

Symbolism (from The Revelation of Jesus Christ, by John Walvoord)

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Symbolisms occur throughout Scripture as a vehicle for divine revelation, but it is undoubtedly true that the final book of the New Testament because of its apocalyptic character contains more symbols than any other book in the New Testament.⁴⁵ In this particular it is similar to the book of Daniel to which, in many respects, it is a counterpart, and also to Ezekiel and Zechariah in the Old Testament. Many apocalyptic books appeared prior to as well as contemporary with the book of Revelation. The fact that Revelation was included in the canon and all other contemporary apocalyptic books were excluded is in itself a testimony to the unusual character of Revelation. Among the apocalyptic books produced in the early church were the *Apocalypse of Paul*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Apocalypse of Zechariah*, and others like them, which though similar in style are not inspired and are far inferior as vehicles of conveying truth. These writings should not be confused with the genuine Pauline and Petrine epistles and the book of Zechariah in the Old Testament. Apocalyptic books in general are so designated because they reveal truth expressed in symbolic and guarded language.

The symbolism of the book of Revelation has been explained on many principles. One of the most probable and popular, however, is that it was necessary to state opposition to the Roman Empire during the persecutions of Domitian by expressing the revelation from God in symbolic terms which would not be easily apprehended by the Roman authorities. Ethelbert Stauffer explains the need for symbolism in the Apocalypse in this way:

We may read the Book of Revelation with new understanding when we see it as the apostolic reply to the declaration of war [on Christianity] by the divine emperor in Rome. And when we realize the perilous political situation in which the book was both written and “published” (22:10), we understand the reason for its mysterious and veiled pictorial language and its preference for words and pseudonyms from the Old Testament.⁴⁶

The exposition of this point of view is expressed by Stauffer in his account of the developments during the reign of Domitian (a.d. 81-96). As Stauffer notes, Domitian gradually applied to himself all the attributes of God and established a form of religion which was anti-Christian. As Stauffer states,

Domitian was also the first emperor to wage a proper campaign against Christ; and the Church answered the attack under the leadership of Christ’s last apostle, John of the Apocalypse. Nero had Paul and Peter destroyed, but he looked upon them as seditious Jews. Domitian was the first emperor to understand that behind the Christian “movement” there stood an enigmatic figure who threatened the glory of the emperors. He was the first to declare war on this figure, and the first also to lose the war—a foretaste of things to come.⁴⁷

Stauffer traces the development of Domitian's opposition to Christianity and his claim of divine attributes on the coins which were issued during the reign of Domitian and which were used as an important propaganda vehicle to communicate to the people Domitian's assumption of divinity. Almost every aspect of nature is used as well as grotesque nonnatural forms as a vehicle of the symbolism of the book of Revelation. Hence, from the animal world, frequent symbols appear, such as the horses of Revelation 6, the living creatures seen in heaven, Christ as the Lamb, and the calf, the locust, the scorpion, the lion, the leopard, the bear, the frog, the eagle, the vulture, birds, fish, as well as unnatural beasts, such as those in Revelation 13. There is also allusion to the botanical world, and trees and grass are mentioned in a context of reference to earth, sky, and sea. The sun, moon, and stars in the heavens; the thunder, lightning, and hail of the atmospheric heavens, as well as rivers and seas on earth often form a vehicle of divine revelation. Various forms of humanity are also mentioned, such as the mother and child of Revelation 12, the harlot of Revelation 17, and the wife of Revelation 19. Weapons of war such as swords are named as well as reapers with their sickles. Trumpeters with their trumpets are introduced as well as the flute and lyre. In many cases John had to use unusual expressions to describe scenes in heaven and in earth which transcend normal human experience.

Some items allude either to biblical background or to the geography of the Bible, but much of the imagery found in the book of Revelation is familiar also to students of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. The golden lampstand of the churches of Asia has some correspondence to the lamp-stand of the Tabernacle and Temple. Allusions to the heavenly Tabernacle and Temple, to the altar, ark, and censer, all have Old Testament background. Geographic descriptions refer also to Old Testament names and places such as the River Euphrates, Sodom, Armageddon—the hill of Megiddo—Jerusalem, Babylon, Egypt, and to Old Testament characters such as Balaam and Jezebel. In many cases there are indirect allusions to Old Testament ideas and situations.

A fair analysis of this compilation of symbols furnishes proof of frequent allusion to the Old Testament. In the center is Christ as the Lamb and Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Root of David. The twelve tribes of Israel are mentioned. As Snell states,

In the Revelation, THE LAMB is the centre around which all else is clustered, the foundation on which everything lasting is built, the nail on which all hangs, the object to which all points, and the spring from which all blessing proceeds. THE LAMB is the light, the glory, the life, the Lord of Heaven and earth, from whose face all defilement must flee away, and in whose presence fulness of joy is known. Hence, we cannot go far in the study of the Revelation, without seeing THE LAMB, like direction-posts along the road, to remind us that He who did by Himself purge our sins is now highly exalted, and that to Him every knee must bow, and every tongue confess.⁴⁸

It is nevertheless true that much of the imagery of the book of Revelation is new; that is, it is created as a vehicle for the divine revelation which John was to record. To attempt, as many writers have done, to consider this symbolism as allusion to extrabiblical apocalyptic literature, is to press the matter beyond its proper bounds.

