

Heavenly Hymns in the Temporal Temple:
**A Comparison of the Songs of the Revelation
with the
Worship Hymns of the Psalms**

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Exposition of Psalms
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Introduction

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.¹” With these words, the Psalmist known as St. John the Apostle introduces his readers to the greatest descriptions of heavenly praise recorded in Scripture. These words remind the reader of the introduction to another book of heavenly praise: the book of Psalms. The Psalter begins by telling us, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.²”

The hymns recorded in the book of Psalms cover a period of nearly 1,000 years, dating from the time of Moses to the time of the Jewish exile from Jerusalem. During this time, God inspired numerous authors to compose hymns of worship and lament that formed the basis for Israelite worship during the time of Solomon’s Temple. After Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity and rebuilt the Temple, the Psalms again became the “hymn book” of Jewish worship within the sanctuary.

In c. 90 A.D., St. John experienced a vision in which he witnessed worship as it was meant to be: praise at the very throne of heaven, where the heavenly creatures and the saints praise God for eternity. Some of the creatures St. John saw obviously pre-dated time itself. The songs of these creatures originated in eternity past and will continue into eternity present.

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1. Revelation 1:3. All Scriptures quoted are from the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001).
 2. Psalm 1:1-2.

Is there a link between the praise in heaven and the Temple praise recorded in the Psalms? Only God Himself could inspire the praise of heaven. God Himself inspired the authors of the Psalms. Therefore, the hymns of Psalms share a direct relation with the hymns St. John witnessed in his vision. Beginning in chapter 1, the book of Revelation is saturated with words, phrases, and images drawn directly from the Psalms.

This paper seeks to examine the links between the Psalms and the songs St. John recorded in the Revelation. As the Church begins to re-acquaint herself with the message of Psalms, believers will gain a new appreciation of the hymns recorded in the book of Revelation. Hopefully, believers will also begin to realize there is far more to Revelation than the cryptic prophecies on which so many Christians have focused in the past century. Revelation is more than a code book to earth's future; it is also a reflection of the praise we will offer to God throughout eternity.

Hymns in Revelation

Revelation contains numerous instances where the characters of St. John's vision erupt into spontaneous praise. The hymns sung reveal the eternal character of God in a way that directly reflects the revelation of God in the Psalter: His holiness, His glory, His majesty, and His deliverance of His people from the godless.

The Song of the Four Creatures

St. John's vision shifts from the isle of Patmos to heaven itself in chapter 4. In chapter 4, we find the first hymns in the book. St. John sees 24 elders seated on thrones around the throne of God. These elders are joined by 4 creatures in continuous praise offered to God:

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around

and within, and day and night they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, “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.”

These songs contain references to the very character of God as described in the Psalms.

First, the hymns describe God as “holy, holy, holy.” St. John’s readers would rightly remember Isaiah’s vision in the Temple when they heard the threefold “holy.” However, the references to holiness of God permeate the Psalms. In Psalm 99, God is described as “holy” in verses 3, 5, and 9. Psalms 103, 105, 106, and 145 encourage worshipers to “bless His holy name,³” “give thanks to His holy name,⁴” and “glory in (literally “praise”) His holy name⁵.”

Of all the Psalms, Psalm 93 best matches the praise of the creatures and elders. The creatures and elders declare that God is the “Lord God Almighty.” The Greek word παντοκράτωρ refers to God’s omnipotent power and universal rule. Psalm 93 states that “The LORD reigns;... he has put on strength as his belt.⁶” The creatures and elders say God is the One “who was and is and is to come;” in Psalm 93, the Psalmist says of God that “Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.⁷” The creatures and elders state that God is worthy “to receive glory and honor and power;” Psalm 93 says that the LORD “is robed in majesty.”

3. Psalm 103:1, 145:21.

4. Psalm 106:47.

5. Psalm 105:3.

6. Psalm 93:1.

7. Psalm 93:2.

The Songs of the Creatures, Elders, and Host of Heaven

In Revelation 5:7-14, the Lamb comes forth to open the scroll sealed with 7 seals. St. John had despaired that no one was found “worthy” to open the scroll by breaking the seals. One of the elders told him to “weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”⁸ St. John then sees the Lamb, Jesus Christ, appear to open the scroll.

When Jesus comes forward to open the scroll, the elders and creatures again burst into praise. St. John records the scene and the song:

when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 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.” Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.⁹

Psalm 98 spoke of a time when God’s salvation would encompass all nations. The Psalm begins with the words, “Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things!”¹⁰ St. John heard a new song in heaven. The Psalm continues by saying, “The LORD has made known his

8. Revelation 5:5.

9. Revelation 5:8-14.

10. Psalm 98:1.

salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.”¹¹ In his time, St. John had seen the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire, far beyond the site of Jesus’ crucifixion in Jerusalem. The one “who sits on the throne” and “the Lamb” rule over all creation. Psalm 98:4 calls for “all the earth” to “make a joyful noise unto the LORD.”

Psalm 22 — the Psalm most closely linked to Jesus’ crucifixion — also contains a prophecy of the nations worshipping God. Psalm 22 declares that “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.”¹²

The Psalms had foretold that God would be worshipped by redeemed from “tribe and language and people and nation.” St. John witnesses the fulfillment of this prophecy in his vision in Revelation.

Revelation 6: the Lament of the Slain

Revelation 6 contains a disturbing episode. St. John describes what he saw:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Does this cry serve as the Revelation’s lament song?

