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Revelation Text: Chapter 4-5 (The Heavenly Throne Room)

Part three of looking at the text: we enter the heavenly throne room.



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The first verse in Revelation 4 marks an important transition in the book. John sees an open door into heaven and is told to come up. “Up” here is not literal, as if heaven is ‘above us’; it speaks of a higher reality: the invisible realm that is beyond the world that we are able to access through our senses.

It is the second time that John tells us he was in the Spirit. From here on, John will be able to see things from a heavenly perspective.

Till Krech, 2006, Juliusturm - last steps to the light,  
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Prologue	In the Spirit	In the Spirit				In the Spirit		In the Spirit	Epilogue
	Letters	Seals	Trumpets	Signs	Bowls	Babylon	Judgment	Jerusalem	
Setting									
Scene 1									
Scene 2									
Scene 3									
Scene 4									
Scene 5									
Scene 6									
Church Interlude									
Scene 7									

A quick look at where we are in the book: this is the beginning of the second series of seven, the seven seals. In chapters 4 and 5, we are reading the setting or introduction to this series. This introduction is very long, by far the most extensive one. What we get is a peek into the heavenly throne room.



The very first thing John sees in heaven is a throne, verse 2. This is significant. What does a throne symbolize? In itself, as an object, a throne is just a chair, something to sit on. An expensive chair perhaps, but a chair nevertheless. As a symbol, however, it speaks of power and sovereignty. Only the king is allowed to sit on this chair. It is the seat of power.

One important subject in the book of Revelation is the power question: who is in charge? It is not surprising, therefore, that we find many references to a throne in this book. There are approximately 40 references, three times as many as in the rest of the New Testament combined.

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There is someone seated on the throne but John tells us little about him. Like Ezekiel before him, John is reluctant to put his vision of God into words. The one on the throne has the appearance of jasper and carnelian, that's all. This tells us of his majesty and glory but probably does not intend any deeper meaning.

