

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 368

Revelation 4, Part 3

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Episode Summary

This episode, the third installment of our discussion of the Old Testament in Revelation 4, has a singular point of focus: the twenty-four elders of Revelation 4. Who or what are the twenty-four elders? What do they symbolize? What is their intended meaning? This episode explores the interpretive options and how each might derive from Old Testament content.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 368: Revelation 4, Part 3. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! Well, how are you doing this week?

MH: I'm doing fine. But you know, I've heard that Texas is overrun with Neanderthals. You guys are Neanderthals.

TS: Yeah.

MH: When I heard the President say that after Texas opened up, I thought, "Boy, that's just really unfortunate timing. Because it would've been great to interview Josh Swamidass *today*. Because then we could really talk about living Neanderthals.

TS: Well, we can still point people back to those two episodes. [MH laughs] But yeah, as one of the Neanderthals speaking here, representing all Neanderthals in Texas, we appreciate that. We actually... What does that say about us, that we actually take that as a compliment? [MH laughs]

MH: I don't know. You know? I don't know that I want to touch that. [TS laughs] But I guess that's better than having Josh on here and talking about Neanderthal interbreeding or something. You know? Probably less offensive.

TS: I've got friends on Facebook and other social media changing their profile pictures to Neanderthals.

MH: [laughs] That's great.

TS: Head shots and stuff. And it's like, "We're pretty proud of that. That's a badge of honor to be called that." So no hurt feelings over here in Texas.

MH: Any sports franchises going to change their name?

TS: Oh, that'd be perfect. Yeah, that's a perfect excuse to change your name. But I'm sure some...

MH: Or maybe people would forget about the Cowboys of a year ago if they just changed their name to the Dallas Neanderthals. [laughs]

TS: Easy. If we started winning, I don't think people would complain. But...

MH: Yeah, that's true.

TS: Yeah. Well, Mike, any Neanderthals in Revelation 4 today? This is the last part of chapter 4. Is there anything in the Bible?

MH: No, no. I looked, but I couldn't find any. [laughs] So unsuccessful there.

TS: That's unfortunate. It doesn't have Texas in there? It doesn't have Texas in the Bible?

MH: No.

TS: Really? Because there's lots of Texans who think that Texas is in the Bible.

MH: Well...

TS: I made that up.

MH: You're going to have to correct them. Tell them the book of Revelation is all about *America*, not just Texas.

TS: Ohh, okay. Well, us Texans only think about Texas, not really the Union.

MH: Right.

TS: So we're a little...

MH: Just like a lot of people conflate Israel and America, you guys conflate America and Texas. Right? Is that what you're saying? [laughs]

TS: Yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying. I'm saying Texas is the new Israel. Is that what I'm saying?

MH: [laughs] Filled with Neanderthals. [TS laughs] Boy, yeah. I'll look for this on an *Ancient Aliens* episode to come. Yeah, we'll probably get that. Giorgio, if you're listening, there you go. You can thank me later. Maybe I get a royalty for that.

TS: I'm waiting for another show to quote our show or do something like that. Wouldn't that be funny if we popped up on *The Simpsons*, or something random? That'd be awesome. Be part of pop culture.

MH: So you think of the fun side. I think of... It sort of makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. What people might do... [laughs]

TS: Yeah, no, I get all that. Yeah, lots of people are like, "This is a Bible show. You all don't need to talk about sports and aliens and stuff." It's like...

MH: Well, see now we're including Neanderthals. So we're widening the berth here.

TS: Yeah, but we're going to get some blowback. I'm going to get some emails chewing me out for having too much fun on the Bible show.

MH: Alright, well, we don't want you to have any more fun, so let's just start into Revelation 4. [laughs]

TS: Sounds good.

MH: Ah... Alright. Yeah, this is Part 3, as it worked out. This is just the way things fell. I didn't want to loop chapter 5 in here, so we're going to do a discrete episode on chapter 5 to wrap up these two that are this Divine Council throne room scene. We're going to spend today really just covering a couple of verses that deal with one item, and that is the 24 elders. So I'm going to just read where they show up in chapter 4. I mean, they're going to pop up in chapter 5, too, but by then we'll already have covered it. So Revelation 4:4 says:

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⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.

And then if you skip ahead a little bit, you hit verse 9 and the first part of 10, which read:

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever.

So the question is kind of obvious here. Who or what are the 24 elders? And there are two possible trajectories in the Old Testament for the “elder” language here, though not really the number (at least in terms of being explicit). So I’m going to quote here (just to sort of summarize the two trajectories or at least get us into this part) from Aune’s commentary again on Revelation 1-5, his first of three volumes in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series. He says:

There are two OT passages in which a group of “elders” is depicted as present before Yahweh: (1) Isa 24:23, which describes an eschatological event [MH: and then he quotes it] (“For the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory”), and (2) Exod 24:9–10, the narrative of the seventy elders who accompanied Moses up to Mount Sinai where they had a vision of God. The author may have derived his conception of twenty-four elders surrounding the heavenly throne of God from these two passages, or may at least be alluding to them.

