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Revelation's Throne Scenes

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Introduction

The word “throne” (Gr. *thronos*) occurs fifty-four times in the NT. Forty-four of these occurrences are in the book of Revelation. By my analysis there are seven throne-room scenes, related to the heavenly sanctuary, in the book of Revelation (Rev 4-5; 8:2-6; 11:19; 15; 16:17-17:3; 19:1-10; 21:5-11). A general introduction about the world view and structure of the book of Revelation is in order before we examine these scenes.

World View of Revelation (Rev 12). It is vital to grasp the world view of Revelation. It deals with the cosmic controversy between God and Satan. Everything in the book has something to do with this controversy. In its literary structure chapter 12 forms the apex of the book, providing an overview of the cosmic controversy in just seventeen verses. The woman represents those who follow God (cf. Jer 6:2, Matt 25: 1); the dragon represents Satan (Rev 12:9); Michael refers to Christ in His pre-incarnate state (cf. Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1, Jude 9). The controversy erupted in heaven. “And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven” (Rev 12:7-8, NIV). Satan was originally a covering cherub in heaven. Subsequent to his expulsion, he took the guise of a serpent and tempted Eve in Eden (see Gen 3:1-7; Ezek 28:11-16), bringing sin into the newly created earth.

While Revelation 12:7 alludes to Satan's initial expulsion, the passage emphasizes a later fall of Satan. “The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him” (vs. 9). When was that? The answer follows. “Then I heard a loud

GULLEY: REVELATION'S THRONE SCENES

voice in heaven say: ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb . . . ’” (vss. 10-11). This moral fall took place at the death of Christ. Calvary forever hurled Satan down. Here is the climax of the cosmic controversy. Satan was decisively defeated. Nothing he does in subsequent time can change that fact. Satan’s defeat is irreversible.

Calvary is also “deliverance day” for Christ’s followers. He died for them so that they could be saved. Hence, the basis for a double judgment took place at Calvary: (1) the defeat of Satan and the enemies of God’s people, and (2) the deliverance of God’s people. This double destiny, decided in Christ’s death, s people. This double destiny, decided in Christ’s death, determines all human history, and is being worked out in that history and in the eschatology of the book of Revelation. The Calvary-judgment moves toward the end-time deliverance of the saints and the destruction of all their enemies. Some of the throne-room scenes introduce the implementation of judgments that issue from the judgment day at Calvary.

Foundational Literary Structures. Richard M. Davidson¹ and Jon Paulien² have convincingly demonstrated two inherent literary structures in the book of Revelation: the Hebrew sanctuary and its festival year. Both are found to compliment the other, showing an unfolding of the plan of salvation on a linear line (as one reads through the prophecies; see my article, “Revelation 4-5: Inauguration or Judgment?” in this volume).

Two important points should be noted. First, these two structures (sanctuary and festivals) show the prophecy unfolding across the Christian era to the earth made new. Both, thereby, indicate a historicist viewpoint. Second, both structures agree with the dividing line between the historical and eschatological sections of the book, as follows:

History	Eschatology
Sanctuary sequence; lampstand, altar of incense.	Ark of the covenant (11:19).
Festival structure: Passover, Pentecost, Trumpets.	Day of Atonement (13-20; 8-11).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

A Real Temple/Sanctuary in Heaven. The seven throne-room scenes take place in the heavenly sanctuary. I concur with Davidson that there is a correspondence of literal reality between the earthly sanctuary type and the heavenly temple/sanctuary antitype, because the heavenly is “the *original, preexistent prototype*” of the earthly (Exod 25:40; cf. Heb 8:5).³

Demythologization of the reality of the heavenly sanctuary is no better than Bultmann’s work of demythologizing divine metaphysics and miracles. As Davidson rightly concludes, “the heavenly sanctuary is not a metaphor for heaven, but a place *in heaven*.”⁴ Although there is a necessary intensification of the earthly type in the heavenly temple/sanctuary antitype, it is a real place in heaven, just as the earthly sanctuary/temples were real places on earth. There is a necessary “literal reality” in the correspondence between the heavenly original and the earthly copy. There is a spatiotemporal correspondence. The heavenly temple/sanctuary is no more to be identified with the entirety of heaven than is the earthly sanctuary to be identified with planet earth (cf. the NIV translation of Heb 9:24). The heavenly temple/sanctuary is as real as the daily and yearly ministries of Christ.

