

# **Creature or Monster? : A Study of the Four Living Creatures Based on Revelation 4:6-8 From the Perspective of Seventh-day Adventist Church**

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## **Abstract**

In Revelation 4:6-8, some people have the impression that God's throne is surrounded by monsters. The purpose of this research paper is to re-examine the understanding of the four living creatures according to the Seventh-day Adventist view in order to provide clarity. Revelation 4:6-8 refers to the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In the Adventist view, the four living creatures are closely related to the identity of the twenty-four elders. However, different scholars have different views on the particular verse. In the modern view of the Adventist church, these creatures make no mention of them being metaphorical, they are genuine, physical entities. They are angels, according to Ranko Stefanovic, exalted angels of God who serve God and are guardians of His throne. The four living creatures are an elevated order of angelic beings known as cherubim or seraphim. The song of these "living ones" is the song of angels, according to William Hendriksen and Ranko Stefanovic in Isaiah 6:1-3. In the traditional view of the four living creatures, it presents some contradicting ideas. The modern view shows that there is a need to study other verse that is parallel to Revelation 4:6-8. It was revealed that the living creatures are an angelic being.

**Keywords:** *Four Living Creatures, Revelation, God's Throne*

## **Introduction**

In the second vision of John, we see that it is a vision of the throne in heaven, one of his description are the four living creatures. This is found specifically in Revelation 4:6-8. When we read this verse, it seems like "the apostle John found that he could not adequately describe these majestic new creatures, the likes of which he had never seen before."<sup>1</sup> Thus, since the description of John are insufficient, it result into some emergence of issues like people have the impression that God's throne is surrounded by monsters.

The most common interpretation that was done by the early church fathers like, Victorinus, and Irenaeus, is, the four living creatures represent the four evangelist which

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Knott, ed., "Heart and Soul: Theology," *Adventist Review*, <https://adventistreview.org/issue-archives/page-2014/page-9141525/141525-24/> (accessed February 22, 2022).

is Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John.<sup>2</sup> However, the focus in this research paper is the Adventist view of the four living creatures. In the Adventist view, according to Ranko Stefanovic, the four living creatures are “the exalted angels of God who serve him and are the guardians of his throne.”<sup>3</sup>

There are issues within the Seventh-day Adventist Church where people say the book of Revelation is frightening. Particularly, in chapter 4:6-8, some people have the impression that God’s throne is surrounded by monsters. When people have this impression in mind, problems may arise within the church, for instance, people will neglect the study of the book of Revelation and that they will overlook the importance of God’s messages to His people in these last days. Therefore, this research paper is simply to set out a study of who are the four living creatures in Revelation 4:6-8? Do monsters really surround God’s throne?

The purpose of this research paper is to re-examine the understanding of the four living creatures according to the Seventh-day Adventist view of Revelation 4:6-8 in order to provide clarity.

### **Method**

In this article will be two methodologies that will be used in order to achieve the goal in this paper. First, an analysis of different interpretation from other Adventist scholars and on other documents are also done in order to provide partial answer to the research problem. These are shown in chapter 2. Second, an exegetical study will be done by comparing to other scripture in the Bible to present the answer of the research problem.

There are many different kinds of interpretation on Revelation 4:6-8, like it was mentioned earlier, the early church fathers interpret the four living creatures as the four evangelists which is referring to the four gospel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Although it might be true, however in this research paper, since the issue deals within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, hence the interpretation will only come directly from the Adventist Church interpretation.

### **Discussion**

In this section, we will be looking at two different views on the four living creatures of Revelation 4:6-8. In the Adventist church, different scholars have different view on the particular verse. It was mentioned earlier that according to Ranko Stefanovic, the four living creatures are angels of God who serve Him and protect His throne.<sup>4</sup> However, different Adventist scholar might not have the same view as Ranko Stefanovic. Thus, here we will be looking at two views about the four living creatures which is the first is from the traditional view and second, is from the modern view.

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Kovacs, and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Cowley Road, Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), Z-Library e-book.