Now again, those are the two directions you could go. Obviously (or maybe not obviously), if you’ve read *Unseen Realm*, you know that I take Isaiah 24:23 as describing celestial elders (supernatural beings, Divine Council), not humans. And of course in Exodus 24, you do have humans (Moses and Aaron and Nadab and Abihu and the 70 elders). They go up Mount Sinai and they see the God of Israel and have a feast—have a meal. So we have sort of a celestial (divine) and a human trajectory—one of each. You know, these are the two paths you could go.

Now just a heads up, I’m going to suggest at one point here when we go through the material that you don’t really need the dichotomy. The dichotomy’s really a bit of a false dichotomy. But for the sake of starting off, there you go.

Now the identity of the elders, Baumgarten writes... I brought in an article by Joseph Baumgarten called *The Duodecimal Courts of Qumran, Revelation, and the Sanhedrin*. “Duodecimal” is a term that refers to 12 (themes of the number 12). The article is from the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. It’s a 1976 article. So he makes the comment that the identity of the elders “has been one of the long-standing and still unresolved problems in the interpretation of Revelation.” So Beale, sort of building off that, summarizes the interpretive options adduced by

scholars. Now again, you have these two trajectories, but the two trajectories have produced a number of interpretive approaches to this. So Beale writes:

Now a heavenly entourage around the throne is pictured [MH: in Revelation 4]. The elders have been variously identified as (1) stars (from an astrological background), (2) angels, (3) OT saints [MH: that would be people—the righteous], (4) angelic, heavenly representatives of all saints [MH: both Old and New Testament], (5) patriarchs and apostles representing the OT and NT saints [MH: again, the righteous] together, and (6) representatives of the prophetic revelation of the twenty-four books of the Old Testament.

Of course, the 24 books would be according to the Hebrew arrangement and canon and all that. Now nobody really spends much attention on that last one, and I'm not going to either. Because the other ones are so much better options. Baumgarten observes that:

... the Church Fathers and ancient commentators generally took them [MH: the 24 elders] to be glorified saints [MH: glorified righteous people], some modern exegetes have tried to advance the view that they were angels. Recently there has been a return to the former opinion [MH: the glorified righteous saints], but no adequate rationale for the number twenty-four has been offered.

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So again, Baumgarten basically is saying, "We've got problems here." Now consequently, most of the discussion about the 24 elders has been oriented to really the second through fifth options: angels, Old Testament saints, angelic representatives of all the saints in both testaments, or patriarchs and apostles (also representing Old and New Testament saints). So those four options (options two through five), that's really where the discussion lives, and at times the distinctions between them are pretty blurred. Now each of those options has some connection to the Old Testament. After all, this series is *The Book of Revelation's Use of the Old Testament*." All of these have some connection to the Old Testament. And where Beale lands is illustrative. You're going to see that the lines are blurred in the list that he himself gave. He writes:

The elders certainly include references to OT and NT saints [MH: so he's going that way]. They are either angels representing all saints or the heads of the twelve tribes together with the twelve apostles, representing thus all the people of God.

So he kind of merges two or three of these options. Beale supports his reasoning in this regard by noting that, earlier in the book, a close relationship between angels and the people of God is suggested via the lampstand imagery, which

applies to the churches and, in its Old Testament source (Zechariah 4), divine beings in the presence of God. Beale also notes that the white garments and crowns worn by the elders (that's what they're wearing) are items associated with human believers who keep their faith until the end. And again, this is well-traveled turf in the last few episodes. But the allusion here is specifically to Revelation 2:10, 3:4, and 3:11. And then to follow that, Beale writes this:

The readers are given a look into heaven to see that the saints of old together with deceased Christians...

Think of the white robes and crowns here, that's how he's tying in the martyrs here.

The readers are given a look into heaven to see that the saints of old together with deceased Christians who have persevered have received the heavenly reward of crowns, white clothing, and kingship... [t]he readers can be assured that they too will receive a like reward, if they are faithful to the end... [I]n Revelation angels never wear crowns or white clothing or sit on thrones...

Now that one's debatable, because if that's where you fall with the 24 elders, he would not be correct there. Though what he's saying is that you'll never see the word "angel" sitting on a throne. Okay, that much is fair. But it's a bit of a misdirection. So I'll back up here. He says:

[I]n Revelation angels never wear crowns or white clothing or sit on thrones, but such descriptions are predicated only of saints [MH: the righteous] who are in heaven (7:13–15; 19:7–8, 14) or of the saints' reward after death, as a result of their perseverance (cf. 2:10; 3:4–5; 3:21; 20:4)."

So that's where Beale lands. A little bit of a blurring of distinction, but he's definitely... I'd say it's fair to say the majority of his thinking is sort of on the human trajectory, or at least the glorified human trajectory.

