

Introduction to Revelation – part 2

Understanding Revelation: Is it symbolic or literal?

Introduction

As we begin I'll PRAY. And then we're going to listen to God's Word – not in Revelation initially – but in **Daniel 2:27-30, 44-45**.

One of the great arguments over the interpretation of Revelation is whether it is to be taken symbolically or literally. That's the question we're going to be considering in this session. The material that follows I've drawn heavily from Beale's *Shorter Commentary* – which I highly recommend.

Those taking a futurist view of the whole book (see an explanation in a later session) too often tend to a literal interpretation, in which the various people or events portrayed are so strange and even shocking they could not possibly refer to anything known thus far in human history. But is such an interpretation justified?

1. Evidence for symbolism: notice the clues in Revelation 1:1

One of the keys to correctly interpreting Revelation lies in its very first verse. It introduces and sets the tone for the entire book:

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 by sending his angel to his servant John."

The Greek verb translated here as "made it known" (*sēmainō*) can be translated in several different ways: made known, communicated, made clear, signified, or communicated by symbols. The related noun (*sēmeion*) is used in the gospels to describe Jesus' miracles as signs or symbols of his divine power.

How do we work out what that verb means here? Is it a statement of general communication, or is it saying in the very first verse that Revelation is chiefly a symbolic communication?

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

Revelation is the most "biblical" of all Bible books (!): i.e. almost every verse contains an allusion to an earlier scripture (usually from the Old Testament). And that's even true of Revelation 1:1. It's closely connected to the second chapter of Daniel (2:28-29,45), in which Daniel interprets the king's dream concerning a great statue. When we see this link we're helped to see from the very first verse that what John saw and wrote is to be understood as a symbolic mode of communication.

John speaks here of four critical elements:

- (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 *only* other place in the Bible where these same four elements occur is Daniel 2. God reveals mysteries... which he has shown... concerning what will take place... and these He has signified.

Daniel 2:28-29, "... but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these: ²⁹ To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be."

Daniel 2:45, "... just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known [LXX: *sēmainō*] to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure.""

Do you remember the story in Daniel 2? The king has had a dream vision of a huge statue composed of four sections of different metals: gold, silver, bronze and iron. The statue is smashed by a rock which grows and fills the earth. Daniel tells the king that this vision was symbolic. The statue was to be divided into four metallic sections symbolizing four kingdoms (Babylon, Medo- Persia, Greece, and Rome). The stone that smashed the statue represented God's kingdom, which would defeat the evil kingdoms of the world and dominate the world.

What's the significance if Revelation 1:1 deliberately has this O.T. passage in mind? It tells what the *content* of Revelation will be: the victory of God's kingdom. But it also tells us *how* John will communicate: through symbols. The dream which Daniel interpreted was not about a literal statue. Rather, the statute "signified" or "symbolised" something else.

Most of the things John will unfold in Revelation are not to be taken literally: lions, lambs, beasts, women, etc. Each refers symbolically to another reality or set of realities. And the deliberate echo of Daniel 2 and the use of that word "*sēmainō*" make that point right up front.

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

Another detail in 1:1 reinforces the point. The word "to show" (*deiknymi*) is another loaded word. When that verb is used again in Revelation (in 4:1; 17:1; 21:9; 22:1,6,8) it is always introducing divine communication by means of symbolic vision. And John chooses to bring that word right to the front of the book, to help us understand what kind of book it is going to be.

- **Some conclusions**

For now we can see that there is an overall approach to Revelation that is helpful and one that is unhelpful.

- Sadly, many popular approaches to Revelation have suggested: "interpret literally unless you are forced to treat it symbolically."
- However, John himself would want us to conclude the opposite: "interpret symbolically unless you are forced to interpret literally." For, the main means of divine revelation in this book is symbolic.

Many of the visions are impossible to take literally (e.g. Is Jesus a Lion... or Lamb? How can Jesus – who is perfectly God and perfectly man – literally be said to be a beast?).

We're going to see that John's visions may have various historical references, rather than referring in a literal manner to a particular person, thing, or event.

This does not mean that they have no meaning or historical reference, but that the meaning is to be found symbolically — and almost always within the context of OT references which run through the visions God gave to John. 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.

2. Evidence for symbolism: numbers in the book of Revelation

There are three numbers — four, seven, and twelve, along with their multiples — which feature repeatedly in the visions, and each is best interpreted in light of its OT significance.

In view of the repeated and systematic use of these numbers, the Scriptural significance attached to them, and the overwhelmingly symbolic nature of the pictorial images in the book, it is clear that the numbers in Revelation are also to be interpreted symbolically.

Here are some examples (and we could give many others):

- **“Seven”**

The first number in the book is clearly symbolic, and it sets the pattern for the others to be likewise interpreted symbolically. In Rev. 1:4 reference is made to “the seven Spirits who are before His [God’s] throne.”

Some commentators try to take this literally and say that there were seven angels or spirit beings around God’s throne. However, it is clear that the reference is to the Holy Spirit, since God the Father has just been mentioned in the preceding sentence (“Him who is and who was and who is to come”), and then God the Son is mentioned in the following sentence (verse 5). Thus, the book is “from” God the Father, the Spirit, and Jesus.

