

Transcription details:

24-Sept-2014 | The Biblical Prophecy Program™

Do the 24 Elders in the Book of Revelation “Represent” the Church? A Reply to Pretribulationism – Ep. 7

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***The following is a transcript so it has not been edited for grammar and spelling.**

Transcription results:

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It's time for The Biblical Prophecy Program, with your host, Alan Kurschner of Eschatos Ministries.

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Do the 24 Elders of Revelation represent the Church? A Reply to Pretribulationism. I have just one announcement before we start. If you live in California, on October 11th of this year, 2014, I am giving a prophecy seminar in Diamond Bar, California, at the Holiday Inn. The topic of the seminar is "Before the Day of the Lord."

I put on these seminars, occasionally, in different parts of the country. It's called California Bible Prophecy Seminar. Emphasis is on the Bible, I'm not talking about sensationalist type of ideas out there, but it's a biblical saturated seminar. If you attend, bring your newspaper. Just kidding. Bring your Bible, because we are going to be immersed in scripture. These are topics that every Christian, I believe, needs to understand, because Jesus taught that every Christian needs to understand these issues. That's why He said in Mathew 24:25, "Remember I've told ahead of time." There's an ominous warning from our Lord that we should understand, which implies that we can understand these issues. If you want to be alerted of any upcoming conferences or prophecy seminars and conferences in your area, you can go to my website, Alankurschner.com and subscribe via email or RSS.

Let's get started. Well, Al from California has called in and left a message for the program that I'm going to answer in this episode. And by the way, if you have any questions that you want me to answer, you can leave a recorded question for the program at Alankurschner.com/contact, or you can just go to the homepage, and in the menu click on contact, and then go to the bottom of that page, and you can leave a recorded message. I'll leave a link in the show notes for that. Here is Al's question.

Hi Alan. This is Al from California. I have a question concerning the 24 elders. Many of the modern or evangelical pastors here in the 21st century say that the 24 elders are the Church. I wanted to get your understanding on this very important question.

This is a good question. Thank you for that. So in Revelation 4:4, it reads, "In a circle around the throne, were 24 other thrones in seated on those thrones were 24 elders. They were dressed in white clothing and had golden crowns on their heads." In this fourth chapter of Revelation, we're introduced to a magnificent scene in the throne room of heaven. John witnesses a panoply of brilliant colors. They're

beaming from the throne, and he sees 24 other thrones with 24 elders seated on them.

Now the identity and the function of the 24 elders are not agreed by many. The big question is do they represent some larger group of people and if they do, what's the significance of that? There are actually about a dozen interpretations on this, believe it or not, and most of them are just very subjective. But I do want to address one of those theories or interpretations, and that is the pre-tribulationist interpretation. Now pretribulationism frequently asserts that these 24 elders, they "represent" the raptured church. Basically they argue that because they're dressed in white and they had crowns on their head.

But why make this assertion, this interpretation? Well you have to understand the pretribulationist believes that the rapture will happen before the anti-Christ great tribulation. And so what they do is, even before this reference of the 24 elders, most of them - not all of them - but most of them will say that at the beginning of chapter four you have John. John is called up to heaven in Revelation 4:1-2 it reads, "After this, I looked and behold. A door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, 'Come up here and I will show you what must take place after this.'"

Verse 2: "At once, I was in the spirit and behold, a throne stood in heaven and-- with one seated on the throne." Verse 1 and 2 here we have, so John is being transported to a different realm in heaven to witness a revelation or revelations. Pretribulationists will say that John here is symbolically representing the Church, or the raptured Church that is. Of course the text doesn't give any hint of this. This is an allegorical interpretation by a pretribulationist, who by the way at the same time, they'll say they take scripture in a literal fashion. In this case, they're being inconsistent with their interpretation. They want to take Scripture in a literal fashion, but then they'll allegorize scripture in Revelation 4.

