constantly in the context of worshiping the Godhead for their salvation.

9. True Worship Provides a New Perspective to Life on Earth

The Book of Revelation begins by locating John on the island of Patmos under difficult circumstances. He is a “fellow partaker in the tribulation” and has to be perseverant (Rev 1:9). But in the beginning of chapter 4 John sees an open door in heaven and is invited to come up there, experiencing heavenly worship before he encounters the challenges on earth.

By reporting what he has seen, John allows his audience to perceive what is going on backstage. This is very important. Before one begins dealing with the problems on earth—in this case the opening of the seals—it is essential to take a look at God and to worship him. Whosoever has “seen” God, his dwelling place, and his work for humanity first, has gained the right perspective to handle everyday life. Such a person knows how to interpret what is going on in this world. Such a person knows that behind the scenes there are ultimate realities working out the plan of salvation.

At the end of the seal vision, John again describes heavenly events. That means: Those who have the right perception of life begin contemplating God and worshiping him (Rev 4 and 5). Then they turn toward the realities of life on earth (Rev 6), and again they look ahead to the heavenly realm (Rev 7). Worship allows them to concentrate on the ultimate reality from which their lives in this world receive meaning. In other words, focusing on the Lord in worship will tremendously help believers to cope with their worries and anxieties, their sorrows and challenges, their pain and suffering. The heavenly dimension allows believers to look beyond the earthly and be filled with hope, joy, and peace.

10. True Worship Is Continuous and Unending

Revelation 4:8 stresses that the worship of the heavenly being is unceasing. They praise God day and night which means that their worship is continuous and unending. John “employs human terminology in expressing the concept of eternity.” This seems also to be true for the other heavenly beings. Osborne states that “the eternal God is extolled for all time for his majesty and power.”

But ceaseless worship does not mean inactivity in other respects. The wings of the four heavenly beings point to the “swiftness to carry out the will of God.” Their eyes imply supreme intelligence, alertness, and “probably wakefulness.” They are involved with the opening of the seals (Rev 6:1, 3, 5, 7). Angels are also actively pursuing God’s concerns by mediating his word (Rev 1:1), proclaiming messages (Rev 5:2), holding back winds (Rev 7:2), sounding the seven trumpets (Rev 8:6) which bring divine judgments on those who dwell on earth, waging war against demonic forces (Rev 12:7), pouring out the seven plagues on earth (Rev 16:1), imprisoning Satan (Rev 20:1), and revealing the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:9). Unceasing worship and unceasing service go hand in hand.

This heavenly worship and activity sets an example for God’s people on earth. They are called to “unceasing” worship and “unceasing” service already today. Their lives are to be permeated by daily praising
and exalting God. What they do honors God and serves others in some way or another (Rev 2:2-3, 19; 1 Cor 10:31). Worship of God is not just a future activity of the people of God. It is their daily practice and working itself out in practical ways of service and ministry.

So the heavenly worship of Revelation 4 and 5, emulated by the Lord’s church on earth, prepares for the final call to humanity: “Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters” (Rev 14:7).

Conclusion

The Apocalypse contains an important theology of worship. Major elements are found in the hymns of Revelation 4 and 5 and their context. Much more can be said. But it would be well for believers to remember the following crucial elements:

▪ True worship is theocentric.
▪ True worship is Trinitarian.
▪ True worship maintains the tension between God’s immanence and his transcendence.
▪ True worship extols the character and nature of God.
▪ True worship praises the works of God.
▪ True worship is objective, not only subjective.
▪ True worship is universal and all-encompassing.
▪ The completion of the plan of salvation is set into a worship setting.
▪ True worship provides a new perspective to life on earth.
▪ True worship is continuous and unending.