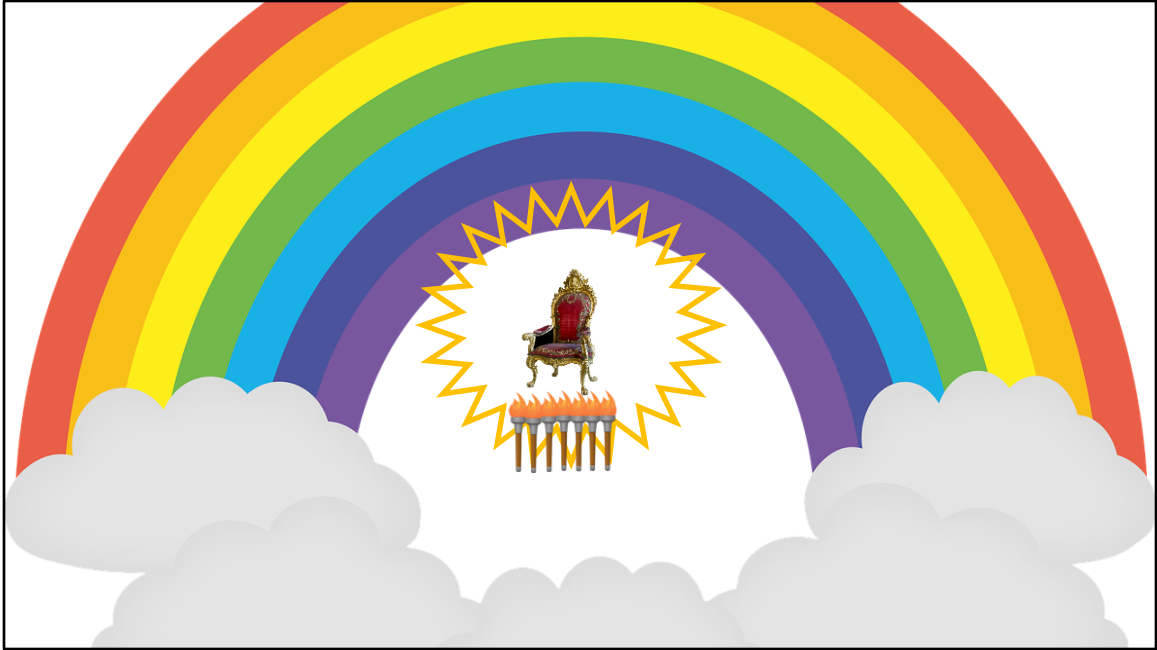


Around the throne, John sees a rainbow. The Greek word is *iris*, which may also mean the iris of the eye. But if its meaning is indeed rainbow here: The rainbow is first mentioned in the Bible after the flood when God promised never to destroy the earth through a flood again. The rainbow is therefore a sign of his covenant faithfulness and his mercy.



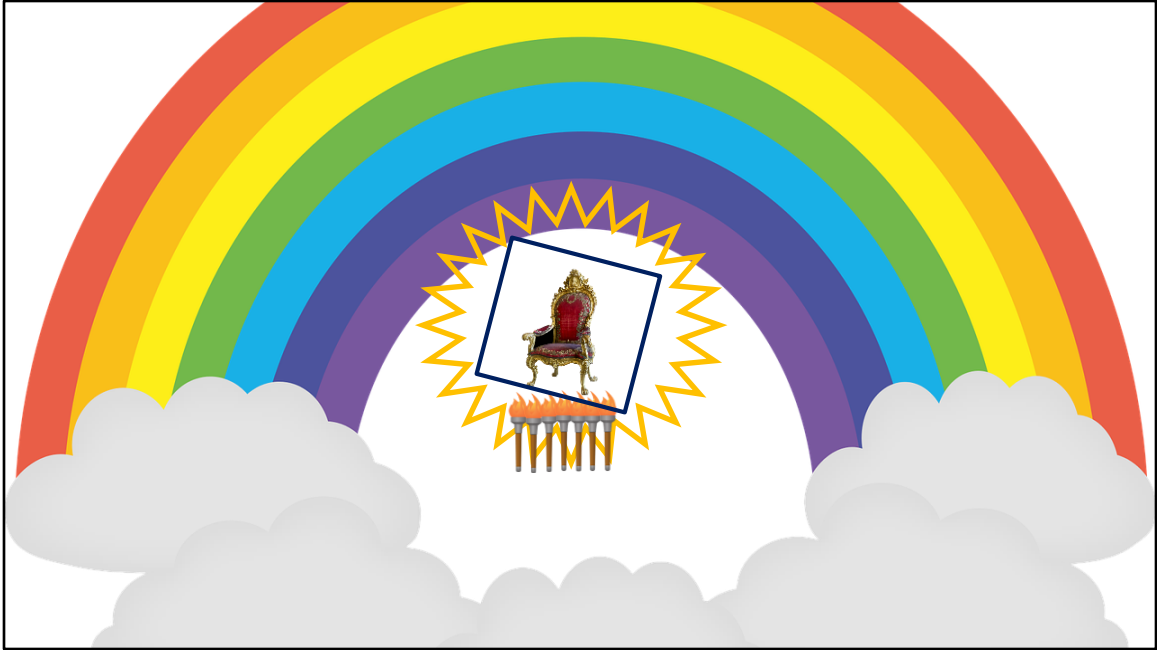
Also around the throne, in verse 4, are 24 additional thrones with 24 elders. Who are they? The number 24 is  $2 \times 12$ . Since 12 is the number of God's people, this suggests the 12 tribes or patriarchs and the 12 apostles. However, these elders appear to be heavenly beings, not humans (they do not count themselves among the redeemed in chapter 5). It seems more likely that they are a special class or group of angels.

Why elders? Every earthly king has a council of advisers. Since God is the greatest king of all, he too has a council of elders. But of course, God does not need advice. For this reason, the elders are not involved in consulting but in worship, as we will see in verse 10 and chapter 5.



