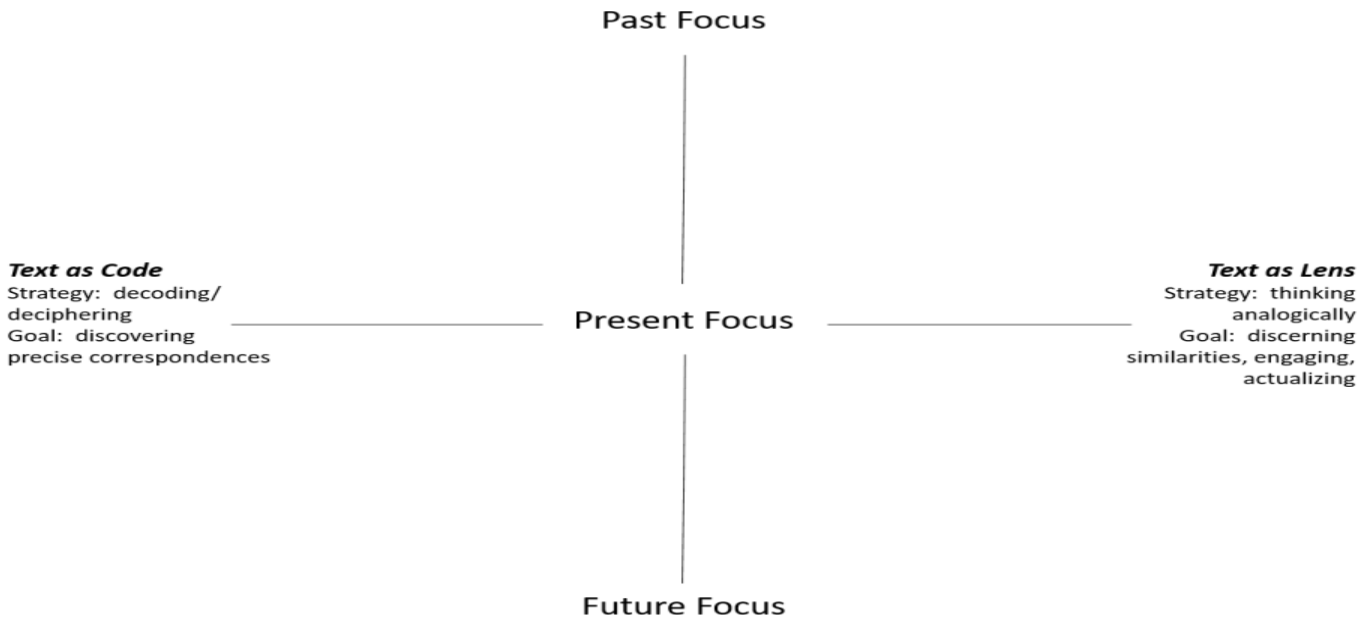
Series: A Call to Worship on Earth as in Heaven (a study in Revelation)
Sermon Text: Revelation 4:1-6a **Slido Poll:** How would you define worship?

Since we're taking breaks during our Revelation study, we're building a summary paragraph to remind us of what this book is about. Our first summary sentence says: "*Revelation is about what Jesus has been up to since His resurrection, and specifically how He is intimately involved with His churches*." This series in ***chapters 4-5*** will help us develop our next sentence and gain a more biblical understanding of worship. So far, we've discussed some bigger themes related to these chapters, like how **Life is all about what we worship** and how **Revelation should inspire worship, not predictions**. Today, we'll explore one other big picture concept and then venture into the first part of ***chapter 4*** to discover this…

BIG IDEA: God's self-revelation informs our worship.