Lament Psalms always include a cry to God and a petition. The saints address the Lord directly: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true.” The saints then give their petition: “ how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” The saints cry, “how long?”

11. Psalm 98:2.

12. Psalm 22:27.

Psalm 94:3 echoes this cry: “O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?” The saints and the Psalmist both wonder how long the Lord will tolerate wickedness. The Psalmist concludes the Psalm with the confident statement that “will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the LORD our God will wipe them out.”¹³

Likewise, the saints in heaven are told that the time of their justice would come. God will always judge those who oppress the saints; God will always validate the suffering of His people.

Revelation 11: The Song of the Seventh Trumpet

In Revelation 11, St. John records the song of the 24 elders following the sounding of the seventh trumpet of judgment:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”¹⁴

Psalm 2 is the first Royal Psalm of the Psalter. In Psalm 2, the Psalmist states the decree of the LORD by which the Davidic king reigns over Jerusalem and the nations. In the Greek version of Psalms, the translators used the word φροῦδος (“to show insolent anger”) to describe the nations’ actions against the Lord’s anointed. (The Hebrew word is שָׁנָה, “to be in tumult.”) The word St. John uses to describe the “raging” of the nations, ὀργίζω, refers to a furious anger. However, St. John’s readers would still see the connection: The nations plot their revolt against the reign of the Davidic

13. Psalm 94:23.

14. Revelation 11:15-18.

king, but His righteous rule will extend over them all. Psalm 2 warns the nations of the “wrath” of the LORD and encourages them to “kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled.¹⁵” Revelation 11 tells the end of the story: The nations do not heed the warning but reap judgment for their treatment of God’s people.

Revelation 18-19: The End of the Godless

One of Psalms’ recurrent themes is the eventual punishment of the wicked — and the fact that God’s people despair of its coming. Psalm 73 is the best example of this theme. The Psalmist begins with by declaring God’s goodness, but he quickly descends to a vivid description of the tempting lifestyle of the godless. Nothing seems to go right for the godly; nothing seems to go wrong for the godless.

The entire Psalm turns with verses 16-19:

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!

The Psalmist recognizes that the destruction will come suddenly and sweep away those who refuse to live godly lives.

Revelation 18 and 19 describe the ultimate conclusion of sin and rebellion. As the judgment unfolds, evil Babylon is destroyed. The nations gather for the final battle against Christ and His people. Finally, judgment comes at last to those who rebelled against God and oppressed the saints.

15. Psalm 2:12.

The fall of Babylon comes suddenly. Those enamored with her will lament, “Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come.¹⁶” Babylon, the symbol of human pride and glory, will fall as the Psalmist decreed: “destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors.”

The war of chapter 19 again reminds the reader of Psalm 2. The nations may rage, but Christ the Lord will prevail in the end. Furthermore, the judgment of Revelation 19 recalls Psalm 73:27: “For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.”

Revelation 21-22: The Call to New Jerusalem

After the final judgment, St. John tells of the “holy city, New Jerusalem,” that descends from heaven. St. John says in Revelation 21 that “I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.¹⁷”

The Psalms speak frequently of God’s dwelling place. To the Hebrews, the Temple served as the meeting point between heaven and earth. The God who used earth as His “footstool¹⁸” had chosen Jerusalem as the place where His glory would dwell among humanity. Psalm 9 says that the LORD “sits enthroned in Zion.¹⁹” Psalm 74 calls on the LORD to “remember Mount Zion, where

16. Revelation 18:10.

17. Revelation 21:3-4.

18. Isaiah 66:1.

19. Psalm 9:11.

you have dwelt.²⁰” Psalm 132 says that “the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place....²¹” St. John says in Revelation 22:3 that “the throne of God and of the Lamb” will be in Jerusalem. The call of Israel will be answered; God will dwell in Jerusalem.

Revelation contains one other connection to the Psalms. In Revelation 22:17, Jesus Christ calls, “Come.” Come to God; come to His dwelling place, the New Jerusalem; come to His salvation. The Psalter contains several hymns called “Pilgrim songs” that were sung by the Hebrews as they approached Jerusalem for the great festivals. One of the Pilgrim Songs, Psalm 122, begins with the line, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’²²” St. John says that the kings of the earth will bring “the glory and honor of the nations²³” into the city.

Will the people of earth sing the Pilgrim Songs as they enter the holy city? Or, will they sing a new song, one never heard on earth until then? Six Psalms mention the same phrase used by St. John in Revelation 5 and 14²⁴, one of which is Psalm 96:

Oh sing to the LORD a *new song*; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods.²⁵

Conclusion

There is a deeper relationship between the Psalms and the Revelation than merely the shared lyrics and terminology. St. John experienced events in eternity, outside time itself. When he

20. Psalm 74:2.

21. Psalm 132:13.

22. Psalm 122:1.

23. Revelation 22:26.

24. Psalms 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, and 149:1.

25. Psalm 96:1-4.

recorded his vision, St. John would have used language drawn directly from the songs his people had used for centuries in their worship. However, in the relationship between time and eternity, the hymns St. John heard in heaven may well have pre-dated the Psalter with which he was so intimately familiar.

The praise of heaven filled the Temple at every sacrifice, at every festival. In eternity, this praise will resound throughout the new creation. The saints will eternally praise Almighty God with new songs, joining with Hebrews from ages past to praise the LORD who inspired the Psalms.