In verse 5, John mentions seven torches in front of the throne. This is the sevenfold Spirit of God as explained in the unit on chapter 1. The lightning and thunder that issue from the throne remind us of God's appearance on Mount Sinai. The sea of glass in verse 6 reminds us of the firmament in Genesis 1.





Next, John sees four living creatures, each different in the form of their face: a lion, an ox, one with the face of a human, and an eagle. It is sometimes believed that these are the four Gospels. This idea was popular with the early church fathers. For this reason, in church art, Matthew is often represented by a lion, Mark by an ox, Luke by a human, and John by an eagle. However, nothing suggests that these four are the Gospels. And why would the four Gospels be in heaven!?

These four are similar to the heavenly beings Ezekiel saw in his vision, with the difference that in Ezekiel each being has all four faces. They are cherubim, angelic beings that combine human features with that of various animals.

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Rosemanios. 2005. "The Gate of Nimrud (Metropolitan Museum)" CC BY 2.0

Cherubim first appear in Genesis 3, where they guard the approach to the garden of Eden. Cherubim were guardians. They were well-known in the ancient world, not only in Israel. We find many statues and reliefs that display winged lions and other composite beings. These sculptures and illustrations implied they guard city gates and palaces - and thrones!

Rosemanios. 2005. "The Gate of Nimrud (Metropolitan Museum)"

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Another example, from the city of Nimrud, 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. Such beings were often portrayed next to the king – or to a sacred tree.

Date: ca. 883–859 B.C. Geography: Mesopotamia, Nimrud (ancient Kalhu).

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This panel from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud (ancient Kalhu) depicts a winged supernatural figure. Such figures appear throughout the palace, sometimes flanking either the figure of the Assyrian king or a stylized "sacred tree." The reliefs were painted, but today almost none of the original pigment survives. However, the reliefs themselves retain incredible detail, including intricate incised designs on many of the figures' clothing.

The figure depicted on the panel is eagle-headed and faces left, holding in his left hand a bucket and in his right hand a cone whose exact nature is unclear. One suggestion has been that the gesture, sometimes performed by figures flanking a sacred tree, is symbolic of fertilization: the "cone" resembles the male date spathe used by Mesopotamian farmers, with water, to artificially fertilize female date-palm trees. It does seem likely that the cone was supposed to hold and dispense water

from the bucket in this way, but it is described in Akkadian as a "purifier," and the fact that figures performing this gesture are also shown flanking the king suggests that some purifying or protective meaning is present. The figure is richly dressed, with jewelry including a collar whose front bead appears pomegranate-shaped, a further collar with pendant tassels, armbands, and bracelets, one artificially reversed so that the large central rosette symbols, associated with divinity and perhaps particularly with the goddess Ishtar, are visible on both. Although we cannot know how these elements were originally painted, excavated parallels include elaborate jewelry in gold, inlaid with semi-precious stones. The figure carries two knives, tucked into a belt with their handles visible at chest level.

The figures are supernatural but do not represent any of the great gods. Rather, they are part of the vast supernatural population that for ancient Mesopotamians animated every aspect of the world. They appear as either eagle-headed or human-headed and wear a horned crown to indicate divinity. Both types of figure usually have wings. Because of their resemblance to groups of figurines buried under doorways for protection whose identities are known through ritual texts, it has been suggested that the figures in the palace reliefs represent the *apkallu*, wise sages from the distant past. This may indeed be one level of their symbolism, but protective figures of this kind are likely to have held multiple meanings and mythological connections.

Figures such as these continued to be depicted in later Assyrian palaces, though less frequently. Only in the Northwest Palace do they form such a dominant feature of the relief program. Also unique to the Northwest Palace is the so-called Standard Inscription that ran across the middle of every relief, often cutting across the imagery. The inscription, carved in cuneiform script and written in the Assyrian dialect of the Akkadian language, lists the achievements of Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 B.C.), the builder of the palace. After giving his ancestry and royal titles, the Standard Inscription describes Ashurnasirpal's successful military campaigns to east and west and his building works at Nimrud, most importantly the construction of the palace itself. The inscription is thought to have had a magical function, contributing to the divine protection of the king and the palace.



