

Revelation 4:4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads

Now you need to know that those who have studied this passage and written about it have variously identified these 24 elders as:

- Angels of special category or assignment, or
- Israel, or
- Israel and the Church, or
- The Church

On review of the evidence for each view the evidence is quite convincing that these 24 elders – which, as we will see, show up 12 times in Revelation – are representative of the church:

- Elders (*presbuteros*) as church shepherds, who are mentioned 15 times in the New Testament before this, are promised a victor's crown (*stephanos*) in 1 Peter 5:4, just as the churches at Smyrna & Philadelphia were promised or encouraged about victors' crowns (*stephanos*) in Rev 2:10 and 3:11. The elders in Revelation chapters 4-19 are also called *presbuteros* and are wearing or having a *stephanos*, which is a victor's crown.
- Neither angels nor Israel are ever described as or promised to have or be rewarded with a *stephanos*.
- Israel's rewards are not promised as heavenly, but earthly and these elders only appear in heaven.
- Angels are never called elders (*presbuteros*) anywhere else in Scripture.
- Overcomers in the church of Laodicea are promised to sit with Christ on His throne (*thronos*) as He sits with His Father on His throne (*thronos*) in Revelation 3:21.
- Believers have already been seated positionally with Christ in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:6), which presumably refers to being seated on thrones, since the Greek verb *kathizo* is not referring to lying down on the floor or the ground.
- Israel will not be resurrected for judgment until the end of the Tribulation, when the Messiah comes (Daniel 12:1-3).
- By that time, the 24 elders are no longer described in Revelation as being in heaven.
- Revelation 5:11 and 7:11 list the angels separately from the 24 elders, implying that the 24 elders are not angels.
- The 24 elders are described as having *white robes* (Revelation 4:4), which is the same as was promised to the overcomers in the church just one chapter before (Revelation 3:5).
- Revelation 5:8-10 has the 24 elders singing a new song in praise about how Christ the Lamb has redeemed people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

- If this were angels the song would not have to be new – they could have sung it long before.
- If this were Israel the praise would not likely be about everyone outside of Israel (Gentiles).
- Having just been raptured from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, singing a new song fits with the raptured church.
- Angels are seen executing judgments of wrath throughout chapters 7 through 18 of the book of Revelation, but the 24 elders are never seen doing so.

Now it's not only fair, but probably a real good idea to ask the question, why 24 elders? Why exactly that number? Now some have guessed that it stands for the number of tribes plus the number of apostles, but that seems like mixing apples and oranges. It places the apostles of the church and elders of Israel on the same plane, and it suffers from the same conflicts as believing that the 24 elders are both Israel and the Church. After all, Israel does not equal the Church. Others have just sidestepped this number 24 entirely, assuming it's arbitrary and therefore irrelevant, but since it says the 24 elders five times in Revelation, and starts off with 24 thrones for them, that takes a lot of tap dancing to step around it – so let's not go there.

First, there are actually very few places in Scripture where the number 24 shows up, which should help us zero in on the answer. That's awful nice, isn't it? The places where we can come up with the number 24 are: the number of tribes in Israel plus the number of original disciples, and the number of priests that David assigned to be representatives of the thousands of priests assigned to temple duty, as explained in 1 Chronicles 24. Since adding the number of tribes of Israel and the number of apostles mixes 'apples and oranges', so to speak, that leaves us with 24 priests representing the thousands of priests who would serve in that role for two weeks at a time on a rotating basis. This practice is reflected in the account in Luke 1:5-10.

We are not given the names of any of the 24 elders. Also, we were not given the names of any elders in the entire New Testament – except the names of some who were elders in Jerusalem at the start. Elders in the New Testament are anonymous.

But, "Wait!", you say. The priests of the Old Testament were part of Israel! Isn't mixing Israel and the church a problem? Well, yes, it could be, unless there is a clear biblical basis for making a connection at specific points, such as 1 Peter 2:9 where Peter says of the church:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

In Revelation 5:8 the elders hold golden bowls full of incense (which priests did in the Old Testament), except that these are the prayers of the saints, before the throne of God. In Revelation 5:10 the 24 heavenly elders sing about those who have been redeemed from among every tribe and tongue and people and nation:

"You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."

The priests of Israel also sang at intervals throughout the day in the inner part of the temple.

These 24 elders, as glorified members of the body of Christ, are called and qualified and act as priests and priestly representatives in the throne room of God. Like the representatives of Old Testament priesthood, these 24 elders represent the glorified church - the Body of Christ.

We'll be seeing a lot more of these elders and a lot more of the throne. The word 'throne' or 'thrones' is used three times as often in the book of Revelation than in all the rest of the New Testament combined. One very important point for us to keep in mind is that we have now stepped into the heavenly scene. While the heavenly scene will be dominated by God directing the Tribulation on earth, this is where we positionally are seated now, according to Ephesians 2:6. The heavenly scene is not something that we just wait for, meanwhile treading water spiritually on this sin-polluted, demon-infested planet. Instead the Lord has called us to live there in heaven, and from that place where we are seated to look upon the events, activities and obligations of this earth. This is why our Lord's appointed apostle Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, saying:

Colossians 3:1-7

Therefore, since you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. 5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. 6 For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, 7 and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them.