

THE IDENTITY OF THE 24 ELDERS IN REVELATION 4:4

Keith R. Krell

The elders are a prominent group mentioned 12 times in Rev 4-19 (4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). Yet, the identity of these elders is disputed. However, the commentary tradition has by and large narrowed it down to two dominant views. The elders either represent church-age saints or some form of angelic beings. The following thoughts reflect my internal wrestling. It is also my attempt to fairly represent both positions and defend both views as well as possible. Not all of these arguments are equally strong, nor do I agree with each line of defense. My goal is to assist the reader to decide which view is the best.

THE ELDERS REPRESENT CHURCH-AGE SAINTS

1. The elders are sitting on thrones before God (Rev 2:26-27; 3:21; 20:6; cf. Eph 2:6). While Christ is not seated on His earthly throne, these kingly ones, having been presented “blameless with great joy,” must be with Him (Jude 24-25).
2. The elders are clothed in white robes. Church-age overcomers are promised white garments (Rev 3:4-5, 18; 6:11; 19:7-8). Moreover, in Revelation, only the saints wear white clothing. This is appropriate, for the church, at this time, would have been judged and rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10).
3. The elders have crowns of gold on their heads. These crowns (*stephanous*) indicate achievement and victory (Rev 2:10; 3:11). In the Epistles, believers are also promised crowns for spiritual accomplishments (1 Cor 9:25; 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Tim 4:8; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4). The Bible seems to distinguish between the word *stephanos*, which is used of a crown of reward for faithful endurance, and *diadema*, which is the crown of royalty or authority. Note: the crowning of these elders also indicates that the rapture and resurrection is past, for disembodied spirits wear no crowns.
4. The term “elder” (*presbuteros*) is only used of men in Scripture (e.g., Luke 7:3; Jas 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1). “Elders” is often used of leaders and representatives of the churches (Acts 15:2; 20:17; 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).
5. The elders are “kings and priests” (Rev 5:10). Church-age believers are a royal priesthood (Rev 1:6; 1 Pet 2:9). Since Christ is a King-Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5-7), believers who are in Christ are also king-priests.
6. The elders are carefully distinguished from both the four living creatures and the angels in Rev 5:11 and 7:11.
7. In Rev 5:9, the elders are seen singing a song of redemption. It appears that they sing of their own personal redemption because they say that God has made them to be kings and priests and they have been redeemed out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation (Rev 5:10). Note: Exodus 15:13, 16-17 demonstrates that it is possible to sing a song about yourself in the third person.
8. The numerical adjective 24 is significant. King David divided the Levitical priesthood into 24 orders (1 Chron 24:3-5). Each order represented the entire priestly tribe and the whole nation of Israel as it functioned before God. Therefore, it is possible that the number 24 represents a larger, complete group. Some believe that the number 24 represents the 12 Apostles and the 12 Tribes. However, the Apostles were to judge the 12 Tribes. Yet, Old Testament saints are evidently not raised until after the Tribulation (Dan 12:1-2, 11-13; Isa 25:8; 26:19).

9. In the other visions of heaven in Isaiah and Ezekiel, there was only the throne and the four living creatures. There were no 24 elders. If the 24 elders were angels then they would've been in the visions of heaven in Isaiah and Ezekiel. It is significant that the 24 elders are seen in the New Testament and not in the Old Testament. It may also be significant that the elders and their thrones are not mentioned after Rev 19:7-9. From that point, the Church is seen as the bride of Christ, and evidently sits together with Christ upon His throne.
10. Many people believe that the 24 elders are angels because they interpret events to John (Rev 5:5; 7:13). We see that two angels interpreted events to John. One showed John the Harlot and the City of Babylon (Rev 17:1-19:10). The other angel showed John the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9-22:11). Both times John fell down and worshipped the angel that interpreted the events to him (Rev 19:10 & 22:8-9). He did this twice. You would think that John learned his lesson the first time. He didn't. There was something about these angels like an overwhelming presence. John never did this to the 24 elders. On two occasions, one of the 24 elders spoke to John (Rev 5:5; 7:13) and John never fell down and worshipped them. Obviously, John didn't see anything overwhelming about the 24 elders for he never attempted to worship them. The important thing is not that both the angels and the 24 elders interpret events to John but the interpretation itself. The angels show John future events and seem to focus on the two cities – Babylon and the New Jerusalem and the difference between the two. The 24 elders describe past redemption and people being redeemed to Christ. One of the elders introduced the slain Lamb (Jesus Christ) in Rev 5:5 and the white-robed multitude in Rev 7:13. Why doesn't an angel do this? Most likely, the elder can better understand this because he himself is a redeemed man.