This, then, is God's bodyguard. But does God need a bodyguard? Of course not. But as a great king, it is nevertheless fitting and proper that he has one. Their function is ceremonial more than protective. Much like the ceremonial guard at Buckingham Palace. The security of the king does not depend on these two at the gate.

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Because God does not need a bodyguard, these four are not engaged as watchmen but in worship: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8).

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society), Rev. 4:8



In this, they are joined by the 24 elders: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11). Notice the reason why God is worshipped: he is worshipped as the creator. As we will see, in the next chapter God will be praised as the saviour. The one who created the world is also the one who saves the world.

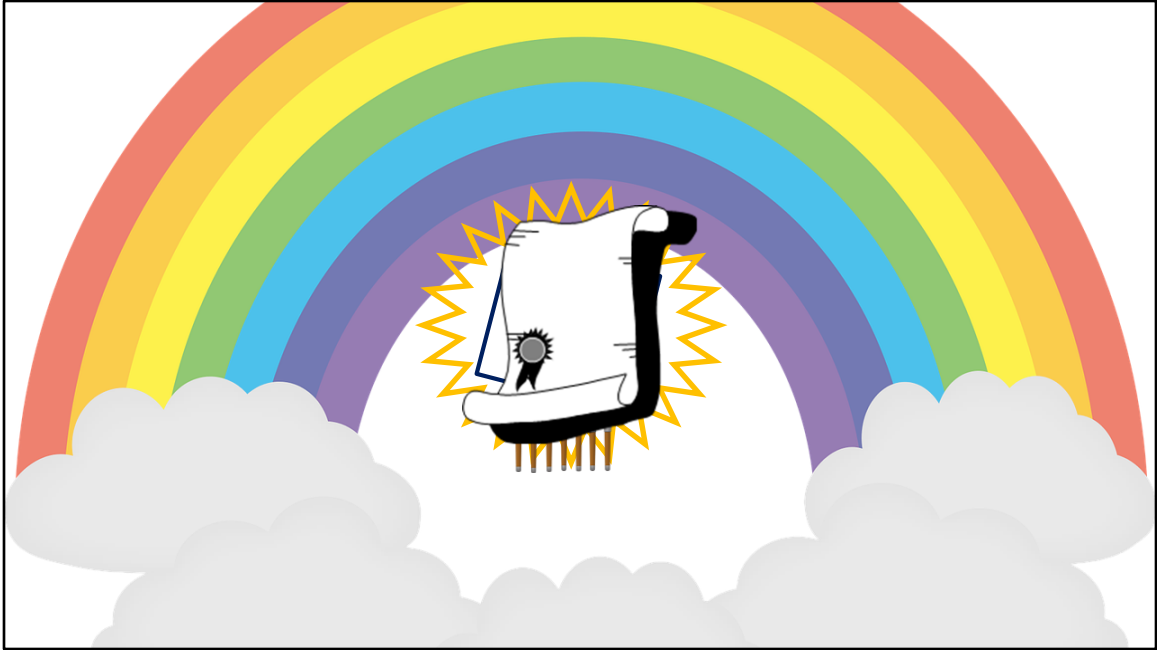
At this point, a word of caution may be in place. Not everyone is thrilled by the idea of spending all eternity in this heavenly throne room singing the same chorus over and over and over again. Don’t worry. Life in the new creation is going to be richer, fuller, and more diverse than life in the present world. This chapter is a scene in John’s vision. It is not necessarily a photographic rendering of what heaven is like. It is not a complete picture, far from it. Although we do learn a few important things about heaven. It is the place where God is king, and no one challenges his sovereignty. It is also a place filled with worship. But chapters 4 and 5 do not give us a comprehensive overview, they are not the complete guide to this place.

