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How the First-Century, Asia Minor, Jewish Christians Understood the Book of Revelation

First, please read the posts: Revelation – 1a. *Preface*, 2. *Overviews*, and 3. *Outline – Scene 1*

3. Outline

Scene 2, Part 1 – An Open Door into Heaven Yeshua and the Kingdoms of the World (4-16:21)

Scene 1 – The Island called Patmos (1:9–3:20)
Scene 2 – An Open Door into Heaven (4–16:21)
Scene 3 – The Wilderness (17–21:8)
Scene 4 – A high mountain (21:9-10–22:21)

The 4 scenes (or sections) of Revelation are separated by the author's words **I was in the Spirit**.

Scene 2 transitions from the Island of Patmos to an open door into heaven:

“After these things, I looked and saw a door opened in heaven, and the first voice I heard was like the sound of a shofar speaking with me, saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must occur after these things.’ Immediately, **I was in the Spirit** and behold, a throne was set in heaven, and One sitting on the throne.” (4:1-2)

Scene Summary: The fullness of God's flourishing kingdom and the opposing kingdoms of this world.

The Door – An Invitation into the Worship of Yeshua (Jesus) Alone

Just before John turns to see the door opened to the Throne Room of Yahweh in Revelation 4, he writes to the Christians in Laodicea the words of Yeshua beckoning them at another door. He says,

“Look, I stand at the **door** and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with Me.” (3:20)

In other words, He says, “Invite Me in, and I will have fellowship with you.” His invitation is to first-century Christians who have gravitated toward the false peace of their comfortable lifestyle in Asia Minor. He asks them to open their hearts and let Him into every area of their lives.

Then, John was redirected to another door, an **open door into heaven**. Can you imagine his awe? This open door invites him into the worship scene in the Heavenly Court. The scene captures the entire scope of our senses with its riveting fullness of creation life! It reveals how the universe is constructed and operates, giving us a worldview that shapes our worship.

Before we look at the components of this heavenly scene, let's define worship according to its first-century understanding:

Worship is giving allegiance and witness based on perceived worth. *Allegiance* is loyalty, commitment, and devotion; *Witness* is observing and giving the message of your observation. Every human being worships something. (The First Century, Asia Minor (FCAM) world was ruled by Ceasars and emperors who demanded worship.)

Worldview shapes worship, and worship shapes who we become. Worldview is what we believe about how the universe is constructed and operates, and this belief shapes our worship and who we become.

We worship what we love and desire. (In Isaiah 44:9-20, the worshippers of false idols become blind just like their wooden idols.) The book of Revelation challenges us to define our worship – where our allegiance and witness lie. It reorients, recalibrates, and fine-tunes our perspective.

- Our allegiance – As Yeshua’s Image Bearers, we live in loyalty and devotion to Him in every sphere of life. The Spirit of God leads us to love what He loves, and we become like Him.
- Our witness – As His Faithful Witnesses, we are observers and ambassadors of His Kingdom.

Into the Door – The Heavenly Court in the Temple

In Revelation 4 and 5, we enter the Temple, Yahweh’s Throne Room and Court that represent His Creation. The scene mirrors the beauty and shalom of the Garden of Genesis 1 and 2. (The Garden was His first Temple where He placed His image – the first Adam.) The Garden and Temple are images John draws from the ancient, near-east surrounding cultures in his effort to be understood by them. The Court is modeled after a Persian court to oppose their gods.

The door is open, and we are invited in to see and experience His Kingdom of Shalom:

- **The Glorious One**, Yahweh, seated on the Throne is surrounded by an emerald-like rainbow with a glassy, crystal sea before Him. All is serene. The lightning and thunder coming from the Throne represent the fullness of God’s presence – an echo from the Mount Sinai experience of God’s presence with His people (Exodus 18-21). Not only was John familiar with the Old Testament writings, but also with the Greco-Roman mythology of the sea as a place of chaos, unpredictability, and large devouring creatures. But here in God’s Kingdom, the sea is still, quiet, peaceful, and beautiful. **Yahweh is celebrated and worshipped for creating and sustaining all things.**
- **The 24 elders** in white garments with golden crowns, harps, and bowls of prayer-incense are seated on their own thrones around the Glorious One in the center. The number 12 represents entirety. Here, 24 represents the entirety of the people of God, the Faithful Witnesses, which includes 12 tribes + 12 apostles (24). (If you have received Yeshua, this is your place in the heavenly scene.)
- **The 4 living creatures** in the center and around the Throne do God’s bidding. Their appearance and behavior echoes the creatures in Ezekiel 1 who move in exact tandem with the Spirit of God. The number 4 represents earth’s completion (4 corners and 4 winds). The creatures reflect all of God’s complete creation fully flourishing as He intended in perfect shalom. The reality of heaven is described with its beauty, gems, calm sea, and radiance. In our allegiance, as we go about our lives, we participate in the new heaven which is creational, fruitful, flourishing, relational, and incarnated. God’s purpose is to redeem this earth, not do away with it. All things will become new as we will see in Chapters 21 and 22. He is not going to make new things; He will make the old things new.
- **The scroll that cannot be opened, sealed with 7 seals**, causes weeping because no one is worthy to open it. The scroll represents all of human experience – its history, brokenness, chaos and confusion, uncontrollable elements, the power of evil, and the presence of sin in God’s good creation. It exposes all that is contrary to Yahweh’s Kingdom of Shalom, and it protects His people by giving them discernment into the nature of evil so they can resist it and live lives set apart from it.