The heavenly temple mentioned in Hebrews is not rooted in Platonic dualism (with its belief in the timelessness of God) but in the OT sanctuary/temple types. Greek dualism speaks of the supra temporal as the real (*kosmos noetos*) and the temporal as a mere shadow (*kosmos aisthetos*). In Scripture the sanctuary/temple types are never considered a shadow of the heavenly reality, but a model, or miniature copy, of the heavenly reality, even though a small representation of that vastly escalated original (Exod 25:40). The distinction between the heavenly temple reality and the earthly types is never one of literal/symbolic, but one of literal/literal correspondence.

Throne-Room Scenes

Against this background we now wish to consider the throne-room scenes of Revelation. Some of the scenes are depicted in the historical division of the prophecy, and some are placed in the eschatological division. They have to do with Christ in His post-resurrection ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, both with His intercessory and judicial roles. All the scenes relate to the working out of the deliverance/destruction accomplishments of Calvary.

The throne-room scenes introduce seven sections of the book. The first two have to do with historic time; the third introduces an

GULLEY: REVELATION'S THRONE SCENES

overview of cosmic history. The next three introduce eschatological events, and the last one introduces eternity in the new earth. In this way, the reader moves from history to eschatology to eternity as the prophecy is read in sequence. I suggest the following units:

1. Introduction to the seven seals (Rev 4-5).
2. Introduction to the seven trumpets (Rev 8:2-6).
3. Introduction to the cosmic controversy chapter (Rev 11:19).
4. Introduction to the seven plagues (Rev 15).
5. Introduction to the fall of Babylon (Rev 16:17-17:3a).
6. Introduction to the Second Advent (Rev 19:1-10).
7. Introduction to the new earth (Rev 21:5-11a).

Kenneth Strand includes Revelation 1:10b-20, and sees the book composed of four historical-era visions and four eschatological-era visions.⁵ I choose to omit Revelation 1:10b-20 as it seems to pertain to earth, rather than to the heavenly sanctuary. This is seen by the fact that the seven golden lampstands are detached from each other and do not form the single sanctuary menorah, and serve to represent the seven churches on earth (Rev 1:13, 20). Strand is right, though, to see in these introductory throne-room scenes the theme of victory.

First Throne Room Scene (Rev 4:2; 5:1). As my previously mentioned article deals with this first throne-room scene, I will only say here that it sets the stage for all the others. It introduces Christ as the King/Priest, inaugurated on His Father's throne as a coregent to oversee human history, to intercede and empower His church, to defend the saints in the pre-advent judgment, and to deliver them and destroy their enemies in the Second Advent. It is this King/Priest who is revealed throughout the rest of Revelation. The Lamb, because of His victory at Calvary, is enthroned by God before He opens the seven seals.

Second Throne-Room Scene (Rev 8:2-6). The second throne scene is depicted before the seven trumpets series proceed. Again, before events on earth are given, a view of events in heaven are presented. An angel offers the prayers of the saints at the altar of incense in the first apartment of the heavenly sanctuary (vss.3-4). The prayers of His saints are important to Christ. They are apparently prayers for help in this troubled world where Christians suffer persecution. The vision shows how responsive to God's people are those who work in His temple.

The angel then took a censer, filled it with fiery coals from the altar, and hurled it onto the earth, "and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake" (vs. 5). These are

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

judgments sent to earth on behalf of the saints during the historical period. The throne-room scenes show that angels are active in helping humans on earth, answering their prayers for help with judgments on their enemies. This seems to be a proleptic insight into the final Armageddon judgments (16:12-21).

Excursus: Role of Angels in Revelation. Angels are mentioned sixty-eight times in the book of Revelation. Each of the seven churches is said to have an angel (2:1-3:22). Christ gave the contents of Revelation to John through an angel (1:1; 22:6,16). There are particular messages pointed out as angel messages, perhaps to emphasize their importance (14:6-13; 18:1-8). Angels hold back coming winds of strife for a time until the saints are sealed (7:1-3). Seven angels with seven trumpets send judgments on the planet (8:2-9:21; 11:15-18), as do the seven plague angels (15:6-16:21). In the second coming of Christ angels do God's bidding in the final Armageddon destruction of all those who oppose His people (14:19-20; 19:14-21). At the outset of the Millennium, an angel will bind Satan (20:1-3).