By the way: the many worship scenes in Revelation *do* something. They draw us as the reader in and change our perspective: God grows bigger, the world and its rulers

smaller.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society),  
Rev. 4:11





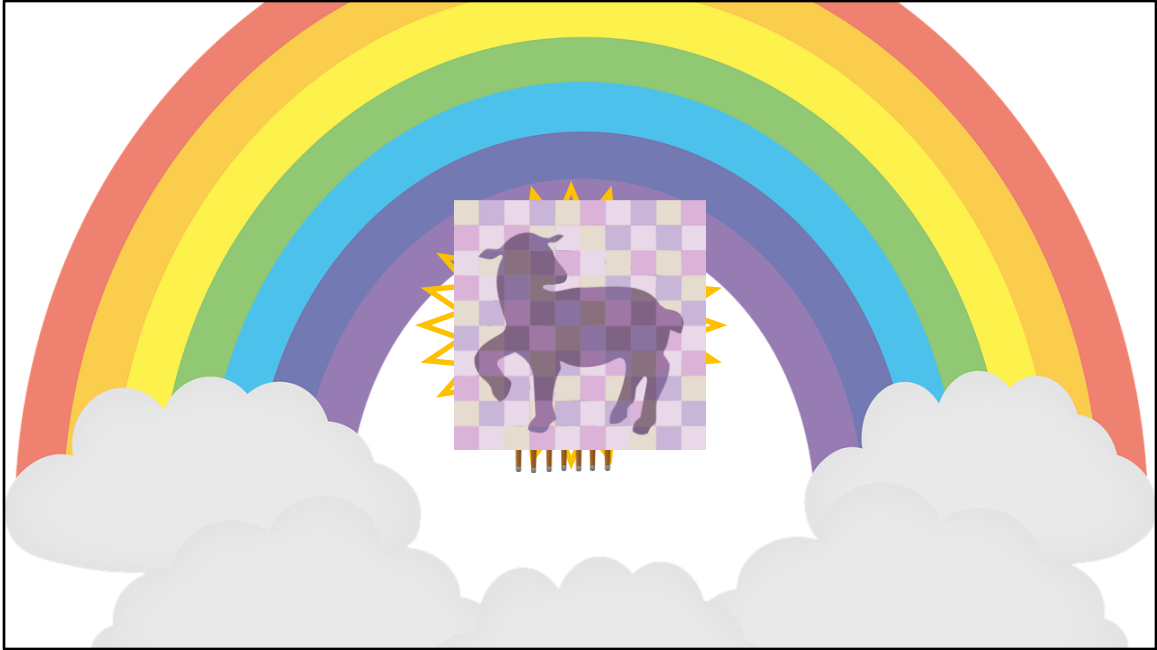
In chapter 5, John notices a new detail: the one on the throne is holding a scroll, sealed with seven seals and written on both sides. This scroll represents God's purpose for creation. It shows features of a legal Roman contract or testament. There are examples where such a document would be testated to by seven witnesses, who would also seal the document. The content was sometimes summarized on the back (it is unusual for a scroll to be written on both sides).

The scroll cannot be read, God's purpose cannot be realised unless the seals are broken and the scroll is opened. It is therefore a pressing question: who is worthy to open this scroll? The answer is no one. This means that God's plan is stuck and cannot move forward. No wonder John weeps loudly in verse 4!



Then, one of the elders tells John that “the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered” (verse 5), and is therefore worthy to open the scroll. Lion of Judah is a familiar messianic title. Root of David, however, is highly unusual. In Isaiah 11:1, the Messiah is a shoot sprouting from the stump or the roots of Jesse, the father of David. Here, it is the other way around. The Messiah is the root out of which David grew.

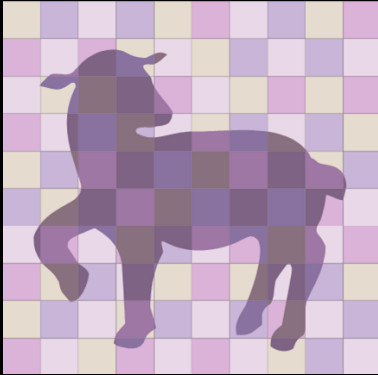
In the next verse, we learn how the Messiah conquered. It is a paradox. He conquered by being slain.