THE ELDERS DO NOT REPRESENT CHURCH-AGE SAINTS

1. There are no other human beings in Rev 4.
2. Believers will not sit on thrones surrounding Christ's throne, they are to sit at a later time with Christ on His throne (Rev 20:4).
3. Believers will not receive their crowns until after Christ returns to the earth and overthrows His enemies.

THE ELDERS REPRESENT ANGELIC BEINGS

1. Angels are called “thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (Col 1:16; cf. Eph 3:10; 6:12).
2. Isaiah 24:23 may be a reference to angels being called “elders” (see LXX). It is debated whether they are angels or the elders of Israel.
3. These elders (literally, “the old ones”) could be interpreted as the majesties turning their ruling authority over the earth to the Lamb (Heb 1:5-14; 2:5-8ff).
4. In Ps 89:7, God sits in the “council of His holy ones” (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Job 15:8; Jer 23:18, 22).
5. White apparel is the characteristic dress of angels (cf. Matt 28:3; Mark 16:5; John 20:12; Acts 1:10).
6. These elders wore crowns (Gk. *stephanous*). This Greek word often refers to a victor’s crown (Rev 2:10; 3:11), but John also used it to describe a crown that represents authority (Rev 6:2; 9:7; 12:1; 14:14). These crowns of gold could denote the royal dignity of those associated with the throne of God (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Ps 89:7).
7. The elders are grouped with the “living creatures” as a part of the eternal worship (Rev 4:4). No one interprets the four living creatures as men; therefore, we should not construe these elders as men.
8. The elders also serve as intermediaries and interpreters (Rev 5:5; 7:13-17).
9. Nowhere in the context is it hinted that the 24 elders are symbols of a larger group. There is no compulsion that they stand for something else.
10. One of the elders performs the same function of offering bowls of incense that is later performed by an angel (cf. Rev 5:8; 8:3). Also, in Rev 7:13, the phrase “one of the elders” indicates that the elders were separate created beings rather than corporately representing a larger group. He is separate and different both from the great multitude and from John (cf. also Rev 5:5). In Rev 7:14, this elder acts as an agent of revelation in much the same manner as angels function in Revelation (cf. Rev 1:1; 17:3; 22:6). Such duties belong only to angels (cf. Dan 9:21-27). This particular group of angels primarily assists in execution of the divine rule of the universe. They are probably part of the assembly of heavenly beings that are regularly pictured as present with God in heaven (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Ps 89:7; Isa 24:23).
11. The elders are seated on thrones (Rev 4:4; 11:16) while the saints stand before the throne (7:11).
12. The elders hold golden bowls that contain the prayers of the saints (Rev 5:8).
13. One of the elders explains who the victorious saints are (Rev 7:13-14).
14. The elders thank God for rewarding the saints (Rev 11:18).
15. In Revelation, the elders are always grouped with angels rather than men, but are distinguished from other angelic subgroups (cf. Rev 7:9-11; 19:1-4).
16. In Rev 19:4, 7, the elders are distinguished from the “Bride of the Lamb.”
17. It is logically and sequentially unlikely that the church, as the bride, would be enthroned before her Lord and husband is recognized as being worthy to rule (Rev 5:8-9).

18. In Rev. 5:10, the personal pronoun is “them” (not “us”) signifying that the redeemed are a separate class of individuals from the 24 elders.

19. The church does not appear ready to rule until Rev 19:7-8.

THE ELDERS DO NOT REPRESENT ANGELIC BEINGS

1. The author of Hebrews suggests that angels are innumerable (Heb 12:22).
2. Angels are never spoken of as seated on thrones elsewhere in the Scriptures.
3. The Scriptures never speak of angels wearing crowns to say nothing of *stephanoi* or victors’ wreaths gotten as a reward for faithful endurance.
4. In what sense are angels “kings and priests” (Rev 5:10)? Angels are never spoken of as being associated in a priestly act in the Bible. In what sense are angels redeemed from every kindred and tongue and people and nation?

Copyright © 2003 Keith R. Krell. All rights reserved. All Scripture quotations, unless indicated, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1977, and 1995 by The Lockman Foundation, and are used by permission.

Permissions: Feel free to reproduce and distribute any articles written by Keith Krell, in part or in whole, in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way or charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. It is our desire to spread this information, not protect or restrict it.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Keith Krell, Timeless Word Ministries, 2508 State Ave NE Olympia, WA 98506, 360-352-9044, www.timelessword.com