Throughout Revelation angels are shown to be mighty messengers sent from the heavenly temple/sanctuary to give hope, help, and deliverance to Christ's followers. By contrast they send judgments of destruction upon their enemies. All angels work out from the heavenly sanctuary, and on the basis of the work of Christ being conducted there. They help to implement in human history the victory of Calvary.

Third Throne-Room Scene (Rev 11:19). "Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of the covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm"(11:19). These judgments seem the same as those mentioned in the second throne-room scene. Here is a sneak preview into the ark of the covenant situated in the second apartment of the earthly sanctuary type (Heb 9:3-4). This introduces the reader to the second phase of Christ's heavenly ministry. To His intercession will now be added the pre-advent judgment. The process of judging (*krisis*) will end in an act of judgment (*krima*). Perhaps the mention of "a great hailstorm" is pointing to the seventh eschatological plague, when one hundred pound hailstones will plunge into the planet (16:21). Again, this seems to be a proleptic insight into the Armageddon-final-judgment.

Fourth Throne-Room Scene (Rev 15). Revelation 14 and 15 have much in common. In Revelation 14 the 144,000 stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion (14:1), which is the heavenly New Jerusalem (Heb 12:22-23). In the OT Mount Zion was always the place of deliverance—the sanctuary in the old city of Jerusalem (cf., Isa 11:9-12;

GULLEY: REVELATION'S THRONE SCENES

Joel 2:32; Mic 4:6-8). In this NT throne-room scene, the heavenly temple/sanctuary is the place of deliverance (Rev 14:3; cf. Dan 12:1). In Revelation 15 John sees those “who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass” (15:2, RSV; cf. 4:6). These are the same end-time saints as the 144,000 named in chapter 14. The power they have withstood is mentioned in Revelation 13:11-17.

Excursus: The Song of Moses; the Song of the Lamb. The song sung by the 144,000 no one else can sing, because they alone have gone through the final events and have been translated (14:3). In Revelation 15:3 it is described as the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. The song rings out, “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (15:3-4).

This song reminds us of the one sung in the first throne-room scene. It is a song about the Lamb. In Revelation 5 it was a song about His sacrifice. Now it is a song about his mighty acts in the plagues. It is echoed in Revelation 16:5. “You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged” (Rev 16:5). The slain Lamb has the right to judge, because He was judged for all mankind in bearing their sins on Calvary (Isa 53:1-12; John 3:16; 2 Cor 5:21).

These seven plagues are spoken of as “God’s wrath” (15:1). While the plagues pound the planet, “the temple [is] filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed” (15:8). All judgments from God during the Christian era come from the temple/sanctuary in heaven, and it is there that the pre-advent judgment session convenes. The final verdict simply issues from that session, as indicated in Daniel 7.

Why is the song of the Lamb also called the song of Moses? (15:3). God’s end-time people will face a world against them (13:3, 11-17), just as Israel faced the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. “They were terrified and cried out to the Lord” (Exod 14:10). “Moses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only be still.’” (Exod 14:13-14).

The utter destruction of the Egyptians and the total deliverance of God’s people is a type of what will happen in the eschatological global judgments (Rev 16-19). Here we have the twofold judgment,

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

“destruction/deliverance,” that took place at Calvary and will be repeated in the eschatological climax of the cosmic controversy during the Armageddon judgment.

The song of Moses exclaimed, “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation” (Exod 15:1-2). So the songs of Exodus 15 and Revelation 15 tell about the great judgments of Christ and His mighty deliverance of His people against overwhelming odds. There is no murmur about the awful ordeal the saints are to go through. The throne-room scenes lift the saints above the challenges of history to see the Lamb who was slain, the Lamb who delivered in the Exodus, and the Lamb who will deliver His people out of the greatest time of trouble ever to impact the planet in the end-time (Dan 12:1). They are Christ-centered and not crisis-centered believers.

Fifth Throne-Room Scene (Rev 16:17-17:30). In the previous section we noted that seven angels, with the seven last plagues, deliver to planet-earth the completion of God’s wrath (Rev 15:1, NIV). This is where the next throne-room scene begins. “The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘It is done.’ (16:17). Here God declares it is over. Then comes the eschatological earthquake, like none before it. Islands and mountains are affected. One hundred pound hailstones pound the planet (16:18-21). This is the judgment on Babylon the Great, the power that opposed God and His saints in the end-time. This is the Armageddon judgment.