[We think of a seal as something to peel off or open to look inside, but in the Hebrew sense, a seal (the Greek *sphragis*, pronounced *sfrag-ece*) protects what it inside from misuse or abuse. A seal marks something as private, hidden, or secret... waiting to be revealed by the right person at the right time. In Ephesians 1:13, this word applies to us as His children; we are sealed with the Holy Spirit!]

- **The Slaughtered Lamb** with 7 horns and 7 eyes (the 7 Spirits of God sent out into the earth-see Isaiah 11:1-5) is Yahweh’s anointed representative on the Throne. His suffering and death exposed and conquered the power of evil represented in the seals. He is our Advocate to persevere through it. **The Slaughtered Lamb becomes the central focus, celebrated and worshipped for redemption.**

- **Many angelic ambassadors** doing Yahweh’s bidding.
- **Ha** (the) **satan** (ha saTANH’). This Hebrew word is not a proper name, but a role in the Court scene. It means *the accuser, the adversary, the prosecutor* who tests, tries, accuses, and proves the Faithful Witnesses to the Lamb. Although not mentioned in the Court scene of Revelation 4 and 5, this one is mentioned elsewhere and functions at Yahweh’s bidding. The accuser is not to be confused with the devil. For additional study, please see Job 1:6-12; Zechariah 3:1; and Romans 8:31-34.

The 7 Seals

The Slaughtered Lamb stands in the Court and opens the seals. Each seal explains an aspect of injustice. Then, He shows Himself as the stark contrast. Only He can fully expose evil, and only He can offer redemption and deliverance. The FCAM Christians were in danger of being assimilated into the culture. The seals give them discernment into the subtleties of evil so they also can stand in stark contrast to it. The vision is given in fantastical scenes of warning they can experience, remember, and heed.

The Lamb’s suffering, death, and resurrection are the backdrop of human experience. Great suffering resulting from injustice has occurred throughout the centuries, even though the Western world has been largely protected from it. The seals do not predict events of the future; rather, they expose the evil that has always been a part of our history – that which undoes creation and subverts its purpose.

An Interjection

But what about Yeshua’s words about the coming of the end of the age and understanding the signs of the times? You may refer to His words in these verses in Matthew and Luke. The disciples asked Him, “What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?” Here are the topics He covered:

General lawlessness will increase.	Matthew 24:3-14; Luke 21:7-19
Jerusalem will be destroyed (in AD 70).	Matthew 24:15-28; Luke 21:20-24
Judgment on evil will happen as seen in Seal 6	Matthew 24:29; Luke 21:25-26
Yeshua is coming	Matthew 24:30-31; Luke 21:27-28; Revelation 1:7
He gives words of preparation for His coming	Matthew 24:32-25:30; Luke 21:29-36
The final judgment will come.	Matthew 25:31

The First 6 Seals

In Zechariah 6:1-8, the horses are **messengers** of Yahweh; in Revelation 6:1-8:1, the horses are **expressions** of all that is wrong in human history and experience. As you read Chapter 6 alongside these expressions, consider the character of each and how you recognize them today. **Six Expressions of Evil:**

1. **First Seal – A White Horse** – represents **political control**. The bow and crown are implements of rulership, war, lust for power and control with a bent on conquest, a disregard for others (no empathy), and the use of manipulation, coercion, and aggression.
2. **Second Seal – A Red Horse** – represents **military conquest**. The sword makes war, is cruel and oppressive, and announces peace while taking it away.
3. **Third Seal – A Black Horse** – represents **economic injustice**. The scales represent usury, high interest rates, unfair distribution of weights, deception, slavery, trading in human lives, resource control, and subjugating others by creating famine, need, and waste.
4. **Fourth Seal – A Pale Green Horse** – represents **the infliction of harm leading to death**. Pestilence, disease, sickness, biological and environmental disasters and toxins, drugs, sorcery, plagues, and the devaluing of life and His creation come often as a result of the first three riders.
5. **Fifth Seal – The Martyrs under the altar** in the Heavenly Court
The martyrs represent the Faithful Witnesses unto death – all who bravely live in truth despite the consequences to them personally. Death as a result of allegiance to the Lamb is the ultimate sacrifice.