Now other scholars have opted for twelve representatives of Israel's original tribes and the twelve apostles by analogy to the two "twelves" of Revelation 21. So let's not forget about this 12-and-12 thing in Beale's list. So some say, "Hey, look at Revelation 21, where the gates of the new Jerusalem correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel, but the foundations correspond to the apostles." So you get 12 + 12, obviously equaling 24. So the reasoning is that the new Jerusalem symbolizes the new Israel comprised of the first people of God (Old Testament Israel) and the new Israel (the Church). Okay, so this is again another notion

that's on the human trajectory, but it's more symbolic (the 12 and 12—the tribes and the apostles).

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Now what Beale says and what these other scholars would say (the predominantly human trajectory), all that is true, but there are outliers in the data. For example, members of God's council may lack crowns, but they *do* sit on thrones (that's Dan 7:9-10). And if we've learned anything about Revelation 4 up to this point, it tracks Daniel 7 on fourteen points in the same order. And the celestial heavenly host in Daniel 7 is meeting. It's a Divine Council meeting. It's a divine courtroom. And they have some participatory role in God making a decision here. They open the books—all of these motifs that we've talked about before. So yeah, okay, they don't have crowns, but they do have some authority here. They do have a participatory role. They participate in God's governance. Further, Isaiah 24:23 references Yahweh's "elders." This is a passage I talk about in *Unseen Realm*. And I suggested there (and will continue to suggest) that the most plausible interpretation of that passage is Yahweh's celestial, supernatural council. Not human beings, okay?

Now I referenced an article in *Unseen Realm* by Timothy Willis in this regard. The title of it is "Yahweh's Elders (Isaiah 24,23): Senior Officials of the Divine Court." That's a 1991 article. So I'm going to drift back into that just a little bit here. While there are Old Testament passages that suggest the eventuality of believers being glorified as members of the heavenly family-council... While that idea is foreshadowed, that in the end, believers will (just to quote Genesis 15)... And this'll take your minds back if you're a long-time podcast listener to our conversations with David Burnett about the "star seed" in Genesis 15:6, when God takes Abraham out and shows him the stars of the sky and says, "Your descendants—your offspring—are going to be like the stars of heaven." How that's not only a *quantitative* statement, but in Second Temple Judaism (and, of course, also suggested in the New Testament) it's also a *qualitative* statement. That eventually your seed (those who are the seed of Abraham, i.e., believers) are going to be like the stars of heaven, which were considered the sons of God (angels, if you want to use that term). So that's true. There's this foreshadowing. But despite that, there's no explicit Old Testament reference to the idea being current (like happening now, or in the past, or something that's already going on) like you get in the New Testament. I mean, you get this language in Revelation 4 and 5 with the martyrs, and you get it in Hebrews 12 (the cloud of witnesses that are enrolled among the celestial group in heaven there).

Let me just quote Hebrews 12 here. We recently did an episode on this, but let's just to capture the wording again—the whole cloud of witnesses episode. But I think what's really important in that passage are verses 22-23. So verse 1 everybody knows, "Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." We talked in that episode about what the cloud of witnesses means. And I think key to understanding it are verses 22-23 in the same chapter. He's talking to believers.

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

Of course, this is the same book (Hebrews) as Hebrews 2, where believers are introduced to God and God to believers in the midst of the congregation—in the midst of the congregation/council. So we get the book of Hebrews and we get other New Testament books that sort of have this "already, but not quite yet" feel to them. But that goes beyond the Old Testament.

Now why am I belaboring this point? Because if the concept goes beyond the Old Testament... If all the Old Testament really offers here is a foreshadowing that's going to be associated in the future with the messiah, with the kingdom, the New Jerusalem... Let's even throw in New Covenant in there. That's what Daniel 12 would be talking about (the End of Days). Okay? If all the Old Testament can do is foreshadow this, then by definition, Yahweh's elders in Isaiah 24:23 are not humans. That's the Divine Council made up of celestial beings only. That's the point. That's why I'm belaboring it. Isaiah 24:23 is prior to these New Testament passages and prior to Second Temple material, which makes it all the more likely a reference to the heavenly host-council. Now I might as well quote from Willis. This is what I said about Willis in *Unseen Realm*. So let me throw this out here. I wrote in *Unseen Realm*:

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... The inclusion of martyrs in the scene in Revelation 6:9–11 seems to require that the elders are also distinct from glorified believers.

Okay, if you actually go look at Revelation 6:9-11... Let's take a peek there. We're talking about outliers to Beale's idea that these are glorified righteous. How he defends that is okay, but again, he doesn't address the outliers. So in Revelation 6:9 we read:

⁹ 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 [MH: there's the martyred righteous].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.

Again, these souls of those under the altar, this shows up in the Revelation 4-5 scene. And they *have* to be distinct from the elders, is the point. So that mars the neatness of what Beale is arguing for in terms of the human trajectory.

