

Seven-Eleven Songs

Does the ministry of "the four living beings" justify lyrical repeating?

But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Jesus, Matthew 6:7

Some songs, that repeat . . . repeat . . . and repeat . . . the same seven-word lyrics eleven times or more, are called "seven-eleven" songs. As with repetitive praying (Jesus warned about this when He said, "**And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words,**" Matthew 6:7.), questions surround the musical mechanism of repetitive praising, singing, or chanting, as a means of inducing consciousness of God.

In order to justify repeating the same lyrics in the worship of God, some might appeal to the biblical example of the Four Living Beings of the Apocalypse who, "**day and night,**" do not "**cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come'**" (Revelation 4:8). At first glance, this biblical text might seem to support spiritual practices of chanting, breath praying or singing repetitive lyrics in an attempt to worship or commune with God. Psalm 136, where twenty-six times the phrase "**His lovingkindness is everlasting**" is repeated, is another biblical text that might be asserted to support worship via repetitive singing of the same lyrics. So what should a believer think about the assertion that, at least in these two instances, the Bible seems to endorse such a means of worshipping and communing with God? We look at the two texts in question.

REVELATION 4 In describing the heavenly scene, John the Seer notices, "**And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come'**" (Revelation 4:8).

First, about the "**four living beings,**" we note that John states, "**they do not cease to say . . .**" The heavenly vision does not describe them as singing. The four creatures praise God by unceasingly saying (Greek, *lego*), not singing (Greek, *ado*, *psallo*, or *humneo*), the repetitive words. They say, "**Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.**" There is no musical accompaniment. This contrasts to "**the twenty-four elders**" and the "**one hundred and forty-four thousand**" who, accompanied by the sound of harps, "**sang** (Greek, *ado*) **a new song**" before the Throne Sitter (Revelation 5:9; 14:3).

Second, what does it mean that "**day and night**" the Four Living Creatures continually praise the Throne Sitter? To mix the concepts of time and eternity, and the dimensions of earth and heaven, we ask, Did John mean to say that 24/7, all day and every day, the creatures unceasingly and endlessly praise God? Do the Four Living Beings incessantly drone "om" and on saying, "**Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come**"? [1] With this question, and given its heavenly context, the phrase "**night and day**"

becomes interesting.

Later in the book of Revelation, John describes heaven to be a place where, "**there shall no longer be any night**" (Revelation 22:5; Compare Revelation 21:25 and Zechariah 14:7.). In this light, we can know that when describing heaven, the phrase "**day and night**" possesses a less-than-literal meaning. A less-than-literal meaning is also evident in Revelation 20:10 where, in describing God's final judgment, John records, "**And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.**" In describing the final judgment of "**the lake of fire and brimstone,**" the reader can only wonder if the eternal place possesses a solar day and night, especially due to the fact that Jesus described the place of judgment as one of "**outer darkness**" (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

In view of the way the Bible employs the phrase, Daniel Wallace points out that "day and night" may have been "a stereotyped phrase that has lost its original grammatical nuances." [2] For example, the Apostle Paul reminded the Thessalonians, "**And you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God**" (1 Thessalonians 2:9). While he was at Thessalonica, are we to presume that all Paul did was incessantly work? Did the apostle not sleep, eat, or attend to other personal matters? Obviously, the phrase "night and day" describes the primacy of his labor amongst the Thessalonians. In the same way, that the creatures praised the Throne Sitter "day and night," seems to describe the priority of their ministry, and not the time frame of it. As Thomas comments, "This is their consuming practice whenever they are not otherwise engaged in carrying out God's will." [3] The phrase "day and night" gives every indication of being a metaphor describing "a kind of time expressed rather than the extent of time." [4]

Third, the setting is heaven. Not everything that happens in heaven can be mimicked on earth. In that otherworldly and fantastic place the Bible calls heaven, the "**four living creatures**" uniquely possess "**six wings, [and] are full of eyes around and within.**" These creatures seem to have been created by God for the purpose of praising the Throne Sitter. In the ongoing drama of redemptive revelation, these beings assume a different role and function from us. Therefore, their worship before the throne in heaven cannot be replicated on earth. As limited by human frailty and weakness, we, after all, do need sleep! Furthermore, none of us can create a heaven on earth anymore than we can build our own Disney World. The repeated praise of "the four living creatures" in heaven does not endorse chanting or singing repetitive lyrics on earth.

One dictionary on alternative spirituality defines chanting as, "The continuous recitation of a mantra, sutra, or phrase as part of meditation or a religious or magical rite, which helps one achieve an altered state of consciousness, ecstasy, communion with the Divine, or summon psychical power for magical, exorcism, or healing purposes." [5] These "four living beings" are not chanting for the purpose achieving an altered state of consciousness so as to commune with "the Divine." They are already in God's presence and in full communion with Him!

PSALM 136 This psalm contains the repeated words, "**His lovingkindness is everlasting**" (The phrase occurs twenty-six times.). Does this phrasing provide license for repetitive singing

or chanting?

In this psalm we must note that each prefatory parallelism to the phrase, "**His lovingkindness is everlasting**," is different and provides wonderful variety as God's person and works (creation and redemption) are praised. In fact, as VanGemeren notes, "The literary form (genre) is that of an antiphonal hymn." [6] In other words, the cantor, or one-half of the congregation, would extol different aspects of God's person (vv. 1-3), His work in creation (vv. 4-9), and His redemption of Israel at the time of that nation's exodus from Egypt and settlement of the land (vv. 10-22). The other half of the congregation would then respond, "For His lovingkindness is everlasting." Such alternating praise and response does not provide precedent for, or give an example of, chanting, breath praying, or singing "seven-eleven" songs. The Psalm, which is verbal, conceptual, and historical, was not meant to be used for inducing altered states of spiritual consciousness.

Neither Psalm 136 nor Revelation 4 endorses spiritual practices like those Jesus prohibited.

ENDNOTES

[1] Admittedly on this point, I am punning. The sound of "OM" is a universally recognized verbal vibration serving as a mantra in eastern-religious-mystical chanting.

[2] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1996): 124.

[3] Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992): 362. Thomas points out that the "four living creatures" do perform other duties (See Revelation 5:11-12; 6:1, 3, 5, 7.).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical & Paranormal Experience* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991): 92.

[6] Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 5, Frank E. Gaebelein, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1991): 823.