Why refer to the Spirit by the phrase “the seven Spirits”? It is to highlight the fact that the fullness of the Spirit is being emphasized, since “seven” in the OT and elsewhere in Revelation figuratively refers to completeness or fullness.

- The reason for this is that it is rooted in the seven days of creation.
- The OT uses seven often in this connection (for instance, Gen. 4:15, 24 and Ps. 79:12 refer to the sevenfold anger of God, expressing His full or complete anger which satisfies His justice).
- The tabernacle had seven lamps because Israel’s earthly temple and its furniture were the microcosmic copy of the archetypal heavenly temple of God, and the number symbolized the fact that God’s dwelling was intended to be extended throughout the earth.

Likewise we read of seven churches and seven lampstands. It suggests that the seven churches to whom the book was given were not to be its only recipients. Rather, they represented the whole of the church of Christ.

We’ll also read of seven stars... eyes... horns... seals... trumpets... bowls... blessings. Each speaking of fullness and totality.

- **“Four”**

It speaks of the whole of creation. Like the four rivers of Genesis 2:10-14 refer to the whole of creation, so in Revelation we read of the earth’s “four corners” (7:1, 20:8) and “four winds” (7:1) and “four living creatures” (6:1).

- **“3 ½ / time-times-half-a-time / 42 months / 1,260 days**

These are related time spans. They are different ways of saying “3 ½.” It’s a period that is associated with persecution and the need for divine protection. Probably, the significance is that it’s half of seven: it’s not the whole story for the suffering people of God. (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)**

It also speaks of totality, especially with reference to God’s people. Israel was composed of 12 tribes. And so we meet 24 elders worshipping (Rev. 4:10).

And in Revelation 7:4 John “hears” the number of the sealed servants of God: 144,000 – lots of twelves! – 12,000 from every one of Israel’s tribes. But then in 7:9 he “looks” and sees an innumerable multitude from every nation. It’s the same group of people, just described in different ways.

It’s a classic clue that in Revelation numbers are almost always to be read symbolically: *they have a qualitative meaning*, not a quantitative one.

- **Carefully repeated words and phrases**

The Holy Spirit – through John – makes the same point not only by his use of particular numbers, but by the number of times he repeats certain words and phrases. For example:

- 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!**

That’s another way of saying that God is sovereign. He has ordered every molecule in His universe so it is just as He wants it. That means anything in His creation can be used (by Him) to reveal spiritual truths.

Why did God make lions? They display his glory in many ways! But chiefly they exist to help us understand the rule of Jesus who is the Lion of Judah. He arranged it like that, in his power and wisdom.

Why did God give marriage to human beings? For our good, and for the good of human society. But chiefly so we might better understand the Gospel – for a human bride is but a poor shadow of true bride (the church of Christ), and a human husband but a poor illustration of the love which took Christ to the Cross.

It is not that human marriage comes first, and then the Bible writers think to themselves “Oh, here’s a cracking illustration of the Gospel.” It is the other way round. In a universe where our God is utterly sovereign and whose end is to glorify Christ the redeemer, he built into human society a relationship designed to depict the Gospel.

But that still doesn’t exactly answer our question! Why did God use a potentially confusing way of speaking His message?

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

Revelation’s symbols are very like Jesus’ parables. In Matthew 13:11-14 Jesus was asked why he spoken in parables. He answered using the words of Isaiah 6:9-10.

Matthew 13:11-14, “And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: ““You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.””

To believers, the parables brought life and understanding. To non-believers, the parables made no sense and were deliberately excluding. Seven times in Revelation John gives the admonition “He who has an ear, let him hear” (2:7, etc). It’s based precisely on Jesus’ words in Matthew 13:9 (and on Isaiah 6). We’re meant to think: “This is a bit like those parables which Jesus told.”

But why does the Lord choose to address Christian people – and the elect – through symbolism?

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

Some Christians think that to say of Revelation “it is symbolic” is somehow to downplay its truthfulness or power. That would only be the case if God wanted us to read Revelation literally. But he doesn’t. And he’s given us truth from heaven in this form because it has power.

It has power to reveal unseen spiritual realities to us. Have you ever thought how hard it is for creatures like us to understand the power of the Devil? We have never seen him, though we know his temptations and wiles. So, very kindly, God takes things we do know about – from within His creation – in order to help us understand that which is beyond our experience. So, the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion, he is a dragon, an accuser, an enemy, a serpent.

And symbolism – rightly understood – has power to capture the imagination and evoke associations in ways which literal propositions do not. Just consider...

The Lord Jesus holds the lampstand of our church. His word is like a sharp two-edged sword. Forever, there is a Lamb standing blood as though he were slain. Our prayers ascend to his ears as surely as incense rises to the sky. One day He will roll up the sky like a scroll, and he will trample the winepress of God’s fury. Yet for those who have been clothed in white robes, who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, that will be a day of joy. For we will be his bride, his city, his temple.

In our next sessions...

We’re going to consider the Old Testament foundations for the book of Revelation (which we’ve already heavily glimpsed today).

And we’re going to consider the structure and the flow of the book – which is also critical to our right understanding.