Let's begin with a question, "*What filters or biases have you discovered within yourself?*" We all have a sin nature, which means that conscious (intentional) and subconscious (unintentional) ideas skew our view of everything, including how we read the Bible. We read with acquired perspectives and simply not knowing what we don't know. This doesn't mean we're terrible people--it's just our common human condition which Jesus came to redeem and improve. For this reason, it's best to study the Bible in community, not in isolation--we need people (past and present) plus resources which inform and stretch our thinking. Professor Michael Gorman (pgs. 63-68) curated this helpful grid to illustrate how human filters have historically affected the way people read Revelation.



Scholars have determined that interpretations of Revelation range between 2 poles: 1) The Decoding Pole dissects details to make predictions and find correspondence between people and events. 2) The

Analogy Pole uses the "*spirit of the text*" as a lens that can be applied to any age. Gorman concluded that "*Some think Revelation should be read primarily or exclusively as an ancient document for the ancient church, some see it as a text that speaks above all to us today (that is, to any age, because its message is timeless), and some see it fundamentally as a set of predictions about the future*." I think the truth is somewhere in the middle--not that every viewpoint is valid, but that there's a way to appreciate aspects of each without fully subscribing to one. My favorite example relates to a perspective that gained popularity in the 20th century called, "*Dispensationalism*" (a.k.a. "*The Futurist View*"), which morphed into "*Progressive Dispensationalism*" after key predications proved false and opened their eyes to the merits of other perspectives (ex: 88 reasons book). My point is that: We should all be life-long learners who are charitable towards one another in our quest for truth. Throughout this study then, we'll aim to discuss the various viewpoints without being snarky about the honest efforts of past believers who had limited resources available to them. As we journey through Revelation, you'll want to repeatedly review today's lesson, last week's lesson, and our final lesson in chapter 1 for perspective.

Now, if you're ready, we'll begin in ***4:1-2***: ***After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit*** (like in 1:10)***, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.*** Last time we learned how at various times in history, certain prophets received essentially identical visions of heaven to bring perspective to their chaotic earthly moments (cf. Daniel 7; Ezekiel 1, 10; Isaiah 6; 1 Kings 22:19ff). John's experience served the same purpose--starting with God's throne, it moves outward to help us see earth from God's seat. One feature of apocalyptic literature, then, is to remind us that we're not the center of the universe! Its movie-like imagery of heavenly happenings eclipses earthly circumstances with an alternative story (lens) through which God's people can discern and respond to divine purposes. Our challenge in reading this genre is to not miss the forest for the trees! In this case, the "*forest/big picture*" of ***chapter 4*** is that ***the one seated on Heaven's throne*** deserves unceasing worship no matter how things appear on earth! The "*trees*", then, would include the various numbers, the identity of the elders, and the super weird looking creatures. While these things have value and help us comprehend what's being communicated, fixating on them can cause us to miss the main message.

Case in point is John's description of God in ***verse 3***: ***He who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.*** God, of course, isn't a pile of precious stones and John wasn't nudging us to study Gemology! He was grasping

for earthly terms to illustrate God's glorious ***appearance***. In fact, he drew mostly from Old Testament vocabulary. For example, consider the ***rainbow around the throne***, which we also discovered last week in Ezekiel's vision. It first appeared in Genesis 9 after Noah's family learned that God has the right to judge wickedness AND the right to extend mercy to anyone who repents, believes, and trusts His ways. The ***rainbow***, then, is one of God's earliest signposts pointing to new creation, and it keeps showing up throughout the Bible. It's mentioned in ***Revelation 4*** to remind believers of God's mercy before we get into the judgement chapters. Where are you on the scale of trusting God to handle justice and mercy? Do you ever second guess God or fail to forgive due to impatience or an over realized sense of justice?