May God’s people learn truly to worship the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ the Lamb that was slaughtered and has redeemed them, and the Holy Spirit, speaking to Christ’s universal church (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

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2 The throne is found there fourteen times and refers to God’s throne twelve times.
4 See Horn, 43.
5 See Osborne, 240.
6 Osborne, 243, calls it blasphemy. He goes on to say: “Any person or thing that comes to be more than God in our lives constitutes idolatrous worship. God must be all and in all in our lives.”
7 David E. Aune, Revelation 1-5, Word Biblical Commentary 52A (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1997), 360, states: “Three hymns in Revelation begin with the adjective ἀξιός, ‘worthy’ (4:11; 5:9, 12), all within 4:1–5:14. The first ἀξιός ἠλ, in the second-person singular du-Stil, ‘thou style’ . . . , introduces a hymn to God in 4:11, while the second ἀξιός ἠλ introduces a hymn to the Lamb in 5:9. There is then a switch to the third person, the so-called er-Stil, ‘he style’ . . . , and the phrase ἀξιός ἐστιν in 5:12 introduces a second hymn to the Lamb. . . . This hymn in vv 9–10 is addressed to the Lamb, and so might appropriately be designated ‘the Song of the Lamb’. . . .”
11 Cf. Horn, 44-45.
Bauckham, 45, describes false worship, namely the worship of the beast as “false precisely because its object is not the transcendental mystery, but only the mystification of something finite.”

Bauckham, 46.

Cf. Aune, 307, who also suggests that in Revelation 4:8 “the threefold repetition of ‘holy’ is connected, perhaps by design, to three characteristics of God.” See also Stephen Smalley, The Revelation of John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 123.

Osborne, 237.

Aune, 365, notes: “Each of the seven prerogatives is a metaphorical application to Christ of qualities that belong properly to God . . .”


Bauckham, 48, maintains, “The one God is defined as the One who brought all things into existence. As Creator, he alone has ultimate power over everything. As creator, to whom all creatures owe their very being, he alone is to be worshipped. . . . The understanding of God as Creator was not only integral to Jewish and Christian monotheism; it was also essential to the development of Jewish and Christian eschatology.”

Horn, 52, stresses that “The death of Jesus, rather than his life and ministry, is the primary focus of John’s Christology. As indicated in the hymns, Jesus’ slaughter results in the redemption of people of God, and his death is the means by which believers overcome.”

Osborne, 260-261.

Bauckham, 51.

The kitharas occur in two other important worship settings (Rev 14:2; 15:2).

This may be what Osborne calls the “horizontal” dimension: “There have been scores of articles and books on the crisis of worship in the church today. The average service so centers on the horizontal life of the Christian that the experience of awe in the worship of God, the feeling that we are in his presence, is all too often lost” (243).

See Beale, 357.

Kistemaker, 193, relates the story when in 1743 Handel’s Messiah was performed for the first time in the presence of King George II. “… the king rose from his seat when he heard the Hallelujah chorus. By rising with bowed head, he indicated that not he but Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords.”

This has nothing to do with so-called multiple fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecy.

Beale, 348, states: “He [John] is in despair particularly because it appears to him that the book’s seals cannot be broken and that God’s glorious plan will not be carried out.” For an extensive discussion of the scroll see Ranko Stefanovic, Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation, second edition (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2009), 171-183. He considers the scroll to be “the scroll of God’s eternal covenant.” “It is . . . symbolic of the sum and substance of God’s plan and purpose for the human race and the entire universe” and “contains judgments and salvation” (180).

In Rev 12:10 and 19:1 other hymns occur, praising salvation. The hymn sung at the sea of glass (Rev 15:4), which is called the “song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb” (Rev 15:3), praises the great deeds of God and his righteous acts. Although language pertaining to salvation does not directly occur, it is clearly referring to salvation from all enemies. This hymn has a future dimension.

Beale, 431.

Cf. Smalley, 192.

Salvation includes among others deliverance from sin, God’s victory attributed to us, and deliverance from enemies. See Osborne, 320.

Kistemaker, 192.


Osborne, 236.

Mounce, 125.


See Smalley, 123.