<sup>3</sup> Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 2002), 186.

<sup>4</sup> Ranko Stefanovic, 186.

## Traditional view

On the Adventist traditional view, the four living creatures are closely related to the identity of the twenty-four elders. As it is noted by Jacques B. Doukhan, the four beasts or living creatures represent the whole of creation, as the twenty-four elders exemplify more specifically the human race.<sup>5</sup> The identity of the twenty-four elders which are shown in the statement is distinguish as human race, so in that sense, the creatures is representing the human race as well. However, a more extensive study is done, and it seems that the four living creatures are associated with the great multitude which link to representation of the four living creatures as human race.

According to Uriah Smith, the living creatures, like the twenty-four elders, they praise God for having redeemed them from the earth. Thus, they belong to the same company, and represent a part of the great multitude.<sup>6</sup> It is true that when we read the rest of the verse in chapter four up to chapter five we see that most of the time these creatures and the twenty-four elders are lifting their praises to God. Because of the similarity in their enterprise on the throne room of heaven and the identity of the twenty-four elders, it is regarded then as part of the great multitude.

In connection with the research problem, since the creature worship God, then, the negative impression of God's throne is surrounded by monsters are diminished. Further, surprisingly, Uriah Smith also state that the translation of the four living creatures as the four beasts are an unhappy translation.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the word should be denote properly as living creatures.

Although in this section it builds up a positive standpoint on the problem, the purpose of the research which is to provide clarity is dissatisfying. Since the identity of the creatures and the twenty-four elders are paired which in summary it represents the great multitude it seems to provide more additional issue while attempting to understand who the four living creatures is. One critic suggests that:

In Revelation 7, the great multitude are described and one of the elders asked who there are. An elder would not ask who the great multitude were if he was one of them. The great multitude is described as being "of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues." A mere 24 individuals could not be the same as that group as it would include far more than 24 nations.<sup>8</sup>

From this statement, if the twenty-four elders are not part of the great multitude, then the four living creatures are also not part of the great multitude, and the numbers should not be disregard as it also has a symbolic meaning when it comes to the interpretation of the book of Revelation. So, we have to reconsider some aspects and once again ponder the question who are the four living creatures in Revelation 4:6-8?

## Modern view

In the modern view of the Adventist church, these creatures make no mention of them being metaphorical, they are genuine, physical entities. They are angels. According to Ranko Stefanovic, they are the exalted angels of God who serve Him and are the

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002), 54.

<sup>6</sup> Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1944), PDFDrive e-book.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>8</sup> Ray Foucher, "The 24 Elders of Revelation: Who are They?," Jesus-resurrection, <https://www.jesus-resurrection.info/24-elders.html> (accessed March 28, 2022).

guardians of His throne, they are involved in leading the heavenly hosts in ceaseless worship and praise.<sup>9</sup> Careful studies shows that this author arrives in these conclusions by referring to the first and tenth chapter of Ezekiel and also by referring to Isaiah 6:1-3.

After conducting some investigation from other sources, majority suggest that these study of the four living creatures should be referred to Ezekiel chapter 1 and 10 and Isaiah 6:1-3. As William Hendriksen points out, “we should bear in mind that there is a very close connection between this entire throne vision and the first and tenth chapters of Ezekiel. We urge the reader to study Ezekiel 1 and 10 very carefully...Observe also that the song of these “living ones” is the song of angels. In Isaiah the seraphim sing it (Isa. 6:1–4).”<sup>10</sup> Thus, this research paper then will bring us to a study of the verses that was mentioned which will be done in another section.