Now I'll say one more thing before moving on. The whole notion about the Old Testament foreshadowing the glorification of human beings, this qualitative concept that believers will be made like the stars and so on and so forth, this is actually really important because in Second Temple Jewish literature, this is a significant theme. David Burnett, when we had him on, we talked a little bit about this. But if you really want the detail, you should go to my website (drmsb.com). And there's actually a blog series written by David Burnett on "Paul's Use of Genesis 15:5 in Romans 4:18 in Light of Early Jewish Deification Traditions." I think he's pretty restricted to Genesis 15:5 and not verse 6. So if you want the detail to this, how the promise given to Abraham is not just quantitative, but qualitative, and how it speaks of believers being glorified and being numbered among the stars in the Divine Council... But anyway, this is an important idea because what it does is it blurs both of those Old Testament trajectories.

So where I'm going to wind up here is that there's no reason that we have to pick, "Oh, is it the glorified righteous or is it the Divine Council members?" And the answer is, "Yeah. Because we are going to be members of the council. And the cloud of witnesses suggests that that's an "already" reality, but "not yet." I mean, we're not at the End of Days, we're not at ultimate glorification, but these two things merge. And they get merged before the New Testament. The New Testament has this talk of "partakers of the divine nature." "You're *already* partakers of the divine nature." That's a passage in Peter. But yet we're not yet glorified. First John talks about our glorification. We have this "already" aspect and a "not yet." And it's associated with being members in God's heavenly family council. We are children and partners. This is what God wanted from the very beginning. So in Second Temple literature, this idea... Because people are

looking back at Genesis 15:5. People are looking at other passages. And they come up with the development of this concept.

Now Aune points out that Second Temple Jewish literature has a lot of precedent for this. It has precedent for seeing the elders that occupy thrones around God himself as being members of the heavenly host. And that's going to turn into this sort of merging or including glorified human believers in it. But let's just start with picking up on my slant here, because I think Isaiah 24:23 does speak of non-human celestial Divine Council members. And so somebody like Aune would say, "Yeah, there's good evidence for that, too, in Second Temple literature. It's not just the human trajectory," although we're going to loop that in. But Aune writes:

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A more conventional conception of the arrangement of heavenly beings who surround God on his heavenly throne is for them to flank the throne on the right and on the left, as in 1 Kgs 22:19 [MH: very familiar Divine Council passage]... There can be no doubt, however, that the author understands the twenty-four elders as encircling the throne [MH: so he's just commenting on the posture here and the arrangement]. For the location of many thrones near the throne of God, see Dan 7:9 [MH: we already cited that, and]... For the conception of one or more thrones in each of a series of heavens, apparently occupied by an angelic leader... see *Asc. Isa.* 7:14, 19, 24, 29, 31, 33, 35; 8:9; 9:10, 24; 11:40.

Basically, read *Ascension of Isaiah* 7 and 8, plus little bit in chapter 9, a little bit in chapter 11. So it's there. Now where you get more of it is the idea that human righteous are part of an angelic priesthood. That's at Qumran. We'll get to that in a moment. But that's where humans are looped into this. But the point here is that there are good reasons to take Isaiah 24:23 as not including humans. And if that's the case, then why can't that idea be what John is thinking of in Revelation 4-5. He's thinking of the celestial heavenly host in Isaiah 24, and he calls them elders. We've got Daniel 7, where God meets with his celestial council, and that is the model. That is the well from which Revelation 4 comes. So why do we have to go all of a sudden and say, "Well, these must be people—glorified people." Why can't they be just Divine Council members? So that's the other side of this. So Beale leans toward the human (and lots of people do). There's this other argument for the divine (the celestial Divine Council). But again, as I've already hinted, these two things... Maybe they're just not a necessary choice. Again, we don't have to really opt for one or the other. Again, does it really matter? Because you're going to have plenty of data for both. Are the twenty-four elders of Yahweh's council human believers in heaven or celestial members of

the heavenly host? In biblical thought, the question really seems like a moot one because human believers are destined to be glorified and joined to the Divine Council. This is a familiar idea to those of you who are familiar with my content (*Unseen Realm*) and have listened to the podcast before.

But I want to track through some of what I wrote and then go into the Qumran material, just to show you how these things get merged, or can be merged, or at least in the Second Temple period on in toward the first century, that this is happening. So in the book of Revelation (let's just start there), Jesus is not only referred to as the morning star, but he grants the morning star to believers. This is one thread. The implications are noteworthy. I wrote in *Unseen Realm*:

The “morning star” phrase takes us back once more to the Old Testament, which at times uses astral terminology to describe divine beings. Job 38:7 is the best example (“the morning stars were singing together and all the sons of God shouted for joy”). Stars were bright and, in the worldview of the ancients, living divine beings since they moved in the sky and were beyond the human realm.

The morning star language in Revelation 2:28 is messianic—it refers to a divine being who would come from Judah. We know this by considering two other passages in tandem.

In Numbers 24:17, we read the prophecy that “a star will go out from Jacob, and a scepter will rise from Israel.”

Okay, that is not a reference to the birth star, because the star goes out from Jacob. The birth star didn't... It's not a reference to the thing in the sky, because the tribe of Jacob isn't in the sky. Okay? This is tribal talk. The word “star” is used to say essentially that a divine being (specifically a divine king, because it's from Judah) will arise. “A scepter will rise from Israel.”