Old Testament images continue in ***verses 5-6a***: ***From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal***. Last time, someone asked about ***the seven spirits of God***, which we first learned about in ***1:4-5*** then again in ***3:1***, so you'll want to review those notes! Most think this refers to the Holy Spirit of God. The number 7 shows up over 50 times in Revelation and over 700 times throughout the Bible. It first appeared in Genesis 2:3 where "*God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it, God rested from all his work that he had done in creation*." That set a precedent for ***7*** to signify "*completion or fullness*", so the phrase "***7 spirits of God***" (NLT: Sevenfold Spirit of God) likely speaks to the fullness/totality of the Spirit's nature. Isaiah 11:2, for example, gives Him 7 descriptive names in the same way that other Scriptures attempt to characterize God the Father and God the Son with various names and statements.

Finally, the Old Testament allusion that I find most intriguing is in ***verse 5***. Did you know that ***flashes of lightning, rumblings of thunder,*** and ***sea of glass*** were sights and sounds that Moses encountered on Mount Sinai (cf. Exodus 19:16; 20:18)? Moses, therefore, also received an apocalypse (revelation) of heaven like Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and John! Do you see how this reveals the continuity of God's story? His Old and New Covenants fit together to show that Israel and the church are like 2 streams that flow into 1 river (cf. Ephesians 1-3). Some think the ***sea of glass*** represents how God has tamed the raging seas, but the most convincing connection is with Exodus 24 which states that "*Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up Mount Sinai and saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone like the very heaven for clearness*." In both visions, the ***sea of glass*** is like a clear windowpane that divides heaven and earth (i.e., a pavement clear enough to see through!). What might this mean for us? First, it "*clearly*" conveys that God can see everything happening on earth--think back to Ezekiel's vision of all those eyes, and how 2 Chronicles

16:9 says, "*The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him*." Secondly, a pane of ***glass*** in heaven suggests that, by faith, we can sense what's going on up there like John did! What do you think about that? I mean, it happened for several prophets in the Bible; and we know that God gave His Word and Spirit to help us process heavenly and earthly realities. Plus, Jesus said something in Matthew 13 about faith giving us "*eyes to see and ears to hear*." Of course, 1 Corinthians 13:12 does say that "*For now we see in a glass dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known*." Do yourself a favor--take time to ponder these images this week: ***a door standing open in heaven***, ***a throne at the center, an indescribably glorious God sitting there, the rainbow, signs seen by Moses on Mt. Sinai, the sevenfold Spirit before the throne***. Ask yourself: How does God's Scriptural self-revelation inform our worship? Then next week, we'll discuss the mysterious 24 elders and the 4 super strange creatures!

Let's pray: Father, you've revealed these spectacular biblical images to not only inform our intellect but to also capture our affections. May they do the work in us that you intended--causing us to see your ultimate worthiness to be worshipped and to draw others to believe in your supreme power and goodness towards those who trust you by grace through faith! Amen.

Considerations for discussion leaders:
1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the "sweet spot", spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Preparing for and applying our sermon from Revelation 4:1-6a.
During this series it would help to repeatedly read over the chapter we're exploring. It would also be beneficial to utilize a commentary that explains the various interpretive strategies used throughout church history. If you need a suggestion, please ask! We should also be thinking about our "*next step*" in our relationship with Jesus. The Bible isn't meant simply to "*inform*" but to also "*transform*", and a next step always begins with faith in Christ--either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Our help comes through Christ's Spirit and His church body!

Other application questions (Don't forget the underlined questions in the sermon notes above!):

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.
- 5 Strategies for Reading Revelation from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- Heaven and Earth Theme from the Bible Project
- Other super helpful Revelation summaries from the Bible Project