But we die daily in other ways in varying degrees as we live in allegiance to Him.

The word *martyr* comes from the Greek *marturia* meaning *witness*. The martyrs represent everyone throughout history who has cried out, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (6:10) These words echo Psalm 35:15-18, “How long O Lord will You look on? Rescue my soul from their ravages...”

The conflicts you and I face as a result of our allegiance and witness to Him are common to all who mourn over the ravages of the opposing kingdom of chaos. (See also Romans 8:22-23; Matthew 5:5; and Ezekiel 9:3-4.)

Yeshua said, “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11-12)

The Apostle Paul said to Timothy, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Messiah Yeshua will be persecuted.” (2 Timothy 3:12)

Yeshua said, “If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what good does it do a person if he gains the whole world, but loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:23-25)

The martyrs are not worthy because of what they did; rather, their allegiance and testimony is their participation in Yahweh’s Kingdom of Shalom. When we live in Him, we experience adversity. We don’t force suffering or ask for it, we simply live by the Holy Spirit. His light shines in the darkness “to the one a fragrance of death to death, and to the other, a fragrance of life to life.” (2 Corinthians 2:16)

6. Sixth Seal – The Entire Cosmos is Shaken

The language of the sixth seal is apocalyptic literature in full strength! The intense images of the massive earthquake and the sky – the black sun, blood moon, falling stars, sky split like a scroll rolled up, and mountains and islands moved out of place all represent the chaos resulting from the exposure of the kingdom of darkness to the brilliant light of the Slaughtered Lamb. (These images echo Isaiah 34:4; Isaiah 2:12-22; Daniel 8:10; Matthew 24:29; and Luke 21:25-26.)

The images are not astronomical events, but the end (the fall) of everyone who has exalted themselves over the Lamb. The falling stars represent the angelic beings and deities in ancient mythology falling from their destiny. His suffering death and vindicating resurrection create such an alternate reality for them that there is nothing left but for them to run and hide. In His light, all who have invested in their arrogance have nowhere to go. Everything they staked their claim on is gone, “rolled up like a scroll.” They scurry and hide from *the wrath of the Lamb*.

What is the *wrath of the Lamb*? We need His revelation to grasp the enormity its definition! His wrath is not anger as we think about anger. Rather, Yahweh’s wrath is the just response to evil, oppression, and injustice expressed in the suffering of the Lamb. Yahweh dealt with evil by giving Himself to redeem a broken world. His suffering and death killed the domain of darkness; He expressed wrath with His suffering (His weapon). In other words, Yahweh was so desirous of shalom for us that He killed the evil with His willing Servant; He did *not* unleash His wrath on His Son.

As His Faithful Witnesses, we stand and fight with our willingness to lay down our lives. As a contrast to the falling stars (the destructive, arrogant people of the kingdoms of this world), we are stars shining in their place. In the words of the angel Gabriel to Daniel: “And those who have insight will

shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven and those who lead the many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.” (Daniel 12:3) We participate in rebuilding Creation with our gifts and with every opportunity until He returns and The New Jerusalem comes!

➤ **The interlude before the Seventh Seal** in Chapter 7 answers the two questions of Chapter 6 using images, symbols, and numbers to communicate the sure rest and vindication for God’s people.

• *“Who is able to stand?”*

In Seal 6, the arrogant cry out, “Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb for the great day of their wrath has come, and *who is able to stand?*” (6:17)

The Faithful Witnesses will stand! Yahweh gathers His people (Jew and Gentile) to give them a mark or seal of protection, which is the Name of the Lamb and His Father – a Passover image of deliverance. (14:1; See also Ephesians 1:13-14).

• *“How long, O Lord, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”* As you read Chapter 7, consider these numerical symbols:

- 1,000 – represents myriads or too much to count (not a specific number).
- 12 – represents totality. Every Faithful Witness is accounted for, not lost or forsaken, and marked for sure vindication.
- 7 – represents completion or fulfillment. Verses 7:14-17 is our current status – we are sealed, washed white in His blood, and living before His Throne in an attitude of worship and awe with His tabernacle covering us.

7. *Seventh Seal* – **Silence in heaven, 7 angels with 7 trumpets** – Revelation 8:5 mirrors 4:5 with the motif of thunder, lightning, and earthquake – a Sinai moment that reflects the awesome, flourishing presence of God.