Then, one of the plague angels says, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries” (17:1-2). This woman is “drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus” (17:6). The punishment of Babylon is further given in Revelation 17-18. The picture of this judgment on the persecutors of God’s end-time saints is to give them courage to face the final events. Just as God overthrew the Egyptians who wanted to destroy His people at the Red Sea, so God will destroy those who pass a death decree on His end-time people (13:15).

Sixth Throne-Room Scene (Rev 19:1-10). By the sixth throne-room scene the singing has given way to shouting. A great multitude cry out, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants” (19:1-2). As it said in the previous

GULLEY: REVELATION'S THRONE SCENES

chapter, “God has judged her for the way she treated you” (18:20). Here the multitude rejoice in the judgment acts of God on the enemies of His end-time saints.

The 24 elders respond to the shout of the vast multitude and cry, “Amen, Hallelujah!” (19:4). And, “Then a voice from the throne” says “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both small and great!” (19:5). Then the “great multitude” shouts out, “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (19:6-7).

The Lamb is the Bridegroom. And “the wedding supper of the Lamb” is about to take place (19:9). This worship of Christ for His judgments on the enemies of His saints is the focus given in the throne-room scene before the Second Advent is portrayed in the following verses (19:11-21). This suggests that the final persecutions of the saints take place during the *wedding day*. I believe this *wedding day* (not the suppers) is concurrent with the Day of Atonement. Atonement means “at-one-ment.” It is during the wedding day that the two (Christ and His followers) are becoming one. During the final times of trouble, the bride ever more fully rests in the Bridegroom. At the Second Advent the Bridegroom whisks His bride from planet earth and takes her to heaven to the wedding supper of the Lamb (1 Thess 4:16-18). What an encouraging scene for end-time saints facing persecution! (Dan 12:1, cf. Matt 24:9-12; Rev 13:15-17; 20:4-5).

The wedding of the Lamb at the throne is an important contribution to the question of where the millennium takes place. It takes place in heaven (Rev 21:9-10, cf. Dan 7:13-14; Luke 12:35-40). Thus, Christ “is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him” (Rev 1:7, cf. Matt 24:30). His saints meet Christ in the air at His return (1 Thess 4:16-18), and not on the ground (Matt 24:23-25). Jesus promised that He was going to prepare places for His saints in heaven when He ascended, and that He would come again to take them to where He lives in heaven (John 14:1-3). This rendezvous in heaven and the great hallelujahs ringing throughout heaven are the focus of the sixth throne-room scene.

Seventh Throne-Room Scene (Rev 21:5-11a). Babylon and the New Jerusalem are literal cities, but they seem to have a symbolic meaning, too. Babylon represents those opposed to God’s people; the New Jerusalem represents God’s people. Babylon is “the mother of prostitutes” (17:5). She unites with the kings of the world (17:2). By contrast, Christ’s followers unite with the King of kings.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

One of the plague angels says, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” Then he shows John the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth (21:9-10). The phrases “wedding of the Lamb” (sixth throne-room scene) and the “wife of the Lamb” (seventh throne-room scene) indicate the intimate relationship between Christ and His people, compared with those who seek after political powers for support. Here’s a message for God’s people. What bridegroom worth his salt wouldn’t stand up for his bride, especially on his wedding day? So these throne-room scenes show that Christ will have the last word in eschatological time. He will stand up for His bride, His wife—just as He did at Calvary. Her enemies will be destroyed. She will be delivered—for the Lamb has already accomplished this in His death. It’s only a matter of time until Calvary is subjectively realized.

The final throne room scene also introduces the new earth. “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” (21:5). Then He said, “‘It is done’” (21:6). These are the same words said in the fifth throne-room scene (16:17). Now the judgments are over. Here the new earth is present. Christ says He is the Alpha and Omega and offers the water of life to His people (21:6), saying, “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son” (21:7).

Here the throne-room scene is on earth. For “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (21:3). Hitherto, the throne room scenes are in heaven, and show that God is in control of human history. Now the throne-room scene shows that God is with His people in the earth made new. That is the ultimate future ahead—not the persecutions that will engulf them in final events on planet earth.