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Thrones**: "Sitting upon a throne meant possessing royal and judicial authority. Although both functions will be exercised here, the emphasis, as the reader will see, will be on the latter. First Kings 7:7 speaks of Solomon's 'Hall of the Throne where he was to pronounce judgment' (cf. 1 Kgs 2:19; Dan 7:9–10, 13–14). In Daniel 7, a passage to which John has already alluded (1:7, 13, 14) and upon which he will draw over and over throughout the book, Daniel has a magnificent vision of the Throne Hall of God that ends in the heavenly court sitting in judgment (Dan 7:26–27). Similarly, in the Book of Watchers 'Enoch' has a vision of God sitting upon the throne specifically in his role as judge (1 Enoch 14:19–20; cf. 1 Enoch 13:4–6; 15:1–16:3). John's vision is of the Throne Hall of God (cf. 1 Enoch 14:8–25; 69:27–29), where judgment will be dispensed (cf. 20:11–15)." (Trafton, 59)
- **Indirect references to God**: We also notice that he refers to God as "***he who sat there***" in ***verse 3*** and as "***him who is seated on the throne***" in ***verse 9***, which honors texts like John 1:18 which says, "*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known*"; John 4:24 which says, "*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth*."; and John 14:9 where Jesus said, "*whoever has seen me has seen the Father*." The point is that our view of God must be shaped by God's self-revelation in Scripture and by the incarnation of Jesus (when God became human). A big reason God gave us the Bible is because our default is to assign attributes to the invisible God based on how we imagine or want Him to be, which usually means that the gods (idols) we invent in our minds lack complexity. Consider, for example, God's self-revelation from Isaiah 55:6-11, "*Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it*."
- **The precious stones and the rainbow**: "The three precious stones mentioned in v. 3, jasper, sardius, and emerald, collectively represent God's sovereign majesty and glory, as in 21:10–11, 18–23, and look forward to the fuller list of stones given in ch. 21, where God's new creation and eternal city are described. The background is found in Ezek. 1:26, 28. Of particular significance is the mention of jasper, the only stone mentioned later in the book in explicit connection with the glory of God (21:11). It is at the head of the list of the twelve foundation stones of the end-time city's wall in 21:19. The stones intensify the light around the throne by reflecting the unapproachable brightness, and hence glory, surrounding God himself (cf. 1 Tim. 6:16; Ps. 104:2). The rainbow around the throne speaks of God's mercy, as in the days of Noah, and suggests that, even as God's judgments unfold, He will be gracious to His true people. Above all else, the rainbow evokes thought of God's glory, since Ezek. 1:28 metaphorically equates a 'rainbow' with 'the appearance of the surrounding radiance … the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.'" (Beale, 101)
- **Sea of glass**: "The 'sea' (4:6) merits special comment; it probably suggests to readers the great glory of the heavenly temple. Mighty waters (cf. 1:15) also appear in apocalyptic visions of heaven or paradise, perhaps developing Psalm 104:3; 148:4; and especially Ezekiel 1:24; note too

that rain and lightning fall from heaven. Thus, some texts of uncertain date portray a vast ocean in the lowest heaven (2 Enoch 3:3 J; 4:2 A) or a heavenly sea of fire (Apoc. Zeph. 6:1–2). John's most direct source here, however, is the bronze 'sea' of Solomon's temple for the priests to wash in (1 Kings 7:23–44; 1 Chron. 18:8; 2 Chron. 4:2, 6), because heaven in Revelation appears like a temple (Rev. 7:15; 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5–16:1; 16:17; for temple apparatus in heaven, see Contemporary Significance section of Rev. 1:10). Solomon's temple probably included a 'sea' for the same reason that ancient Egyptian temples depicted heaven on their ceilings: to testify that their deity ruled the entire cosmos. That the sea is of 'glass, clear as crystal' reflects the sapphire that was 'clear' in God's revelation to Israel at Sinai (Ex. 24:10), but especially the crystalline, heavenly expanse beneath God's throne and above the throne angels in Ezekiel 1:22. That it is like 'crystal' links it with the new Jerusalem, clear enough for God's great glory to shine through it (Rev. 21:11, 18, 21). It is thus probably not a symbol of subdued cosmic evil, as some commentators have suggested. That the glass was 'clear' contrasts with most of the glass available in John's day." (Keener, 173-174)

Quotes related to the larger context:

