

# The 24 Elders in the Book of Revelation

Bible Study

Chart # 303

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## Observations

As the student of the Book of Revelation examines this profound book, he is faced with identifying many different persons, groups, and nations. One of these that must be unveiled is “the 24 elders.” The identification of the 24 elders is very significant in our understanding of the book of Revelation and the developments of the end-times. These elders appear 12 times in six chapters of the book (chapters 4, 5, 7, 11, 14, 19). They are always in heaven around the throne of God while the holy wrath of God’s judgment is unfolding on earth during the time of the Tribulation. They are depicted as continually praising God, along with the angels of God. They appear for the first time in heaven (chapters 4-5) prior to the beginning of the Tribulation (chapter 6). Their last appearance is in chapter 19, immediately before the marriage feast of the Lamb in heaven and before the Revelation of Christ.

## Their Symbolic Description

It is very apparent the 24 elders are not a group of 24 individuals. As throughout the book of Revelation, it is best to conclude that their description should be viewed as a symbolic representation of a real group gathered in heaven. Revelation 1:1 informs us that an angel of God showed the Apostle John “*the things which must shortly come to pass.*” These things were coded in signs. For example, in Revelation the beast symbolizes the Antichrist and his earthly kingdom. The harlot in chapters 17-18, represents a very powerful religion of the last days that will have power over all kings and nations. Therefore, we must discover what the 24 elders symbolize.

It is best to understand the 24 elders as a representative body. The number 24 in the Bible speaks of completion or representation. In the Old Testament there were 24 officers of the sanctuary representing the 24 courses of the complete body of Levitical priests in Israel (1 Chronicles 24:4-5, 7-18). Each of these 24 courses of priests would serve at the temple for two weeks each year. There were also 24 division of singers in the temple (1 Chronicles 25). Therefore, these 24 elders must represent a larger group.

They are called “elders.” In the Bible, angels are not called elders. [Other evidence will lead us to conclude this group cannot be angels.] Therefore, this must be a unique group of people or saints. In Old Testament days, Israel had many elders. An elder was an older man who was a leader of a family or tribe. More specifically, Israel had 70 recognized elders (Exodus 24:1). The term elder also became a prominent title for the recognized leaders of the church in the New Testament (Acts 14:23; 15:2). The terms elder, bishop, or pastor were used interchangeably to refer to the God-appointed leadership of the church. The apostles also viewed themselves as elders (1 Peter 5:1; 3 John 1).

Therefore, the 24 elders must be a representative body of Israel, the church, or both. Which is it? The answer to this question is very significant in our understanding of the church and its relationship to the Tribulation.

## Their Description of Themselves

When the Apostle John recorded what he saw and heard in his tour of future events on earth and in heaven, he saw and heard the elders speak and sing in their worship around the throne of God. We can learn much about their identity by listening to their description of themselves. Let’s listen to them...

Revelation 5:9-10- They say to the Lord, “*For thou wast slain, and have redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.*” This statement, along with other details, reveal that these elders are the completed body of Christ [Jewish and Gentile believers after Pentecost] in heaven. See chart #401. They have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. The angels could never say this. God never provided a plan of redemption for fallen angels. Only redeemed men could say this. They also identify themselves as being a people that have been redeemed out of the nations. Their statement about coming out of the kindreds, tongues, people, and nations, is a reference to the Gentile nations. In Revelation 11:9, these groups describe all the unsaved in the nations of the entire world. In Revelation 13:7, the global kingdom of the Antichrist is described as “*all kindred, and tongues, and nations.*” In Revelation 14:6, all those who dwell on the earth are described as “*every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.*” Therefore, we must conclude that the elders are a redeemed group of people who have been saved out of all the Gentile nations – the perfect description of the church.

They also describe themselves as “*kings and priests.*” This is a statement made in reference to the church saints in Revelation 1:6. This fits the Apostle Peter’s description of the church. See 1 Peter 2:5,9. The Bible speaks often about the priesthood of the N.T. believer. This could not be said about the Old Testament saints who had an ordained priesthood. They also declared, “*we shall reign on earth.*” (Revelation 5:10). The church has been promised that they will reign with Christ during His earthly kingdom for 1,000 years (2 Timothy 2:12).