It was also discovered that most of the time, while referring to the verses cited previously, the conclusion appears to be that the four living creatures are angelic beings. Other writers also have noted that the four living creatures meaning "beings" are an elevated order of angelic beings known as cherubim or seraphim.<sup>11</sup> This statement is similar as Ranko Stefanovic. Robert H. Mounce penned, “a consistent interpretation of the entire throne-room vision requires us to understand the living creatures as an exalted order of angelic beings who, as the immediate guardians of the throne, lead the heavenly hosts in worship and adoration of God.”<sup>12</sup>

Throughout this section we see one thing in common is that the four living creatures are then an angelic being that exercise worship in the throne room in heaven. Besides that, we should take note that the throne room in heaven can be seen as a divine assembly. The primary theme of the divine assembly in the New Testament is worship and the divine assembly consists of angels who surround the heavenly throne.<sup>13</sup> Then, in relation to the research problem we clearly define that it is not monsters who surrounded in God's throne, but it is an angelic being and the fact that it shows that angels worship God, we learn that God holds a high authority above everything.

### **Result of the Study**

In the result of the study, careful observation shows that most modern interpreter suggest that the four living creatures are angelic beings. So, this research paper will focus on the modern view of the four living creatures. It has been discussed earlier that in the interpretation of the four living creatures, one should refer to the book of Ezekiel and Isaiah since there is a strong link between this entire throne vision and the first and tenth chapters of Ezekiel and also in the book of Isaiah where the seraphim sing (Isa. 6:1–4).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ranko Stefanovic, 186.

<sup>10</sup> William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2015), Z-library e-book.

<sup>11</sup> S. Michael Houdmann, “Who are the four living creatures in Revelation?,” Got Questions, <https://www.gotquestions.org/four-living-creatures.html> (accessed March 27, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977) PDFDrive e-book.

<sup>13</sup> Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An Encyclopaedic Exploration of the Images, Symbols, Motifs, Metaphors, Figures of speech and Literary Patterns of the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1998), Z-library e-book.

<sup>14</sup> William Hendriksen, 87

Thus, this section will examine the common aspect between other verses in the old testament. The common aspect between Revelation 4:6-8, Ezekiel 1 and 10 and Isaiah 6:1-4 that can be seen, is the characteristics of the four living creatures.

## Characteristics

To begin with, we will first discover the characteristic of the four living creatures in Revelation 4:6-8, Ezekiel 1 and 10, and Isaiah 6:1-4 and second we will analyze the passages in relation to the main verse. Revelation 4:6-8 reads:

Also, in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." (Revelation 4:6-8, New International Version).

The description shows that the four living creatures were covered with eyes, in front and in back, each are described as having the appearances of a lion, calf, man, and eagle, they have six wings, they worship God by saying the words: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

Next, in Ezekiel 1:5-11. The passage reads:

And in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, but each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides, they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved. Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. They each had two wings spreading out upward, each wing touching that of the creature on either side; and each had two other wings covering its body (Ezekiel 1:5-11, New International Version).

In Ezekiel 10:12-14, 20-22. It says:

Their entire bodies, including their backs, their hands and their wings, were completely full of eyes, as were their four wheels. I heard the wheels being called "the whirling wheels." Each of the cherubim had four faces: One face was that of a cherub, the second the face of a human being, the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle. ...These were the living creatures I had seen beneath the God of Israel by the Kebar River, and I realized that they were cherubim. Each had four faces and four wings, and under their wings was what looked like human hands. Their faces had the same appearance as those I had seen by the Kebar River. Each one went straight ahead (Ezekiel 10:12-14, 20-22, New International Version).

Now, in accordance with Ezekiel 1 and 10, we see that they are referred to as four living creatures, they have four faces. Their four faces have the likeness of a man, lion, ox, and eagle, they have four wings, full of eyes all around, they are found before the throne of God, they are referred as cherubim.

Lastly in Isaiah 6:1-3. The passage reads:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two

they were flying. And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”(Isaiah 6:1-3, New International Version)

From this passage in Isaiah 6:1-3, we learn that the four living creatures are before the throne of God, they have six wings, and they worship God by saying the words: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

## Analysis

When we compare the main verse which is Revelation 4:6-8 with Ezekiel 1 and 10, we see that it shares similar characteristic. It was stated earlier that the four living creatures that we see in the book of Revelation, have the appearances of a lion, calf, man, and eagle. This feature is also stated in the book of Ezekiel, they have four faces. Their four faces have the likeness of a man, lion, ox, and eagle. Other than that, like it was describe in the book of Revelation, the four living creatures were covered with eyes, in front and in back. In the book of Ezekiel, it also shares these same features. They have full of eyes all around.

