In my last post, we continued exploring Revelation 4. In this post, we complete our journey in Revelation 4.

The Four Living Beings

Who or what are these living beings? God identifies them as both living beings and symbolic entities with the use of "like a" and "as a." These beings are commonly understood to be cherubim [k'ruvim in Hebrew], actual beings of an angelic order. They seem to be identical with those spoken of in Ezekiel 1 and 10, where Ezekiel says, "I knew they were cherubim."

"6 In front of the throne was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living beings covered with eyes in front and behind. 7 The first living being was like a lion, the second living being was like an ox, the third living being had a face that looked human, and the fourth living being was like a flying eagle. 8 Each of the four living beings had six wings and was covered with eyes inside and out; and day and night they never stop saying, "Holy, holy, holy is Adonai, God of heaven's armies the One who was, who is and who is coming!" 9 And whenever the living beings give glory, honor and thanks to the One sitting on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before the One sitting on the throne, who lives forever and ever, and worship him. They throw their crowns in front of the throne and say, 10 You are worthy, Adonai Eloheinu, to have glory, honor and power, because you created all things — yes, because of your will they were created and came into being!" ~ Revelation 4:6-11 (CJB)

Cherubim were present at the fall of humanity (Genesis 3:24) and afterward guarded the Tree of Life. Here they join in the celebration of humanity's redemption. We will see them worshiping God again in Revelation 19:4. There are, however, many varieties of opinion about these living beings. Whatever their specific identity, they, along with all of heaven, worship the One on the throne, in a crescendo of praise to God the Creator of all.

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary states:

The cherubim from their position at the gate of Eden, upon the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, and in Rev. 4 are evidently connected with vindicating the holiness of God against the presumptuous pride of fallen man, who despite his sin, would "stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life" (Genesis 3:22). Upon the Ark of the Covenant they looked down upon the sprinkled blood that symbolizes the perfect maintenance of God's righteousness by the sacrifice of Christ (Exodus 25:17-20; Romans 3:24-26). The cherubim seem to be actual beings of the angelic order. They do not seem to be identical with the seraphim (Isaiah 6:2). The cherubim apparently have to do with the holiness of God as violated by sin; the seraphim with uncleanness in the people of God.

In front of the throne was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. The sea of glass represents that which is presently off limits. Later God permits it to be inhabited (Revelation 15:2), and, finally, it is done away with altogether (Revelation 21:1).

Around the throne, were four living beings covered with eyes in front and behind. These four living beings were created by God to serve as guardians. Genesis 3:24 describes them as cherubim guarding the Tree of Life and in Exodus 25:10-22, they are again referred to as cherubim guarding the Mercy Seat.
The first living being was like a lion, the second living being was like an ox, the third living being had a face that looked human, and the fourth living being was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living beings had six wings and was covered with eyes inside and out; and day and night they never stop saying, "Holy, holy, holy is Adonai, God of heaven’s armies the One who was, who is and who is coming!" The first actual description of the living creatures is in Ezekiel 1:4-28; 10:1-22. Please note the similarities between what Ezekiel and Yochanan saw. There are some differences; however, these can be explained simply on the assumption that there are different orders of Living Beings. Yet, they are serving the same function, that of guardians. Oliver Greene clarifies:

These living creatures were full of eyes before and behind, and John describes them as resembling a lion, a calf, a man, and an eagle. This lion denotes majesty and power among the animal kingdom - he is king of all the beasts (Gen. 49:9, Dan. 7:4, Amos 3:8). The second beast John saw was like a calf or an ox. The cow, whether a calf or an ox, denotes humility and patience, and is a beast of labor (read 1 Cor. 9:9, 10; Prov. 14:4). The third beast John saw had the face of a man-and man is the highest of God’s creation, denoting wisdom, reason and intelligence (Isaiah 1:18, Job 9:24, Ezra 9:6, 2 Cor. 2:11). The fourth beast was a flying eagle. The eagle is the wisest of all birds. He flies the highest, is keenest of sight and is swift of action (Deut.28:49, Job 9:26, Heb. 1:8, Job 39:27-30). These characteristics combined express the character of God's throne in relation to earth.

The Worship of the Lord

And whenever the living beings give glory, honor and thanks to the One sitting on the throne, to the One who lives forever and ever. When the four living beings begin praising God, it brings about spontaneous praise and worship on the part of the twenty-four elders.

The twenty-four elders fall down before the One sitting on the throne, who lives forever and ever, and worship him. They throw their crowns in front of the throne and say, "You are worthy, Adonai Eloheinu, to have glory, honor and power, because you created all things — yes, because of your will they were created and came into being!" Finis Dake writes of this event:

Here we have worship from the living creatures and the elders because of God’s creation and the purpose of it. The living creatures are first seen giving glory to God who sits on the throne, who liveth "to the ages of ages." After this the elders cast their crowns before the throne and fall prostrate in worship to God. The purpose of creation is given here as being for God's pleasure and for His will and desire.

Special Comparative Note on Chapter 4:6-11

Historicist Approach:

Albert Barnes points out that "it was not unusual for the thrones of monarchs to be supported by carved animals of various forms, which were designed undoubtedly to be somehow emblematic of government – either its stability, vigilance, boldness or firmness. Thus, Solomon had twelve lions carved on each side of his throne." On God’s Throne they were not carved, but living beings. The rabbis said that the lion was chief of the wild beasts; the ox the chief of domestic beasts; the eagle the chief of the birds; and the human the chief of all intellectual creatures.

When they throw their crowns in front of the throne they were acknowledging God’s authority as the source of their own.

1 Material in this section is taken from "Revelation: Four Views, Revised & Updated" by Steve Gregg
**Preterist Approach:**

Preterists do not appear to be unified on whether the living beings are cherubim, angels or archangels. Though they do appear to acknowledge that the imagery is taken from Ezekiel’s cherubim, but acknowledge that Ezekiel’s cherubim have sixteen total faces. Clifton compares the four faces of Yochanan’s vision to the middle signs in the four quarters of the Zodiac; Leo the lion, Taurus the bull, Aquarius the human, and Scorpio the eagle.

**Futurist Approach:**

The sea of glass is the heavenly model for the laver in Solomon’s Temple. The laver was used for cleansing by the priests. Like the Preterists, there is similar divergence between the Futurists as to the identity of the living beings. They seem to focus more on what they represent than on who or what they are.

Walvoord says the represent the “attributes of God” presented to John here as living entities. Ironside agrees and Ryrie gives that as one possible option. Ladd follows the rabbinic interpretation discuss above by the Historicists and suggests two possible interpretations: (1) they represent the praise and adoration extended to the Creator by the totality of His creation and (2) they are angelic beings used by the Creator in executing His rule and divine will.

Lindsay thinks they are angels who represent the four portraits of Christ in the Gospels: Christ as King (Matthew); Servant (Mark); Son of Man (Luke); and, Son of God (John).

**Idealist Approach:**

Idealists recall the description of four living beings as the cherubim in Ezekiel 1 and the seraphim in Isaiah 6 combined into one image.

From my perspective, I can see the rational with each of these interpretations with the obvious objection to Clifton’s dealing with the Zodiac. I do believe that the four living beings were cherubim.

In my next post, we will begin to explore Revelation Chapter 5.