So we're told by pretribs that in Verse 1, John represents the Church and then we're told that, four verses later, now the Church is represented by the 24 elders. Well how convenient is that [chuckles]? There's a name for this. I mean, it's called exegetical gymnastics. And it's just simply allegorizing and twisting scripture to fit a preconceived theory. So getting back to this issue of the 24 elders representing the Church, pretribulationists they argue this because, again, they're wearing white, and this must mean that they represent the Church. Well white is a common color for angels in Scripture, and it can just simply represent purity. It's really a straining reading to require to read into this the raptured Church being represented by the elders.

And another argument that's used is that they're wearing crowns, and crowns supposedly that indicates the Church. But once again, crowns are not exclusive to believers, I mean, Christ has a crown, even angelic demons is said to wear something like crowns. The first sealed writer who very well may represent the Anti-Christ, I believe that he represents Anti-Christ, has a crown. Again, if you're going to read a whole theological system-- if you're going to place your whole rapture theory - not all pretribulationists would put all their eggs in this argument, but a lot of them do. It's just a bad argument because it's a very subjective argument.

I want to give two reasons. There's a number of good reasons why the 24 elders do not represent the church. But I want to focus on two reasons. The first is found in Revelation 5. And Revelation 5:7-10 starting verse 7, "And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on a throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the lamb, each holding a harp in golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sing a new song saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals for you were slain and by your blood,'" now listen to this, "'By your blood you ransomed people,'" get that? "'You ransomed people,'" that's third person, not first person. "'You ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people-nation.'"

Now, verse 10, "'And you have made them,'" third person, "'A kingdom and priest to our God and they,'" third person, "'Shall reign on the earth.'" What does this mean? What it means is that the elders are distinguishing themselves from the Church. I mean, if they represented the church there would be

some, they would possess some marker of representation but we don't find that.

Now one objection to this is - and I've heard this a number of times - there are some pretribulationists who use the King James Bible and they say that their text, their version of the Bible it reads in the first person, not the third person. And just as a preface, I'm not against the KJV, it's not a bad translation. I say this because I know some KJV folks can get worked up over this issue if you criticize the King James or you agree with a modern translation over the KJV. Never the less, there are textual facts that bare out that the KJV in this instance contains an inferior reading in a few places here.

For example, Revelation 5:10 in the King James Bible it reads, it says, "And hast made us." That's the first person, right? First person plural. "Unto our God kings and priests, and we shall reign on the Earth." And "we", right? There's that first person again. "You have made them," Revelation 5:10. This is in the New American Standard now, "You have made them." So the KJV has, "You hast made us." Got to get the Elizabethan wording in there, right? So, "You hast made us," KJV. Now, New American Standard, "You have made them," third person, "to be a kingdom and priest to our God and they will reign upon the earth." Since the King James version says, "Made us," then the four living creatures and the elders" they would argue are part or represent the church.

But the question of this variant reading can quickly be solved by examining the support of the manuscripts. I've worked through this text in the past, by the way, and looked at various manuscripts and so this is not something I'm getting just third hand or second hand. First of all, by far, most of the majority of the witnesses, manuscripts, they testify to the third person, not the first. This is an interesting point, because King James only advocates, they often use the quote "majority argument" as a defense for the readings. Right? And maybe I should have noted this but you have to understand the King James Bible and then modern translations they have two similar but there are some different textual tradition behind the KJV and the modern translations. So that's why you find a lot of debate on some of these textual variants. Well this is an example of one of these issues that you have two different readings. So modern translations have the third person and the KJV has the first person.

But in this instance here, the majority of witnesses is on the side of this third person and more importantly it's the earliest and the best manuscripts that support "them." It's not so much, when you do textual criticism you don't just merely count noses that is count manuscripts, "Oh, 50 manuscripts over here has this and then there's two over here. You can't really do that because what if the 50 manuscripts or 49 is depended upon a corrupted reading? What if they are copied from a corrupted manuscript? So they can't just count manuscripts. And there's ways to analyze what are the best - evaluate - what are the best manuscripts.

But the third person is supported by the earliest and the best manuscripts here. And I kind of alluded to the other variant where it says the King James Bible has, "We shall reign," that's the first person, and the modern translations have, "They will reign." Once again, here are the KJV is attested by no Greek manuscripts of significance, whereas the modern reading, "they," is attested by the-- well, not just the vast majority of manuscripts, but more importantly again, the earliest and the best of them.

