

The Twenty-Four Elders

Do They Represent the Raptured Church in Heaven?

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It is really rather baffling to watch pretribulationists claim that “**literalism**” leads to pretribulationism, and then in the next breath rely exclusively on **symbolism** to find the rapture in Scripture! Without any rapture in the early chapters of Revelation, pretribulationists point to the twenty-four elders as proof that the entire Church is in heaven prior to the tribulation. The following comments by Thomas Ice, of the Pre-Trib Research Center, are typical.

“The 24 elders of Revelation 4:1-5:14 are best understood as representative of the church. Dr. Charles Ryrie explains:

‘In the New Testament, elders as the highest officials in the church do represent the whole church (cf. Acts 15:6; 20:28), and in the Old Testament, twenty-four elders were appointed by King David to represent the entire Levitical priesthood (I Chron. 24). When those twenty-four elders met together in the temple precincts in Jerusalem, the entire priestly house was represented. Thus it seems more likely that the elders represent redeemed human beings, ... the church is included and is thus in heaven before the tribulation begins.’

If these elders refer to the church, then it would mean at least two things: 1) It would necessitate the rapture and reward of the church before the tribulation and would require a chronological gap for them to perform their heavenly duties during the seven-year tribulation. 2) It would also show that the completed church was already in heaven before events of the tribulation begin.”¹

First, let's look at Ryrie's words that Ice quoted. Ryrie claims that “*elders as the highest officials in the church do represent the whole church (cf. Acts 15:6; 20:28).*” Yet, the two passages he offers as evidence do not support his claim. They do not show that those represented by the elders were present. In fact, just the opposite is the case – those being represented were not present!

¹ Ice, Thomas, The Necessity of an Interval Between the Rapture & Second Coming, <http://millennianet.com/atpro4se/2ndcom.html>

Acts 15:6

6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

Dr. Ryrie's meaning is that "elders" specifically mentioned in heaven means that their presence "represents" the whole Church being in heaven also. Yet, when we look at the context of his proof text, it is clear that the whole church was NOT present. In verse 6, the terms "apostles and elders" are clearly meant to EXCLUDE the rest of the church from this meeting. In verse 4, Paul and Barnabas were before the whole church when a dispute with the Pharisees arose. Then, in verse 6, the Apostles and elders assembled privately with Paul and Barnabas to consider the objections, leaving the rest of the church out of the meeting. Therefore, this passage proves just the opposite of what Ryrie claims. Yes, the apostles' and elders' decision would be binding on the whole church, and one could view them as "representatives" for the whole church. But, when we view the 24 elders in heaven as this kind of "representatives," it is quickly apparent that their presence in heaven does not require the presence of the rest of the church in heaven in order to represent them, any more than the apostles and elders in Acts 15 required the presence of the rest of the Jerusalem church in this meeting in order to "represent" them! On the contrary, it would imply that the rest of the Church is not in heaven, hence the need for representatives! Ryrie next cites the following passage:

Acts 20:28

28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Here again Ryrie's example proves him wrong. This sermon was delivered **to the elders of the Ephesian church in a private meeting**, not to the whole church. Paul distinguished between the elders and the "flock" over whom they were the overseers. Paul, in his address, singled out the elders from the congregation! The rest of the church was not present, only the elders. These verses prove just the opposite of what Ryrie claims! These elders "represented" their respected churches, and neither the Jerusalem nor Ephesian congregations were present. Our "representatives" in Congress represent us as well. But that does not imply that the whole population of the United States is physically present in the Capitol when votes are taken.

Ryrie also appealed to the 24 courses of priests in the Old Testament in support of his view. The priests acted **on behalf of the people** and so are "representatives" of the people in the presence of God in the Temple. But, the whole point of the priesthood was that the people could not directly enter the presence of the Lord. If the 24 Elders are representatives of the Church in heaven, the implication is that the ones they represent

are NOT in heaven. Otherwise, they would not need to be represented! Should we also conclude that the Church will not have access to God directly because of Ryrie's analogy to the Old Testament priesthood? That is where his logic takes us.

The 24 Elders are Angelic Beings

Revelation 5:8-10 clearly shows the 24 elders acting on behalf of believers who are on earth in the tribulation!

Rev 5:8-10

*8 Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, **and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.** 9 And they sang a new song, saying:*

"You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, 10 And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth."

In the KJV and NKJV, it appears from the song sung by the 24 elders that they were "redeemed from every tribe and nation." Since there are more than 24 nations, some might infer that the whole Church is in heaven. However, the KJV and NKJV follow a late variant reading of the Greek text. The older manuscripts support the third person plural. Notice the NASB's correct translation of this passage, where the four creatures and 24 elders are singing in the third person about **another group, redeemed from every nation**, which does not include the four creatures or 24 elders.