## The Context of their Appearance



The introduction to the book of Revelation helps us identify the 24 elders. In chapter one, Jesus is symbolically depicted as standing in the middle of seven lampstands, with seven stars in His right hand (Revelation 1:12, 16). In Revelation 1:20 we are told that the lampstands represent seven churches, which represent all the churches (see 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The seven stars in the right hand of Jesus are seven church leaders [the Greek word can be translated as angel, messenger, or leader], probably best understood in Revelation 1 as a reference to all the church leaders.

Therefore, Jesus is depicted as sovereignly ruling over the churches through the leadership of the church leaders. The N.T. declares that Jesus, the Lord of the church, has given authority to His appointed elders to lead the church (1 Peter 5:1-4).

When chapter 4 opens, the Lord is upon His throne, surrounded by 24 elders on thrones [also called “seats”]. This imagery must be another repeat of the same symbolic imagery as in chapters 1-3. In chapter 4 these church leaders are called “elders.” Therefore, these elders in heaven must represent the body of Christ in heaven.

Some believe the 24 elders are a reference to Israel or a combination of Israel [12 tribes] and the church [12 apostles]. However, the appearance of these elders before the beginning of the Tribulation indicates this cannot be a reference to Old Testament Jewish saints. The resurrection of these O.T. saints does not take place until the end of the Tribulation at the Revelation of Christ (Revelation 11:18; Daniel 12:2). According to the Bible, only the church saints will be Raptured. See chart #100.

## Their Heavenly Description

In Revelation 4:4, these elders are depicted as sitting on thrones around the throne of God, having white robes, and with crowns on their heads. This would indicate these elders are the completed body of Christ who have been resurrected/raptured and judged before the Tribulation begins on earth in chapter 6.

These same three descriptions in Revelation 4:4 was mentioned in Revelation 2-3 about the churches.

1. They sit on thrones in heaven. Revelation 3:21- *“To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.”*

2. They are clothed in white robes. Revelation 3:5- *“He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment...”*

3. They wear a crown in heaven. Revelation 2:10- *“I will give thee a crown of life.”* See also 3:10. There are two Greek words for a crown. One is a crown that speaks of rulership. This is not the word used here. The other Greek word speaks of a struggle to overcome or to run a race. That is the word used here. This simply means these elders had completed their life and were raptured and judged, receiving their rewards in heaven. In the Bible, the rewards for the New Testament believer are always connected with the Rapture of the church (1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Timothy 4:8; Revelation 22:12).

Therefore, these elders must be the completed church in heaven after their Rapture and Judgment.

Furthermore, these elders, who are also a kingdom of priests, are shown carrying vessels of sweet-smelling odors that symbolically represent the prayers of the church saints before God and His throne. See Philippians 4:18. Revelation 8:3 records that the church will finally witness their prayers for the Lord to take His vengeance upon those who have persecuted and afflicted His church.

## The Significance of their Identification

The evidence that identifies the elders in the book of Revelation as the completed church that has been raptured and judged gives powerful testimony that the church as the bride of Christ must escape the wrath of God during the Tribulation. At the end of Revelation 19, Christ returns to earth to judge the wicked at Armageddon. According to the chronology in Revelation 19, immediately before Christ descends to earth (verses 11-21), the 24 elders make their final appearance (verse 4). Then the church receives a new name. In Revelation 19:7, the church is called the wife of the Lamb. That indicates the marriage of the church as the Bride of Christ is now complete. With the marriage completed, the celebration of the marriage supper of the Lamb takes place in heaven. Revelation 19 records the transfer of the symbolic title of the church from “the 24 elders” to the wife of the Lamb. This is more evidence that the church will be raptured before the Tribulation begins. No wonder Revelation 22:17 declares, *“And the Spirit and the bride say, Come.”*