Numbers 24:17 was considered messianic in Judaism, completely apart from the New Testament writers. In other words, literate readers of John's writing would have known the morning star reference was not about literal brightness. It was about the dawning of the returned kingdom of God under its messiah. Later in the book of Revelation, Jesus himself refers to his messianic standing with the morning star language: “I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (Rev 22:16).

...As Daniel says, the righteous [MH: here's where we get the righteous looped in again] will “shine like the brightness of the sky above... like the stars, forever and

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ever” (Dan 12:2–3). Our inheritance of the nations with Jesus at the end of days (Rev 3:21) is in a glorified, resurrected—divine—state. The star language of Genesis 15 has an eschatological connotation.

Now that thinking in Revelation, where you have celestial being and glorified human being spoken of in the same way, in this case, authority in the kingdom... Think of the council. Think “councils have authority,” where you blur (or at least merge—that’s a better word) the deity/divine Jesus with human glorified believers. They’re members of the same body with Jesus. He says that he’ll grant to the one that overcomes to sit on his throne with him in Revelation 3, and he will share with them the morning star in Revelation 2. Again, this is inclusion in the council and it’s inclusion in authority. Both sides start to be blended here.

This line of thinking is consistent with wider Second Temple Jewish thought that human believers, when glorified, will become members of God’s heavenly entourage. This point of theology is well known from Second Temple Jewish sources and the literature of Qumran especially, whose occupants saw themselves as an angelic priesthood.

This belief in a presumed symbiosis between the earthly and heavenly priesthood-servants of God may provide a point of connection to the number of the elders as well, which some suggest derives from the twenty-four priestly courses described in 1 Chronicles 23-24.

Maybe that’s where we get the 24. Maybe it’s about a heavenly priesthood that is both divine but also earthly. Like we’ve got again this merging going on. You know, consider the elements. Just think about the elements of the scene. Revelation 4-5 is based on Daniel 7, a divine council scene in which all authority is given to the Son of Man. Remember how Daniel 7 ends? All the authority is given to the Son of Man. The Son of Man, Jesus, is the Morningstar who shares his authority with human believers, specifically sharing his throne (in Revelation 3:21). And he sets believers over the nations being judged in Revelation 2:26. To this we could add the description in the book of Hebrews where believers are part of a great cloud of witnesses, which is language drawn from celestial court imagery in ancient covenants. These believers “have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God.” Oh, isn’t that what’s described in the book of Revelation? The New Jerusalem—the heavenly Jerusalem? Hebrews 12 has believers coming to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem, “to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” They are enrolled in heaven. And those believers will (as Paul says) judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:3).

The point here is that a choice between glorified humans and celestial agents of the heavenly Divine Council isn’t really necessary. The categories overlap. That’s the point. So at this point in the episode, this is where I’d say, “This, I think, is a

really good way to look at it.” That the 24 elders... Okay, you’ve got 12 and 12—24. I’m not bothered by the whole symbolic attempt here. But I think wherever you land on how you talk about the 24 elders, you need to affirm that the Divine Council, in terms of the supernatural character of it, is not denied. In other words, the humans don’t squeeze out the divine elements here of the council. Rather, humans are included in the council. So however you want to talk about that... And again, you go back to Beale’s five or six options, all the elements are there—both the celestial (if you want to use the word “angelic”) element of the council along with glorified humans. Yeah, all that stuff is there, so we need to find a way to talk about the 24 elders that includes both sides of the coin without squeezing one out of the other.

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Now here’s the wild card. What about the astral interpretation of the twenty-four elders? That was the first thing Beale listed. And I’ve mentioned this before. Now I’m going to (again, more or less) just tell you where I’m going with this. The Divine Council in the Old Testament is described in very explicit astral language. And believers (glorified believers) who will join the council are described in very explicit astral language. Daniel 12: “...will shine as the stars.” Genesis 15: “You’ll be as the stars of the sky.” Just go back and read through the Burnett series and you’ll get all the primary source data from the Second Temple period about this. In other words, Mike isn’t making it up, and neither is Dave Burnett. This is how they were thinking about this kind of stuff (this star language) associated with the Divine Council. So would it really be inconsistent if we also looked at the 24 elders astrally—as astral talk? The short answer is no, it wouldn’t. In fact, that would sort of lend another perspective to the same things we’re talking about: the Divine Council, in this case, made up of supernatural beings *and* glorified humans. And the way we telegraph this idea is the astral talk from the Old Testament. Okay?

Now obviously we’re not going to take time on this episode to go through all the astral talk of the Old Testament. I’ve just given you a few passages to think about. There are, of course, more. We’ve hit Daniel 12 here. We’ve hit Genesis 15:5. We’ve hit Job 38 (the stars). Isaiah 14 you could throw in there. I mean, there’s plenty of this astral talk in the Old Testament. So let’s just go down that trajectory a little bit and talk about, “What about the astral approach?” Now Aune and Beale are skeptical of the approach generally. They don’t really seem to connect the dots here between glorified humans and the celestial star language stuff. I don’t know why, because it’s not hard to see. Maybe it’s just they’re not used to looking at things that way. But again, it’s not hard to see. Again, if you want the primary source data, go to the blog series by Burnett and you’ll get references there, too, and bibliography.