However, there are also dissimilar feature when we look at Ezekiel 1 and 10. Unlike the four living creatures in the book of Revelation, here in Ezekiel it was describe as having four wings. But then these does not contradict the interpretation of the four living creatures as angelic beings. Despite the fact, Ranko Stefanovic says, no doubt that the four living creatures is drawn from Ezekiel’s vision<sup>15</sup> and one of the most intriguing things that we see in Ezekiel 1 and 10 is that the four living creatures are referred as the Cherubim. According to Gustav Davidson, Cherubim originate from Assyrian or Akkadian which they are pictured as huge, winged creatures with leonine or human faces, bodies of bulls or sphinxes, eagles.<sup>16</sup> The depiction of the Cherubim as winged creatures is clearly an angel. These Cherubim are not only described in the book of Ezekiel but also in Exodus 25:18, the covering cherubs on the ark of the covenant. According to Ellen G White, these cherubim are “to represent the angelic host who are connected with the work of the heavenly sanctuary and who are ministering spirits to the people of God on earth.”<sup>17</sup>

Besides that, we also need to consider the verse in Isaiah 6:1-3. The features that they share are, in Isaiah 6:1-3, the representation of the four living creatures have six wings and they worship God by saying the words: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory. Again, this similarity of characteristics proves that clearly, the four living creatures are an angelic being. More than that, unlike the reference of the four living creatures in the book of Ezekiel as cherubim, here in this particular verse, it is referred as seraphim. Note that there is no explicit definition as to what cherubim and seraphim is. All we could know is that they are angelic beings, and it was suggested that these are order of angelic beings.

Further, we may also notice that each of the parallel verses that was stated earlier shows that these beings or creatures are found before the throne of God with the purpose of worshipping Him. Since the context of Revelation 4 is talking about the enthronement of Christ, then it is sufficient to say that these divine assembly involves the angelic orders with a primary purpose to worship the One who is seated on the throne.

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<sup>15</sup> Ranko Stefanovic, 186

<sup>16</sup> Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels Including the Fallen Angels* (Sixth Avenue, New York: The Free Press, 1967), PDF Drive e-book.

<sup>17</sup> Ellen G White, *Christ in His Sanctuary* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1969), Ellen G. White Estate e-book.

Lastly, we also should not disregard the significance of the appearance of the four living creatures. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Ranko Stefanovic seems to agree on the statement of William Hendriksen where it says that the four living creatures are pictured as having the strength of a lion, the ability to serve of an ox, the intelligence of a man, and the swiftness to serve of an eagle.<sup>18</sup> So, here we see that the description of the four living creatures as lion, ox, man, and eagle suggest that these are the characteristics ascribe to angels which is strength, service, intelligence, and swiftness.

Besides that, there is also meanings to the feature of the four living creatures having six wings and full of eyes around and inside. Ranko Stefanovic suggest that these “may symbolize swiftness of movement and great intelligence and discernment.”<sup>19</sup> Again these attributes are all ascribe to angels.

## Summary and Conclusion

### Summary

There are many different kinds of interpretation on Revelation 4:6-8. The early church fathers interpret the four living creatures as the four evangelists which is referring to the four gospel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

According to Uriah Smith, the living creatures, like the twenty-four elders, they praise God for having redeemed them from the earth. In the modern view of the Adventist church, these creatures make no mention of them being metaphorical, they are genuine, physical entities. One critic suggests that: In Revelation 7, the great multitude are described and one of the elders asked who there are. So, we have to reconsider some aspects and once again ponder the question who are the four living creatures in Revelation 4:6-8? Most of the time, while referring to the verses cited previously, the conclusion appears to be that the four living creatures are angelic beings.