Notice that John only hears about the Lion of Judah; he is told about him, but he does not see him. When he looks, what he sees is not a lion but a lamb. The lion is a lamb, such is the logic of apocalyptic imagery.

But it is also the logic and the style of God's intervention. The greatest demonstration of power and its highest form is to have power and not use it.

A lamb stands for innocence. It also stands for vulnerability, and defenselessness. Jesus is these things by choice. It is not for lack of power. He chooses to make war this way. It makes Jesus an unlikely opponent for the dragon and the beast that will appear later in the book: a lamb against a dragon!? Jesus conquered by dying. In this way, he sets the standard and the model for the way believers are to conquer as well.



Seven horns  
Seven eyes

The lamb has seven horns. Horn is a symbol of strength. Seven horns symbolise a fullness or perfection of power. The lamb is omnipotent. The lamb also has seven eyes. This speaks of a fullness of vision and therefore of omniscience. These seven are also (once again) the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. This speaks of a fullness of presence.



Next, the lamb takes the scroll. At this point, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fall down and worship. Notice that they fall down before the lamb. This is the content of their worship:



## A new song

Worthy are you to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you  
ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people  
and nation,  
and you have made them a kingdom and  
priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth (Rev. 5:9-10).

And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll

and to open its seals,

for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God

from every tribe and language and people and nation,

and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,

and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9-10).

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)

A new song?



So what makes this a new song?



## A new song

Worthy are you <sup>=?</sup> to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you  
ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people  
and nation,  
and you have made them a kingdom and  
priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth (Rev. 5:9-10).

First of all, it is the identity of the one being worshipped. “You” in these verses must be the lamb. Elsewhere in the book, when John is tempted to fall down and worship an angel he is quickly stopped and held back from doing this. Worship God, John is told. Yet Jesus is freely worshipped in the book of Revelation.

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## A new song

Worthy are you <sup>=?</sup> to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you  
ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people  
and nation, 4x  
and you have made them a kingdom and  
priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth (Rev. 5:9-10).

What makes Jesus worthy to open the scroll is that he has given his life as a ransom, in this way redeeming people from every tribe, language, people, and nation. This is a fourfold phrase. Since four is the number of the earth, it suggests the redeemed do indeed come from everywhere. Interestingly, such a fourfold phrase appears seven times in the book, showing its universal outlook. This is a message for all ethnicities.

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## A new song

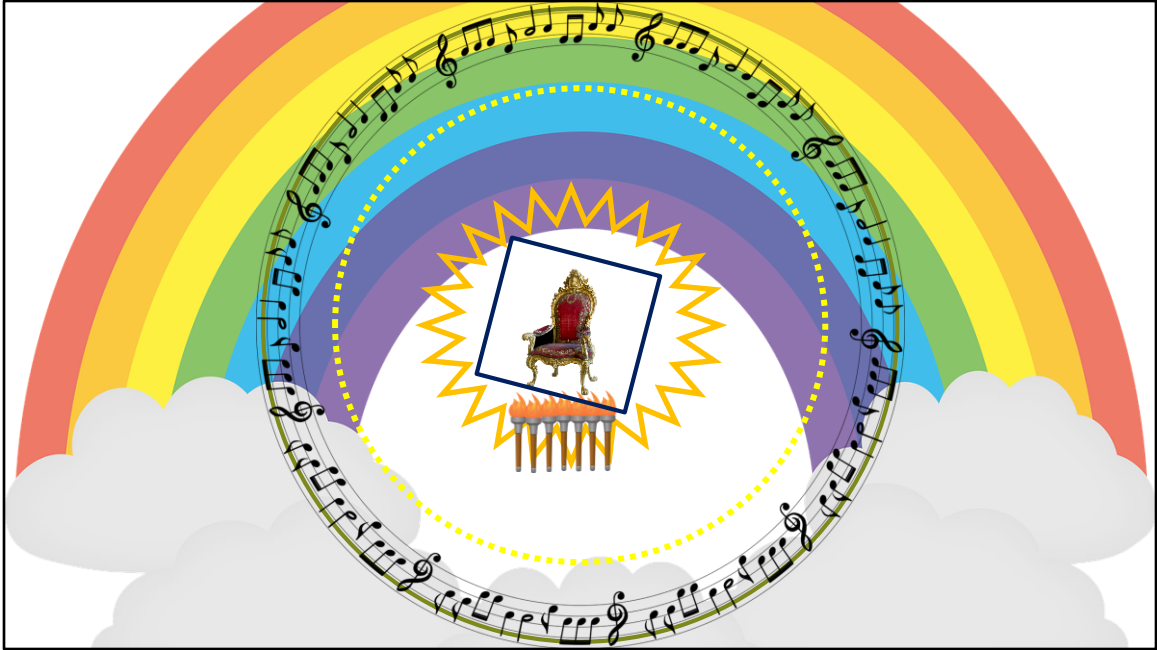
Worthy are you <sup>=?</sup> to take the scroll  
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and you have made them a kingdom and  
priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth (Rev. 5:9-10).

