

INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION (2): IS IT SYMBOLIC OR LITERAL?

Daniel 2:27-30,44-45

1. EVIDENCE FOR SYMBOLISM: NOTICE THE CLUES IN REVELATION 1:1

Revelation 1:1, “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known [sēmainō] by sending his angel to his servant John.”

Q: General communication? Or symbolic communication?

- **Notice the link to Daniel 2:28-29, 45**

Four elements that ONLY occur together in Rev. 1:1 and Daniel 2...

- (i) a revelation – Dan. 2:28
- (ii) God showed – Dan. 2:28
- (iii) concerning what will come to pass – Dan. 2:29
- (iv) and He signified it (Greek: sēmainō) – Dan. 2:45

The story in Daniel 2: huge statue... smashed by a rock = 4 earthly kingdoms...
smashed by the global Kingdom of God

So what? The link with Daniel 2 tells us immediately about...

- The CONTENT of Revelation: the victory of God’s kingdom.
- HOW God will communicate in Revelation: through symbols... like the dream which Daniel interpreted. (e.g. lions, lambs, beasts, women, etc).

- **God will “show” (deiknymi – 4:1, 17:1, 21:9, 22:1,6,8)**

“Show” explained later in Revelation as introduction to symbolic visions

- **Some conclusions**

NOT: “interpret literally unless you are forced to treat it symbolically.”

BUT: “interpret symbolically unless you are forced to interpret literally.”

E.g. the person of Jesus: Which one is he – Lion or Lamb? How can the perfect God-man be a beast anyway?

There IS a meaning / historical referent. But we establish it symbolically... almost always via OT references...

2. EVIDENCE FOR SYMBOLISM: NUMBERS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION – QUALITY NOT QUANTITY

- **“Seven” = fulness / totality**

1:4, “seven spirits” (See days of creation... seven Tabernacle lamps, etc)

1:20 etc, “seven lampstands” = “seven churches”

Also: 7 stars... eyes... horns... seals... trumpets... bowls... blessings

- **“Four” = whole of creation**

E.g. 4 rivers of Genesis 2:10-14 → “four corners” / “four winds” (7:1), “four living creatures” (6:1)

- **“3 ½ / time-times-half-a-time / 42 months / 1,260 days = not the whole story!**

Duration of persecution

See Rev. 11:9-10, 11:11, 12:14, 11:2, 13:5, 11:3, 12:6. See Daniel 7:25, 12:7

- **“Twelve” (and its multiples) = totality... of God’s people**

12 tribes... 24 elders (Rev. 4:10)

“Hears” 144,000 (=lots of twelves)... then “sees” an uncountable multitude (7:4,9)

- **Carefully repeated words and phrases**

7x blessings (1:3, 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7, 22:14)

7x tribes, tongues, people, nations / kingdoms / multitudes (5:10, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6, 17:15)

7x the “Lord God Almighty”

14x Jesus

14x the Spirit

28x the Lamb

4x “the seven spirits” = linking complete sovereignty and worldwide domination

4x the allusion to Exodus 19:16ff (“lightnings, sounds, thunders” – 4:5, 8:5, 11:19, 16:18)

12x “twelve” in the new Jerusalem (21:9-22:5)

6x “Babylon” = ? to associate it with the number of the beast ?

Etc

3. PURPOSE: WHY DOES GOD USE SYMBOLISM?

- **Because He can!**

He has arranged everything so that it can teach us (e.g. lions... marriage... etc)

- **To reveal *and* to conceal truth**

Matthew 13:11-14 (and Isaiah 6:9-10): parables bring revelation and exclusion...

So, “He who has an ear, let him hear” (Matt. 13:9 → Rev. 2:7 etc).

- **Imagery / symbolism / typology has power**

Power to reveal unseen spiritual realities to us.

E.g. the Devil

Power to capture our imaginations and evoke associations...

RESOURCES ON REVELATION

- *ESV Study Bible*: notes and introduction [NB. The introduction is available online at The Gospel Coalition website: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/revelation/#overview>]
- John Richardson, *Revelation Unwrapped* (82 page booklet)
- G.K.Beale, “Help me teach the Bible: Revelation” (1 hour interview with Nancy Guthrie – tips for Bibleteachers – at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/revelation/#teaching-preaching>)
- Leon Morris, *Revelation* (256 pages; Tyndale New Testament Commentary series)
- G.K. Beale, *The book of Revelation: a shorter exegetical commentary* (NB. Beale’s “shorter” commentary is still 500 pages.... but it’s smaller than his 1,300 page classic!)

On symbolism - Extract from G.K. Beale, *The book of Revelation: a shorter exegetical commentary* (pages 12-14)

There is always a literal meaning underlying the symbolic meaning, though this literal meaning is often about spiritual realities and sometimes about physical realities, both of which have to do with some kind of historical reality.

This means that we must distinguish between the vision given to John, what that vision symbolizes, and to what or whom the vision may refer. For instance, the woman on the beast in ch. 17 symbolizes the ungodly world system (that is, its economic, cultural, and religious aspects combined together). This worldly system's values are opposed to God's values for His people. The mistake is to bypass the visionary and symbolic and go straight to a literal interpretation, according to which a literal woman on a beast, or something very much like that, is referred to. In that case, the text portrays something so strange and different from anything which has happened hitherto (as with the beast of ch. 13) that it must represent something yet to come. This kind of interpretation could turn Revelation into some kind of science fiction fantasy along the lines of an alien invasion film, which is bizarre, but unfortunately often set forth in popular portrayals. However, admittedly, few literal interpreters try to understand the woman on the beast in some crassly literal fashion. Nevertheless, some commentators take the falling of one-hundred-pound hail (Rev. 16:21) as literal, as well as attempting to interpret literally the fire coming from the mouth of the two faithful witnesses and devouring their enemies, so that their mouths become supernatural flame-throwers. The fact that John bases the plagues of chs. 8, 9, and 16 on the plagues of Exodus does not mean that these plagues are to be taken literally as equivalent to the Exodus plagues (in which case they are yet to come), but rather that they symbolize the judgment of God in various ways, the exact historical reference or references of which must be drawn out by examination of the context and the way in which they are alluded to. When this is seen, we no longer have to conclude that none of the events referred to have yet occurred and must refer to some future cataclysm. This opens up a far broader sphere of interpretation.

John does, however, occasionally explicitly identify something he has seen in a vision, such as when he says that the lampstands are to be identified with the churches (1:20). In that case, we are fairly confident that wherever lampstands occur, they must refer to the churches. But otherwise, we must search the context and the OT (see again below) for the symbolic meaning referred to, and then proceed cautiously to identify any historical reference or references. The impossibility of interpreting literally most of the things seen in the various visions is shown by the fact they are often expressed in a way impossible to understand in a literal manner. For instance, John speaks not only of the lampstands being the churches (see 1:20), but identifies the two lampstands and two olive trees with the two witnesses (11:3-4, on which see for how this correlates with the original identification of the lampstands with the churches). His visions speak of horses with the heads of lions, out of whose mouths come fire, smoke, and brimstone, and whose tails are like serpents with heads (9:17-18). He speaks of locusts which look like horses, have crowns on their heads yet have the faces of men, the hair of women, the teeth of lions, and breastplates of iron (9:7-9). He speaks of the lamb, standing though slain, with seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), and of the mysterious living creatures full of eyes, with six wings, and having the appearance of a lion, a calf, a man, and an eagle (4:6-8). None of these can be interpreted literally, outside of (as noted above) an understanding of Revelation as a strange work of science fiction.