The song of these "living ones" is the song of angels. In Isaiah the seraphim sing it (Isa. 6:1-4). This statement is similar as Ranko Stefanovic and Robert H. Mounce penned. In Revelation 4:6-8, Ezekiel 1 and 10 and Isaiah 6:1-4, there is a strong link between this vision and the first and tenth chapters of Ezekiel. Each are described as having the appearances of a lion, calf, man, and eagle, they have six wings, they worship God by saying the words: "Holy, holy, holy".

Ezekiel 1:5-11, New International Version. In appearance their form was human, but each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides, they had human hands. They each had two wings spreading out upward, each wing touching that of the creature on either side.

Isaiah 6:1-3. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings, and they worship God by saying the words: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory". The four living creatures that we see in the book of Revelation, have the appearances of a lion, calf, man, and eagle. This feature is also stated in Ezekiel, they have four faces.

Other than that, they are covered with eyes, in front and in back. In Isaiah 6:1-3, the representation of the four living creatures have six wings and they worship God by saying the words: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty". In Ezekiel 1 and 10, it is referred as

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<sup>18</sup> William Hendriksen, 88

<sup>19</sup> Ranko Stefanovic, 190

cherubim or seraphim. According to Gustav Davidson, Cherubim originate from Assyrian or Akkadian which are pictured as huge winged creatures with leonine or human faces, bodies of bulls or sphinxes, eagles. It is sufficient to say that the divine assembly involves the angelic orders with a primary purpose to worship the One who is seated on the throne of God.

The description of the four living creatures as lion, ox, man, and eagle suggest that these are characteristics ascribe to angels which is strength, service, intelligence, and swiftness. There are also meanings to the feature of them having six wings and full of eyes around and inside. Ranko Stefanovic suggest that they may symbolize swiftness of movement and great intelligence and discernment. Paul places Sin in juxtaposition to Grace, which according to some people means that one is either under the law or under grace. Dying to sin means dying with Christ, according to Douglas J. Moo, "Not under law, but under grace" also implies not under a legal dispensation and gracious dispensation.

The scope of 6:1 – 8:17 is to trace the path of freedom, not only from sin's penalty but also from its power. In Romans 6:15 mentioned that we are under grace and not under the law. Paul also mentioned that the law is not sin although it gives hint on what to do and not to do because the law defines what is sin. Accepting Jesus Christ as Messiah, being justified by Him, being baptized into His death, having the "old man" destroyed are the things that will dethrone sin from our lives. In the traditional view of the four living creatures, it presents some contradicting ideas which result into some confusion and had left the researcher to have the inability to really provide the answer for the research problem.

The modern view shows that there is a need to study other verse that is parallel to Revelation 4:6-8. Through a deeper look, it was revealed that the living creatures are an angelic being and were design to carry out a task in the throne room of heaven.

## **Conclusion**

This research has re-examined the understanding of the four living creatures according to the Seventh-day Adventist view of Revelation 4:6-8 and has provide clarity. After presenting the background of the problem which is to clarify whether is it really monsters who surround God's throne, the researcher studied the parallel verses for Revelation 4:6-8 and has analyze it's characteristic.

It was discovered that in the traditional view of the four living creatures, it presents some contradicting ideas which result into some confusion and had left the researcher to have the inability to really provide the answer for the research problem. However, the modern view shows that there is a need to study other verse that is parallel to Revelation 4:6-8. After careful investigation with the parallel verses, the researcher found out that these four living creatures are an exalted order of angelic beings.

With all the features that was presented in the main verse and the features that it shares from the parallel verses; it was determined that the four living creatures are angelic beings and was design to carry a task in the throne room of heaven which is worship.

In respond to the research problem, the solution was provided in reply to the negative impression of the surrounding beings on the throne of God. Notice that throughout the research paper, we see that every reference state uses the word "living creatures" this is because in the original Greek language the word *zoa* are translated as "living creatures" unlike in some old translation, the word "beast" is used which upsets the readers and cause the tendency to assume that those are monsters that surround God's throne. So, it is living creatures and not monsters. Through a deeper look, it was revealed that the living creatures are an angelic being.

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