- **Biblical Apocalypses**: "So, in terms of the two books that are given the label apocalyptic, there's one in the Hebrew Bible, one in the New Testament: Daniel and Revelation. With Daniel, it's a bit of a misnomer because half of the book is these dreams and visions. But the first half of the book are the narratives about Daniel and his friends. Those two halves go together in a crucially important way, but the whole book isn't an apocalypse like The Revelation is. It's also true that there are sections of other books that are apocalypses. Like Zechariah, first half of the book is about his dreams and visions in the heavenly temple. Sections of the book of Ezekiel, the beginning, middle, and end. The prophet Isaiah has an apocalypse in one chapter, chapter 6. The Prophet Amos has a series of apocalypses: chapter 7 through 9. And then we talked about Abraham has dreams, visions and so is Jacob. There you go. In a way, what we're focusing in on is when you have a whole book or a section of a book that is full of this kind of dream imagery." (Tim Macke Video Transcript)
- **Apocalyptic Literature**: "John's throne vision in Revelation 4, like most of this book, resembles visions in the biblical prophets (esp. Isa. 6:1–5; Ezek. 1:4–28; Dan. 7:9–14). Yet while Revelation is biblical, it is also relevant to the issues and language of its day: John frequently emphasizes the themes most dominant in the literature of his contemporaries, which we call apocalyptic literature. From an early period, Jewish apocalyptic texts focused on and developed particularly the throne visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah. John's language regularly echoes Scripture, but he shares this feature with some of his contemporaries: 'And I looked and behold' (lit. trans. of 4:1) is standard language from Ezekiel (e.g., Ezek. 1:4, 15; 2:9; 8:2, 7, 10; 44:4) and Daniel (Dan. 8:3, 15; 10:5; 12:5), which also becomes characteristic of apocalyptic visions (e.g., 1 Enoch 14:14–15, 18; 85:3). The similarity of subject matter between Revelation and other apocalyptic visions makes some of the differences in detail all the more striking. Apocalyptic texts frequently narrate the visionary's arduous journey through various heavenly gates to reach God's throne (e.g., 1 Enoch 14:9–13); some suggest dangers involved in this journey. By contrast, yet like his biblical predecessors, John is simply transported there by God's sovereign summons (Rev. 4:1) and the Spirit's inspiration (4:2; cf. 17:3; 21:10). Some texts provide angelic help for the ascent (e.g., 1 Enoch 71:5; 87:3; 2 Enoch 7:1; 2 Bar. 6:3–4), but John ascends simply by the Spirit, as did Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 5, 24; 37:1; 43:5)… John does not have to force his way into heaven, as some of his contemporaries thought they did; he is invited, in language that recalls

God's call to Moses to receive his revelation: 'Come up here' (Rev. 4:1; cf. Ex. 19:20, 24; 24:12; 34:2) recalls the Bible's first throne vision (Ex. 24:10–12; cf. also 19:24)." (Keener, 169-170)