One more similar variant reading's found in Verse 9. The King James version has, in Revelation 5:9, has, "Hast redeemed us to God," where the New American Standard has, "Purchased for God." Big difference there, right? But again here, textual considerations will help us clear up this discrepancy. Because, though there are not many manuscript witnesses that testify to, "Purchased for God," it is however supported by the best witness to the Book of Revelation, that's Codex A. I know I'm getting maybe a little bit technical here, but the point here is, on this variant, it's to show that the best rendering of the third person is attested by, once again, the best manuscripts.

Before we move on to the second point, I do want to note that it's interesting that it says, "Since the four living creatures," these are clearly celestial beings, right? They're not humans. Even pretribulationists would agree the four living creatures are not humans. But it's absurd to argue that they had been redeemed, because the King James Bible has the living creatures being redeemed. You see that? So again, it's absurd, and that would argue against the King James rendering in this case. So

the first reason is that the narrative in Revelation 4 and 5, they show the elders are not part of the Church, nor do they even represent the Church. It's just a subjectiveness on the part of the pretribulationists.

But the second reason is this 800-pound gorilla in the room. If the 24 elders, if they represent the Church, and the Church according to pretribulationism says that they are present in this scene in heaven, Revelation 4 and 5, because they have been raptured, then the obvious question is, where is the Church? The text does not indicate at all any large group of redeemed people in heaven. The raptured Church, we're told, is supposed to be in heaven at this time, and yet the focus is on the Lamb of God, who gave his life for the Church. And yet, we are given no hint of any great multitude in this scene.

Interestingly, where do we find an account, in the book of Revelation, of a large multitude in heaven? That's right, in Revelation 7, between the sixth and the seventh seal. Let me just read a portion of this. The sixth seal is broken, and before the seventh seal is broken - that will unleash God's wrath and the trumpet and bowl judgments - you have two groups of people being delivered. There's 144,000 Jews on Earth that are protected. And then there's this innumerable multitude that appears in heaven, resurrected bodies. It can be none other than the raptured Church of God's people, or not just the Church, but all of God's people.

In verse 9, Revelation 7:9 it says, "After this, I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation and from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne, and before the lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches in their hands. And they're crying out in a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.'" And then we were told later - in the few other verses later - that this innumerable multitude came out of the Great Tribulation.

So the pre-wrath interpretation takes a natural interpretation of the book of Revelation, not trying to find some enigmatic entity in the book of Revelations, "No, that's the rapture there. They represent the Church," or whatever. No, that's why a lot of people are beginning to subscribe and have subscribed, coming over from the pretribulation camp to the pre-wrath camp, because they see that the pre-wrath interpretation, is the natural interpretation on this issue.

Have you ever asked yourself this question, why should there be a representation of the Church by the elders if in fact the reality of the Church is present? Let me ask that question again. Why should there be a representation of the Church by the elders if the Church is already there, if the Church is there? Why this representation? I've never had a pretribulationist answer this question for me. In other words, if the church is in heaven at this time, even though one will look in vain for it in Revelation 4-5, then why have the Church be represented by an entity? We're never told by pretribulationists.

So to sum it up, who are these enigmatic 24 elders? I think they are likely some special order of angelic beings, such as the four living creatures are a special order of worshiping angelic beings. The elders probably, they may function in some ruling capacity. We're not actually told. We're not told exactly. It's very limited so we don't know for sure. But what we can know is that the presence, that their presence, the 24 elders there, their presence, it doesn't indicate a pretribulationist rapture, as I argued above in those two reasons, and that's just simply straining the text.

Reading into the passage, a preconceived pretribulationist theological system. And when you see this type of reasoning, by the way, when a theological system feels the need to read into a passage, as like what we see in Revelation 4, I mean, it should tell you that they don't have much scriptural ground to stand on. I've heard it once before, very sagaciously, that about the 24 elders in light of all the speculation that surrounds it, it's probably the best understanding of all of this, and that is, this person said, "Our attention should be drawn to the worshiped one, not the worshipers."

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