So Aune and Beale are a little skeptical of the approach. They presume (maybe this is why) the imagery must come from the Babylonian zodiac, and that Old Testament correlations are more likely. Now wait a minute. Are you suggesting then, professors, that astral imagery in the Old Testament doesn’t have a

connection to Babylonian stuff? If you're suggesting that, you would be incorrect. Ezekiel 1, okay? We'll get there in a moment. Now it is true that the zodiacal system would have its point of origin in Mesopotamia (everybody sort of knows that), but all cultures of the Mediterranean region, including that of ancient Israel and the Second Temple Jews, they all utilized the zodiac for observing the celestial sky. So big deal if it comes from Babylon. Everybody used it. It's kind of like a meaningless objection. Plus, if you throw Ezekiel 1 in there, it's kind of a misguided objection.

Now there's a good deal of evidence for Jewish astrological beliefs in Second Temple Jewish texts. And this evidence should not... Let me emphasize this. This evidence should *not* be interpreted as a concession to heterodox pagan religion. Rather, Judaism held to its theological orthodoxy, parsing astronomical phenomena and astrological concepts through a belief in Yahweh as the ruler of the cosmos. And this blend actually gets visible representation by zodiac mosaics in ancient synagogues.

Yes, there are zodiac mosaics in ancient synagogues. Now if you want some sources here (just generally something that's accessible online), I would say probably the best thing to look up using Google is the author Lester Ness, and you'll find his book, *Written in the Stars: Ancient Zodiac Mosaics*. It's his dissertation from Miami University of Ohio under Edwin Yamauchi, who is an evangelical (and so is Lester Ness). But it's a really good dissertation. Lester Ness taught for many years in China. (I don't know if he still does.) But he put his dissertation online. So there you go. You can have it. It's also been published in hard copy form, too. I mean, there are other sources that you can just use Google Scholar for this sort of thing. Search for "zodiac mosaics Judaism" and you'll find lots of stuff. But anyway, that one's free and accessible.

So back to the point here, the fact that you could have zodiac imagery... Who cares if it comes from Babylon? That's where astronomy stuff came from, and everybody's using it. So does Ezekiel 1, and we don't look at Ezekiel 1 askance for that. We have primary source data that Jews did have zodiacal thinking in their theology, and it didn't steer them away from orthodox Yahwism. Because Yahweh was the one who created these objects, wasn't he? And he is their master. What Jews and later Christians rejected in terms of astrology stuff is the idea that the objects in the sky could dictate and control individual fate. That was theologically anathema, because only God is sovereign. Period. These things do not decree individual fate. They serve their Creator.

Anyway, let's go back to the whole approach. Scholars who have championed the astral-zodiac approach are few. There aren't many of these. Now the most

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notable contemporary scholar is the late Bruce Malina. Dr. Malina passed away a few years ago. He was a New Testament scholar specializing in applying the social sciences to New Testament culture and interpretation. And Malina argued for the astral view based on several textual considerations that were then parsed according to ancient astronomical or astrological thought. If you want to get sort of his whole commentary on Revelation, it's published in a book. It's still available on Amazon. It's called *On the Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys*. I said before on the podcast that the book has (I think rightly) been reviewed negatively in that Malina neglects to connect this stuff to Old Testament material. I think that's a legitimate criticism. In other words, he sees the astral road and gets on it and never departs and never bothers to sort of try to marry it to Old Testament material. That's a legitimate criticism; however, he has a lot of data [laughs] that really makes sense. So the sentence a few seconds ago, I said something like... What Malina's arguing for is he's looking at the text. There are certain features of the Revelation 4-5 vision that John has, and he pulls those out. He observes those things. And then he interprets them according to ancient astronomical/astrological thought. Let me give you some examples of how this approach would work:

1. The throne of Revelation 4-5 is (drumroll, please) heavenly. In other words, it's said to be in the heavens. Revelation 4:1-2 just says that point blank. So Malina's like, "Well, why don't we consider the heavens then? If that's where the vision is situated."
2. God's throne is situated above the firmament (we know this from the Old Testament), and the firmament was conceived as this solid dome over the earth in ancient cosmology. We're talking about the firmament created in Genesis 1:6 that separated the waters below it from the waters above it. Genesis 1:6 is your verse. You could compare that to Proverbs 8:27-28 and Job 37:18, which has the firmament being solid and hard as brass—this kind of language. God, in the Old Testament, "walks upon the vault of heaven," the vault in this firmament. He walks on it (Job 22:14). Psalm 29:10 says, "the Lord sits enthroned over the flood," in other words, over these waters up there above the firmament. God "builds his upper chambers in the heavens and founds his vault upon the earth" (Amos 9:6). The dome rests upon the earth and God lives above it. In Revelation 4:5, meteorological phenomena emanate from the throne. Malina says, "Hey, have you read verse 5 in Revelation 4? You get flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. That's, like, sky stuff. Okay? Up there." So Malina says, "Consequently, the sea of glass before the throne," and really under the

throne, “is likely to be understood as this firmament.” Malina would say, “Well, let’s try that out. Let’s just put that one away and consider it.”