It is also true that some items, while partially symbolic, may also be intended to be understood literally, as in numerous instances where reference is made to stars, the moon, the sun, rivers, and seas. While there will never be complete agreement on the line between imagery and the literal, the patient exegete must resolve each occurrence in some form of consistent interpretation.

Very prominent in the book of Revelation is the use of numbers, namely, 2, 3, 3½, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 24, 42, 144, 666, 1,000, 1,260, 1,600, 7,000, 12,000, 144,000, 100,000,000, and 200,000,000. These numbers may be understood literally, but even when understood in this way, they often carry with them also a symbolic meaning. Hence the number seven, used fifty-four times, more than any other number in the book, refers to seven literal churches in the opening chapter. Yet by the very use of this number (which speaks of completion or perfection) the concept is conveyed that these were representative churches which in some sense were complete in their description of the normal needs of the church. There were not only seven churches but seven lampstands, seven stars, seven spirits of God, seven seals on the scroll, seven angels with seven trumpets, seven vials or bowls containing the seven last plagues, seven thunders, 7,000 killed in the earthquake of chapter 12, a dragon with seven heads and seven crowns, the beast of chapter 13 with seven heads, seven mountains of chapter 17, and the seven kings. Next in importance to the number seven and in the order of their frequency are the numbers twelve, ten, and four. Some of this stems from the fact that there are twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve thousand were sealed from each of the twelve tribes. The elders of chapter 4 are twice twelve or twenty-four. The new Jerusalem is declared to be 12,000 furlongs wide and long, and its wall twelve times twelve, or 144 cubits in height.

From these indications it is clear that the use of these numbers is not accidental. Though the symbolism is not always obvious, the general rule should be followed to interpret numbers literally unless there is clear evidence to the contrary. The numbers nevertheless convey more than their bare numerical significance.

Of special importance is the reference to forty-two months or 1,260 days, describing the precise length of the great tribulation. This is in keeping with the anticipation of Daniel 9:27 that the last half of the seven-year period would be a time of unprecedented trouble. Endless speculation has also risen over the number 666, describing the beast out of the sea in Revelation 13:18.⁴⁹ The most natural and simple explanation of this number, however, is that the beast is characterized by the number six, just falling short of the number seven and signifying that he is only a man after all. Possibly the threefold occurrence of the number six is in vague imitation of the trinity formed by his association with the devil and the false prophet.

The wide use of symbols is attended, however, by frequent interpretations in the book of Revelation itself either by direct reference or by implication. Symbols can often be explained also by usage elsewhere in Scripture.

The following list may be helpful:

The seven stars (1:16) represent seven angels (1:20).

The seven lampstands (1:13) represent seven churches (1:20).

The hidden manna (2:17) speaks of Christ in glory (cf. Exodus 16:33-34; Heb. 9:4).

The morning star (2:28) refers to Christ returning before the dawn, suggesting the rapture of the church before the establishment of the Kingdom (cf. Rev. 22:16; 2 Peter 1:19).

The key of David (3:7) represents the power to open and close doors (Isa. 22:22).

The seven lamps of fire represent the sevenfold Spirit of God (4:5).

The living creatures (4:7) portray the attributes of God.

The seven eyes represent the sevenfold Spirit of God (5:6).

The odors of the golden vials symbolize the prayers of the saints (5:8).

The four horses and their riders (6:1 ff.) represent successive events in the developing tribulation.

The fallen star (9:1) is the angel of the abyss, probably Satan (9:11).

Many references are made to Jerusalem: the great city (11:8), Sodom and Egypt (11:8), which stand in contrast to the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city.

The stars of heaven (12:4) refer to fallen angels (12:9).

The woman and the child (12:1-2) seem to represent Israel and Christ (12:5-6).

Satan is variously described as the great dragon, the old serpent, and the devil (12:9; 20:2).

The time, times, and half a time (12:14) are the same as 1,260 days (12:6).

The beast out of the sea (13:1-10) is the future world ruler and his empire.

The beast out of the earth (13:11-17) is the false prophet (19:20).

The harlot (17:1) variously described as the great city (17:18), as Babylon the great (17:5), as the one who sits on seven hills (17:9), is usually interpreted as apostate Christendom.

The waters (17:1) on which the woman sits represent the peoples of the world (17:15). The ten horns (17:12) are ten kings associated with the beast (13:1; 17:3, 7, 8, 11-13, 1&-17).

The Lamb is Lord of lords and King of kings (17:14).

Fine linen is symbolic of the righteous deeds of the saints (19:8).

The rider of the white horse (19:11-16, 19) is clearly identified as Christ, the King of kings.

The lake of fire is described as the second death (20:14).

Jesus Christ is the Root and Offspring of David (22:16).

In many instances, where symbols are explained in the book of Revelation, they establish a pattern of interpretation which casts a great deal of light upon the meaning of the book as a whole. This introduces a presumption that, where expressions are not explained, they can normally be interpreted according to their natural meaning unless the context clearly indicates otherwise. The attempt to interpret all of the book of Revelation symbolically ends in nullifying practically all that entails the book and leaving it unexplained, as in the work by Lilje, written during the early days of World War II and completed while the author was in prison in Germany.⁵⁰

The problems of interpretation of Revelation have often been made far greater than they really are. They frequently yield to patient study and comparison with other portions of Scripture. The linguistic study of Revelation is an endless task but offers rich rewards to the patient student.