Also, notice the exodus motifs here in chapter 5. The lamb is the Passover lamb. Those who are redeemed become a kingdom of priests, just like the people of Israel coming out of Egypt.

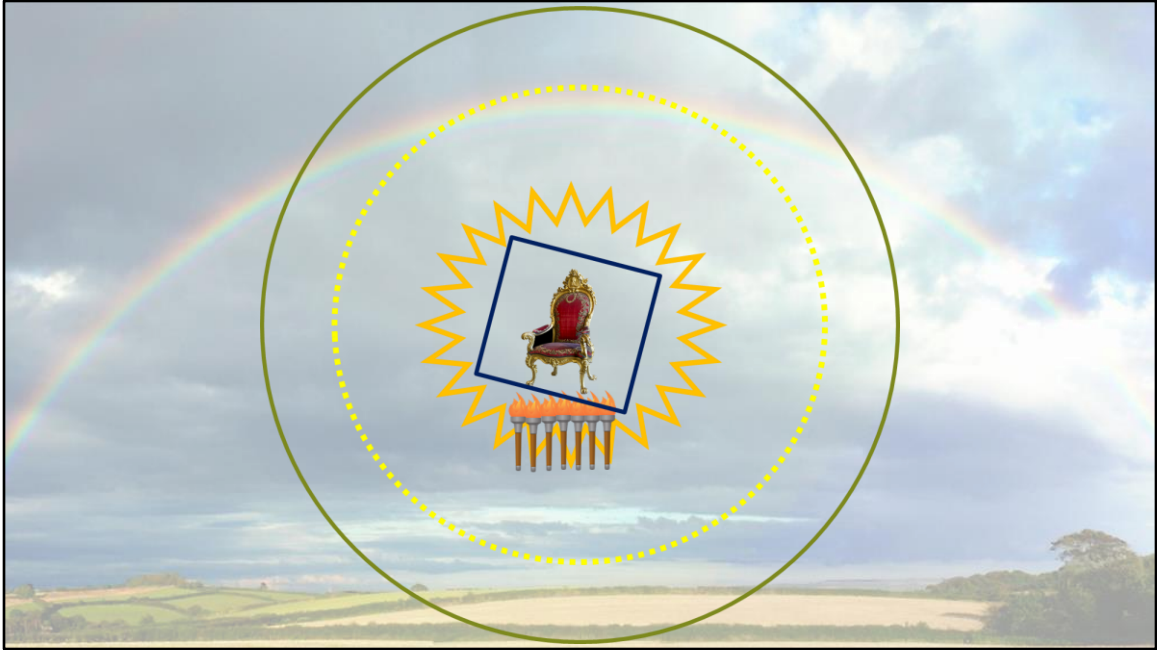
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Because of further response to the worthiness of the lamb, we learn there is yet another circle around the throne, in verse 11. This circle includes, literally, myriads of myriads. *Myriados* was the largest number in Greek. It means 10,000. To express even larger numbers, people would multiply numbers. Such as myriads of myriads. This literally means 10,000s times 10,000s, which makes hundreds of millions of angels.