Excursus: God’s Judgments. Judgments of God are a part of each of the throne-room scenes, except the first, which has to do with Christ’s inauguration as King/Priest in the heavenly temple/ sanctuary (4-5). This combined focus on judgments (historical and eschatological divisions of the book) reveal the acts of the King/Priest that follow His enthronement in the first throne-room scene. He stands up for His saints against their enemies. The same Christ who died for them also defends them.

Judgments come to implement the judgment of Calvary. Properly understood, Calvary provides our King/Priest the authority not only to intercede in behalf of repentant sinners, but also to pass judgment on the rejecters of divine mercy. The two sides in the cosmic controversy meet at Calvary. Human beings either accept or reject what Christ accomplished there for them. This is what is worked out

GULLEY: REVELATION'S THRONE SCENES

in all subsequent history, throughout the book of Revelation, for it is the Crucified One who administers the deliverance/destruction components of Calvary. This is the ultimate work He does as King/Priest.

Saints on Thrones

Apart from the throne-room scenes that introduce segments of the prophecy, a couple references are made to redeemed persons sitting on thrones. During the Millennium in heaven, John says, "I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge" (20:4). "They will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years" (20:6). Like the 24 elders during the Christian age (4:4), the redeemed after the Second Advent, during the Millennium, will be seated on thrones as judges. They will be given opportunity to see why the wicked are not in heaven.

There are three sequential phases of the final judgment: the pre-advent phase (Dan 7:9-10, 13-14), the millennial phase (Rev 20:4; 1 Cor 6:2-3); and the post-millennial phase (Rev 20:11-15; Matt 25:31-46). Through these three phases of final judgment all created beings will have opportunity to see that God is just in His judgments, and that in the light of the judgment for all made at Calvary, nothing more could have been done to save mankind. The pre-advent judgment is for the benefit of all unfallen beings, the millennial for all the redeemed, and the post-millennial for all the lost.

Then, in agreement with Nels Ferre,⁶ G. C. Berkouwer,⁷ William Barclay,⁸ Edward W. Fudge,⁹ Hans Kung,¹⁰ John Stott¹¹ and Clark H. Pinnock,¹² I believe Scripture teaches the annihilation of the wicked. The cosmic controversy does have a resolution. The last pronouncement from the throne is "I am making everything new" (Rev 21:5). This could not be possible if hell burned in some corner of the universe, or on some part of the planet. Malachi said, "'Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,' says the Lord Almighty. 'Not a root or a branch will be left to them'" (Mal 4:1). Peter said Sodom and Gomorrah became "ashes" as "an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly" (2 Pet 2:6).

The last mention of God's throne is given in the final chapter. "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

light. And they will reign for ever and ever” (Rev 22:3-5). The redeemed will not only be the wife of the Lamb, but will reign with Him forever. What a future!

Significance of the Throne-room Scenes

If we step back, as it were, and reflect on the theological importance of these throne scenes, we may infer the following guidelines:

1. We should focus on Christ rather than on the crisis.
2. We should look to Christ rather than the passing events.
3. We should see the future as the vantage point from which to interpret the present.
4. We should see that Christ is in control of human history on the basis of His victory at the cross. He reigns as the new Davidic King/Priest with the whole world under His jurisdiction. At Calvary Christ’s death determined the destruction of the enemies of His people and determined the deliverance of His people.
5. We should see (because of the Calvary judgment) it is only a matter of time until the destruction of God’s enemies and the deliverance of the saints will take place.
6. We should see that while Babylon is in an adulterous union with the kings of the earth, God’s people are the bride of the King of Kings.
7. We should see that while the enemies of God’s people rule the world in final events, it is the saints who will rule with Christ forever as His bride, and will be seated on His throne for eternity.

These seven insights put eschatological events in their proper perspective. They focus on the good news of the final events on planet earth. They give courage to end-time saints as we face the greatest time of trouble ever to impact the planet (Dan 12:1).

Notes

* Biblical citations are from the KJV, unless otherwise noted.

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10 Hans Küng, *Eternal Life*, p. 136.

GULLEY: REVELATION'S THRONE SCENES

¹¹ David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), pp. 312-319.

¹² Clark H. Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," *Criswell Theological Review*, Vol. 4 (1990), pp. 246-247; 250-254; *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p. 195.