- **Engaging our imaginations**: "Perhaps above everything else, one must be warned not to stoop to unthoughtful literalism while reading chapters 4 and 5. Rather, children of the Enlightenment though we are, we must do our best to let the visions speak to our imaginations—to take our breath away, as it were, and thus to give one theological perspective from which to see what comes next in chapter 6, not to mention our own present existence." (Fee, 66)
- **Echoes of Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7**: "These visions both came in Babylon just as John's vision came in the symbolic "Babylon" of the Roman Empire. Ezekiel sees God on a moving throne with all-seeing eyes. Even in Babylon, in the stronghold of empire, God is reigning. Daniel also has a vision of empires: four successive empires which are superseded by another empire whose dominion will never end (Daniel 7). The Ancient of Days gives all authority to the people of God represented by the son of man. The churches to which John wrote saw Roman imperial rule with all its splendour and imagery. It was constantly in their sight line. They were tempted to compromise or give up. God appears to be absent from history, and others appear to be lords. But John sees God on the throne and his reign puts all other rulers completely in their place. Twice God is described as 'him who lives for ever and ever' (Revelation 4:9–10). This is John's response to the claims of 'eternal Rome'. Rome appeared to rule all the known world, but God rules in heaven." (Chester, 55)
- **How chapter 3 flows into 4**: "The picture of Christ in 3:21 presently sitting on His Father's throne leads into the vision of chs. 4–5. In these chapters John wants to explain in more detail and with more imagery the past act of Christ's exaltation upon His throne as ruler over the church and the cosmos, which was accomplished by His death and resurrection. John is taken up to the throne room of God, where he sees Christ enthroned along with the Father. The vision shows how Christ's exhortation to each of the churches to overcome is based on the fact that Christ Himself has already overcome (5:5)…*I will show you what must come to pass* after these things is apparently used in the same way as in 1:1 and 1:19. We have already seen that the after these things allusion from Daniel in 1:19 and its equivalent 'shortly/quickly' in 1:1 indicated that the fulfillment of the Daniel 2 prophecy concerning the establishment of God's kingdom has begun in Christ and the church. Rev. 4:1 introduces not only 4:1–5:14, but also the rest of the visions in the book (4:2–22:5). It becomes clear, therefore, that all the visions about to unfold concern events throughout the church age, past, present, and future. Some may have already unfolded, others await their fulfillment, and yet others have multiple fulfillments throughout the church age. In this connection, the NT is both consistent and clear in its view that the 'last days' or 'latter days' started already with the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:17–21, citing Joel 2:28–32 as fulfilled; 1 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 1:20; Heb. 1:2; Jas. 5:3; 1 John 2:18; Jude 18, etc.)…All the visions from Rev. 6:1 to 22:5 flow out of the vision in chs. 4 and 5. They are all visions which come from the sealed book of 5:1ff. This means that all these visions probably have a mixture of past, present, and future elements." (Beale, 96, 99-100)
- **How the chapters fit together**: "It may help us to keep our balance in the rich mixture of imagery in the following chapters if we see the book like this, structured around its sequences of 'sevens'. We have already had the seven letters to the churches. Now we are to be introduced to the seven seals, which are opened between 6:1 and 8:1. The seventh introduces a further sequence, the seven trumpets, which are blown one by one from 8:6 to 11:15. Then, at the centre of the book, we find visions which unveil the ultimate source of evil and its chief agents: the Dragon, the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land—and also a vision of those who have somehow defeated

these monsters (chapters 12–15). This then leads into the final sequence of seven: the seven bowls of God's wrath, the final plagues which, like the plagues of Egypt (15:1), will be the means of judging the great tyrannical power and rescuing God's people from its claws. These bowls of wrath are poured out in chapter 16, but their effect is described more fully in chapters 17 and 18, leading to the celebration of victory over the two Beasts in chapter 19. That only leaves the old Dragon himself, and the last twists of his fate are described in chapter 20. This then clears the stage for the final unveiling of God's eventual plan: the New Jerusalem in which heaven and earth are joined fully and forever." (Wright, 43-44)

- **Behind the scenes**: "Now, by strong implication, we are being invited to see that the powers of the world are simply parodies, cheap imitation copies, of the one Power who really and truly rules in heaven and on earth. As John's great vision unfolds, we will see how it is that these human kingdoms have acquired their wicked, cruel power, and how it is that God's radically different sort of power will win the victory over them. This is the victory in which the seven letters were urging the churches to claim their share. We now discover how that victory comes about. It begins with the unveiling of reality. Behind the complex and messy confusions of church life in ancient Turkey; behind the challenges of the fake synagogues and the threatening rulers; behind the ambiguous struggles and difficulties of ordinary Christians—there stands the heavenly throne room in which the world's creator and lord remains sovereign. Only by stopping in our tracks and contemplating this vision can we begin to glimpse the reality which not only makes sense of our own realities but enables us, too, to win the victory." (Wright, 45-46)

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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