3. Given that the cherubim imagery of Ezekiel 1 repurposed in Revelation 4 corresponds to the four points of the Babylonian zodiac, an astral significance to John’s throne description and the twenty-four elders seems to make sense.

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Now we talked about this before as far as the Ezekiel 1 imagery. We’ve spent some time before on the podcast in that material. And if you remember, I cited Dan Block, his commentary on Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 1, he makes this point that the four faces of the cherubim are the four cardinal points of the Babylonian zodiac. And the theology is significant. You have the eyes and the wheels. The wheel is a circuit. It goes around. Okay? And you’ve got eyes in the wheels. And depending on how you take chapter 10:12, you could have the eyes in the creatures. You certainly have the eyes in the creatures in Revelation. And eyes in the creatures and the wheels, and they all have eyes. This is constellations. And constellations go around. They have cycles. This is astronomical/astrological imagery that Ezekiel is using in chapter 1 of his vision. This is what he sees. And what does it communicate? What do constellations and stars and rotating cycles in the heavens do? They map time. And why is that important? Because history proceeds through time. And the messaging is, “All of this is controlled. The passage of time and history and human destiny is controlled by whoever sits on the throne in the midst of all this. And in Ezekiel’s vision, it’s not a Babylonian deity like Marduk. It’s Yahweh.

So there they are—the exiles. Ezekiel has this vision. And the point of the vision is to say, like preachers like to say, “God is still on the throne. Yeah, we’re kicked out of the land. We’re apostates. We violated the covenant. But God is still with us. He still has a plan. He is still in control.”

Now I would suggest that John knows that. He understands Ezekiel 1. He understands the astral imagery. He understands the theological teaching point, and he uses that material (or God providentially gives him the material by virtue of the vision—it’s probably a little bit of both) to communicate the same idea. Revelation is what? It’s an *apocalypse*. Bad stuff is coming down the road. It’s the End of Days. Who’s in control of all that? Who’s going to make sure that the righteous are vindicated? Who’s going to make sure that the nations are judged (and, of course, their gods)? Why, that would be Yahweh’s council. God is still on the throne. He is still ruling with his council like he did, frankly, in the book of

Ezekiel, but also all these other passages we've cited (Isaiah, Daniel 7). Think of Daniel 7. It is God who decides the flow of history and the destiny of empires, including his enemies. So I think John is trying to communicate the same things.

Now let's go back in a little more detail with the whole astral approach to Revelation 4—a little bit of ancient astronomy talk here. Egypt and Babylon are both going to factor in here because of some terminology and the way they understood things. So what Malina does is he makes these sort of observations (and I just sort of created a paraphrased list from his material). And he's suggesting, "Look, you've got all this stuff to consider from an astral perspective. Maybe we ought to do that." And he moves from the textual observations to arguing that the elders specifically were "decans." Decans are groups of stars that ancient cultures used to mark out specific phases or portions of the night sky. To be more technical, "decan" comes from the Greek word *deka* ("ten"). The word "is a creation of the Hellenistic period to designate the astral deities who dominate over every ten degrees of the circle of the zodiac." (That quote is from Malina, page 94.) So a decan is a portion of the sky—by virtue of the terminology, ten degrees. Now Egypt and Babylon had a decan system of 36. Thirty-six times ten equals 360 degrees, which is a circle. It makes good sense. So Egypt and Babylon had 36 decans, dividing the sky into thirty-six sections of ten degrees for a 360-degree system. The book of Revelation is a product of a later period—the Hellenistic period. And the Hellenistic approach to this differed from the older 36. It opted for the number twenty-four. Malina writes this:

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Herodotus records that . . . "the Greeks learned about the sun dial and the gnomon [MH: this is time and measurement stuff] and the twelfold division of the day from the Babylonians [MH: so Babylon did use 12 to chop up the day]..." [By] the fifth century B. C. the civilized world from Babylon to Greece knew of twelve lunar months of thirty days... Then on the analogy of the year, the day (daylight plus night time) was divided into twelve larger "double hours," and 360 smaller units.

Does this sound familiar? We have a 24-hour day. And the 360 is divisible by 60 minutes. So we inherit parts of this too.

... on the analogy of the year, the day (daylight plus night time) was divided into twelve larger "double hours," and 360 smaller units. And these time units were connected with the circular course of the sun, the moon, and the stars, in terms of the same procedure; a circle's circumference consisted of twelve equal 'double segments' and 360 lesser units [MH: in the Hellenistic system]... Thus by the time of John's gospel [MH: now pay attention to this—it's first century], it is no

surprise when Jesus asks theoretically, 'Are there not twelve hours in the day?' (John 11:9) [MH: it shows they're using this system]. These twelve hours corresponding to the twelve divisions of the celestial circle are in fact double hours, hence twenty-four in all. Consequently, our seer [MH: John of the apocalypse book of Revelation] could see twenty-four elders about the central throne of God... [In] a number of Israelite inscriptions from around the Mediterranean, a council of elders was called a *Gerousia* or *dekania* [MH laughs] , while a member of this council was called *presbyteres*, *presbyteros* [MH: which is the term translated in Revelation 4 for elder], synonyms for the Latin *decurio*, and the Greek *decanos*.