At this point, the circle widens yet again. Now all of creation, every living creature that exists, joins in the worship of both the one on the throne and the lamb. Once again, Jesus is freely included in the worship of God.



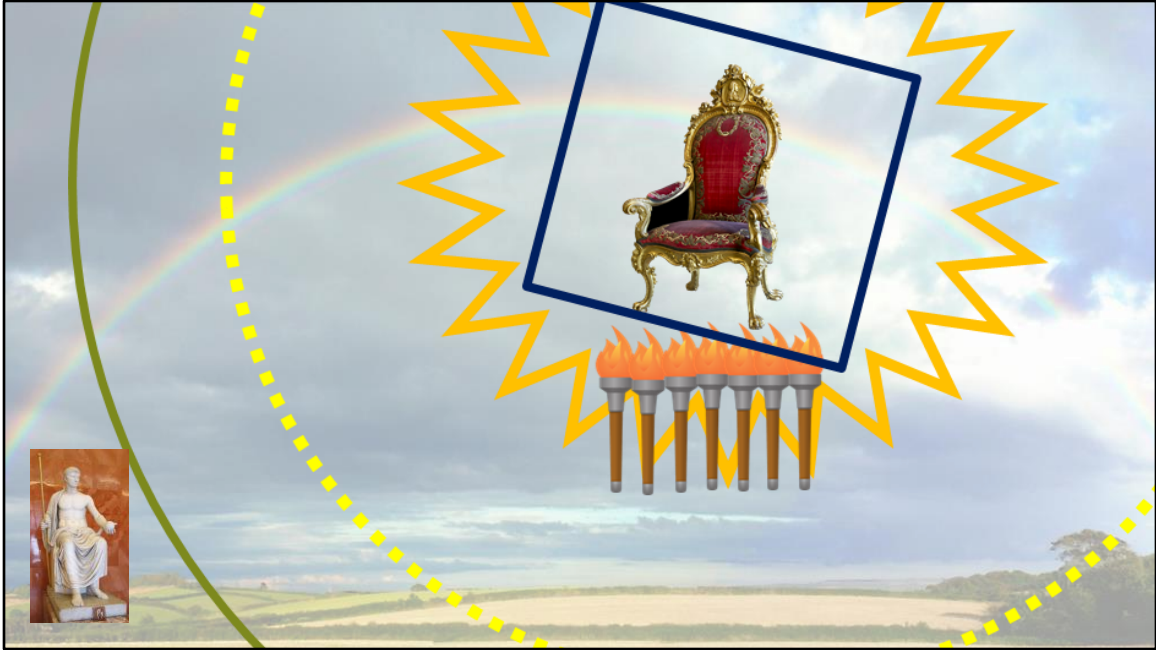
In conclusion, these two chapters, the setting for the upcoming series of seven seals, give us a theocentric view of the universe. At the centre is God's throne. Everything happens before and around this throne. Not, of course, in a literal or geographical or topological sense; if you find the centre of the universe, you won't find a throne there. But spiritually and theologically, this throne is the centre.



## CONTROL ROOM

This heavenly throne room is the true control room of the universe.

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And therefore, the true centre of power is not in Rome. (Do you even notice the Roman emperor in this picture?) Rome is not the centre of the world. There is a greater throne and a greater king.

With that knowledge, the time has come to open the seven seals.

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Sailko, 2011, "Ancient Roman statue of Emperor Augustus as Jove (i.e. Jupiter), first half of the 1st century AD,"

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Revelation Text: Chapter 4-5 (The Heavely Throne Room)

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