Rev 5:8-10 NASB

*8 And when He had taken the book, **the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders** fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.*

*9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, **and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.***

*10 "And Thou hast made **THEM** to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and **THEY** will reign upon the earth."*

Clearly, the 24 Elders viewed themselves apart from those redeemed from every nation – who will reign on the earth. They are singing about all of the saints from every nation, not just a particular remnant of saints. By singing about all of the saints using the third person (they – them), the 24 elders have necessarily excluded themselves from the whole body of the redeemed. They are therefore NOT a part of the Church.

For those who wish to challenge the NASB (and nearly every other modern translation), consider this fact. The 24 elders are not the only ones singing this song! It is a joint choir of the four creatures and the twenty-four elders! Are the four creatures claiming to be “redeemed from every nation?” What nation of human beings has creatures like these? If the KJV is correct here, then the four living creatures are including themselves among the body of redeemed men from the nations!

The four creatures and the twenty-four elders operate in unison in the heavenly worship of God. John observed this earlier in chapter 4.

Rev 4:6-11

*6 Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. 7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle. 8 The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And **they do not rest day or night, saying:***

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!”

*9 **Whenever** the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:*

11 “You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created.”

The form of praise in heaven alternates between the four creatures and the 24 elders. That is, whenever the four creatures repeat their verse of praise, the 24 elders react to them by bowing, casting their crowns, and repeating a different verse of praise. The alternating form of worship is said to continue day and night without ceasing. This kind of praise requires a certain kind of partnership, and implies that the 24 elders are celestial beings like the four creatures. Isaiah witnessed the continuous praise of the four creatures before the throne thousands of years ago, singing the same song.² Revelation states clearly that they do not cease day and night in this form of worship. So, it seems the four living creatures have been in heaven all along worshipping in this manner. Since the 24 elders are continuously reacting to the praise offered by the four creatures, the presence of the 24 elders in heaven is not something unique to the tribulation, but has been going on since Isaiah’s day.

² Isaiah 6:1-3

John was caught up to heaven in the first century. Yes, he was going there to see the future revealed. But, this doesn't seem to begin until the ceremony of the opening of the seals. At first John just described what heaven was like. Then the play began for his benefit. At first, no one even paid any attention to his arrival.

In his description of heaven, John was doing more than telling us what he personally observed. He had just arrived in heaven. How did he know that the four creatures and 24 elders praise God day and night without ever stopping, as 4:8 indicates? That could not be based on his personal observation. He wasn't there long enough to know that from personal observation.

Note the use of the present tense verbs in 4:8-10, describing continuous worship. In other cases where John was simply describing what he personally observed, he used the past tense. In verses 1-6, the verbs are in the past tense in His narrative, indicating John's telling his personal observations. Yet, when elaborating on the activity of the 24 elders and 4 creatures before the throne, John switched to present tense verbs. This switch to the present tense verbs indicates that John wanted to emphasize the perpetual nature of what was going on in heaven. In other words, this is what he observed, BUT, he wanted to let his readers know that it is still going on in heaven even now, years after he saw it! This is what goes on in heaven continuously! He meant, "This is what heaven is like," rather than "this is what I observed." Notice also, that when he got to the prophetic parts (the things that shall be hereafter) he switched back to using past tense verbs in his narrative. This is significant in demonstrating that the perpetual praise by the 24 elders and the 4 creatures was going on in the 1st century, and is still going on today. It is because of this perpetual praise that the seventh seal is so important in and of itself, SILENCE IN HEAVEN. It is the first time there is silence in heaven.

4 Creatures & 24 Elders act as Priests

The activities of both the 24 elders and 4 creatures implies that they are acting **on behalf of Christians** who are not present. Notice that they are offering the **prayers of the saints** before the throne of God.

Rev 5:8

*8 Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, **which are the prayers of the saints.***

There is a clear distinction here between the "saints" (who's prayers are being offered) and those offering them (the 24 elders & 4 creatures). Since the prayers of the saints are

being offered on their behalf by someone else, it seems that the saints are not present. Otherwise, why not act on their own behalf? Why not speak face to face with God, as do those who are already in heaven?

In chapter 8, we see another “angel” doing exactly the same thing. This implies that acting in this priestly function on behalf of the saints is a function of certain angelic beings (rather than men).

Rev 8:3-4

*3 Then **another angel**, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. And he was given much incense, that he should offer it **with the prayers of all the saints** upon the golden altar which was before the throne.*

*4 And the smoke of the incense, **with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand.***

Sometimes it is claimed that the word “elders” is never applied to angels or celestial beings, and therefore must refer to men. The meaning of the word “elder” is indeed applied to angels in Scripture. In the New Testament Michael is referred to as the “arch-angel” (Jude 1:9). The prefix “arch” means chief or high rank, similar to the word “elder.” In the Old Testament, Michael is called “one of the chief princes” (Dan. 10:13). Here again, the word “chief” is a Hebrew word with the same meaning. In fact, this same Hebrew word is translated “eldest” in 2 Chron. 22:1. The word “prince” is also a Hebrew word that refers to high rank. So, the concept of “elder” is definitely appropriate for certain high ranking celestial beings. And wearing crowns and sitting on thrones would certainly be appropriate for rulers or high ranking celestial beings.