There you go. So for Malina, the fact that the elders surrounded the throne of God was also visually significant. To him it was an interpretive clue, along with all this other stuff. This description, Malina points out (and he's right), is unique in divine council scenes, where the members of the council typically stand "before the Lord" (Job 1:6; 2:1; Dan 7:10) or to the left and right of God (1 Kings 22:19-23). Divine council members are, of course, the members of the heavenly host, the stars of God (Job 38:7). This unique encircling... Now catch what Malina's angling for with the circle thing, surrounding the throne.

This unique encircling of the celestial council members therefore refers to stars encircling the throne of God in the heavens.

For Malina, this arrangement depicted the rotating cycle of the zodiac signs that encompass the decans, which were the elders. He goes on and cites the comments of classical writer Diodorus Siculus 2.31.4 (for those who want to look it up), whose writings date to just before the Christian era. So he cites Diodorus, in favor of his approach:

Beyond the circle of the zodiac [the Babylonians] designate twenty-four other stars, of which one half [MH: there's your 12 and 12], they say, are situated in the northern parts and one half in the southern, and of these those which are visible they [MH: Babylonians] assign to the world of the living, while those which are invisible they regard as being adjacent to the dead, and so they call them "Judges of the Universe."

[MH laughs] So he said, "Look, the Babylonian 12-and-12 thing, they're collectively called the Judges of the Universe (*dikastas tōn holōn*). The wording here ("Judges") pretty obviously fits the context of Revelation 4-5, because this is the divine council scene, which is convened to render justice in the last days. Now again, you could get Malina's book if you want more of this kind of stuff. But that's really fascinating. Okay? It's really fascinating. And I think it's worth

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consideration and worth looping into this whole question of “who are the 24 elders?” Are they supernatural beings? Are they glorified righteous? Are they the stars? Yeah. Yeah, I think all of these things are in play. It’s really difficult to imagine that all of this stuff—all these data... Just take what we just went through with Malina. It’s really hard to imagine that it’s all coincidental or irrelevant to John’s description in Revelation 4-5. In light of the use of astral language and metaphor for the divine council in biblical thought generally, particularly in light of Ezekiel’s vision and its zodiacal correspondence (which John uses quite a bit)... We’ve got the cherubim right in here. That was the last episode of the podcast. We talked about the cherubim. I mean, it’s right there. In light of astral language, metaphor, Ezekiel’s vision, it seems best to include the astral approach alongside the motifs that identify the elders with both supernatural members of the council and glorified believers in the council. In other words, I don’t see an obvious need to pick one of these three possibilities. The Old Testament council language employs astral terminology and suggests a glorified destiny for believers in that council. The New Testament solidifies the latter concept. A passage like Daniel 12:3, in fact, merges the ideas in its foreshadowing:

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

By the way, that’s day and night right there. The brightness of the sky above and like the stars forever and ever—12 and 12. The grand idea is that God and his council control the flow of history and destiny. And these images communicate that truth. And John’s doing the same thing Ezekiel’s trying to do. “It’s going to get bad on earth.” This is an apocalypse. This is the End of Days. Who is in control? Is our destiny—is your destiny as a believer—secure, when basically the whole thing explodes? And the answer is yeah. Yeah, it is. In fact, on the other side of it, you’re going to emerge as glorified children and co-rulers with God. And again, he’s trying to communicate these ideas using all of this imagery. So I think... Who are the 24 elders? What are they? I think it’s all three. I think all three are in play.

TS: Alright, Mike. Part 3, just like that. It’s amazing how much is packed into Revelation 4.

MH: I know, I know.

TS: Three hours of Old Testament good stuff. I love it.

MH: Thank you, John. [laughter] It’s messy, but thank you.

TS: We said this is going to be a long process, but... I know we’ve talked about this before, about how seminary students aren’t really being taught to connect

those dots from the Old Testament to the New Testament, but hopefully we're changing minds here.

MH: Yeah, I think it's generally... And I'm not going to say that this podcast is responsible (because it's not), although we're playing a role, especially in people who are not enrolled in seminary classes. And honestly, I think we are ahead in a lot of respects. But I do think it's changing. People are paying (professors and, of course, their students, whether they like it or not) more attention to seeing how the Old Testament is repurposed in the New. They're seeing how Second Temple literature was produced by people who revered the Old Testament as the Word of God and wrote about it, how that material was helpful and influential and meaningful to New Testament writers. And the more aware we are of it, the better readers we will be.

TS: Alright. Well, looking forward to chapter 5 next week. And with that, Mike, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.