

SYMBOLISM IN REVELATION

Introduction

This commentary on the book of Revelation, otherwise known as the Apocalypse, is clear and simple, devotional and enlightening. Simple, because it is mainly concerned with the meaning of the text, and not so much with the author, date, and background details many commentaries give. What I believe to be the correct interpretation is presented with minimal discussion of alternative interpretations. It is devotional in that it lays emphasis on the Bible text and what should be our basic response, not on exhortation or application to the Christian life. The general format for each passage is Scriptures on the left-hand page and commentary on the right.

We are blessed if we read the words of this prophecy and take to heart what is written in them because the time is near (Rev 1:3). Don't ignore reading the Scripture portions carefully. Revelation is 'apocalypse' in Greek and means 'unveiling', an unveiling or revealing of what must soon take place before the end of the world as we know it. It was written by John, generally believed to be John, the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' disciples in the first century. It is saturated with thoughts expressed by the Old Testament prophets concerning the end times and the Messianic kingdom. Below each passage of Revelation on the left-hand page are relevant verses from the Old Testament, of which words in italics are alluded to directly by John. Jesus confirmed the words of the prophets and we'll do well to study them and pay attention to them as to a lamp shining in a dark place (2 Pet 1:19).

More is revealed here about the end of this age than what the prophets knew. Jesus himself is the revealer (1:1), and he reveals more to us here than what we have in the Gospels or the epistles. Even so, we are not told everything. There are many mysteries, and scholars have different interpretations. There is a lot of symbolism and use of metaphor in Revelation. The reader should not interpret these symbols and metaphors literally. It was revealed to John in a series of visions, so Revelation is like a picture book. We need to think

about the symbols and metaphors, and by using our imagination, picture it, and discern the truth being taught. This doesn't make it any less real. The symbols will be explained. Metaphors, by definition, should always be taken imaginatively, rather than literally. When John says he saw Jesus standing among seven golden lampstands with seven stars in his right hand, he is telling us what he saw in a vision. We are then told that the lampstands are seven churches, and the stars are the messengers of those churches. The primary meaning of 'angel' in Greek is messenger. Imagine the picture of Jesus standing among gatherings of believers, whose job is to bear light to the world. He is there to protect, guide, and empower the messengers, the church leaders, who teach the truth and inspire the believers through their preaching.

The series of seals, trumpets, and bowls all end with the Day of the Lord. There are many parallels between them. Some visions take place in heaven, others are on Earth. The book's climax is the return of the Messiah and his millennial reign on earth. The purpose of the book is to inform the saints about these future events (Rev 1:1). God's servants need to be prepared for the terrible time of persecution that is coming when the Antichrist wages war against God's holy people and conquers them, and everyone is invited to accept the gift of salvation.

The main end-of-age events and personages connected with the book of Revelation are explained before the commentary is given. This gives you a better appreciation of this wonderful revelation and just how the end-of-age events will pan out.

The book of Revelation consists of a series of visions that were communicated to the apostle John by an angel. The visions are like little video clips that illustrate end-of-world events. The events are real future events that should be interpreted literally, but many words and phrases used in these visions have a symbolic meaning, and those words should not be interpreted literally. The symbolic meaning of the words is often found in the Old Testament. In the following list of symbolic words and phrases, relevant references from the OT and Revelation are given in parentheses.

SYMBOLISM

word or phrase

12 (Gen 49:28)
144,000 (12 x 12 x 1000)
24 elders around God's throne
666
7 spirits/lamps (Ex 25:37)
7 (Gen 4:15, 7:2)
Abyss
altar (Gen 8:20)
ancient serpent (Gen 3:1)
Armageddon (2 Kings 23:29)
Babylon (Dan 4:30)
Balaam's teaching (Num 31:16)
beast (Dan 7:3)
blood flowing to horse's bridle
book of life (Ex 32:32)
bride (Hos 2:19)
chain
crown
crown of life
desert (Hos 2:14)
double-edged/sharp sword
(Isa 49:2)
eagle (Ezek 1:10)
eagle flying overhead

symbolic meaning

number for God's people
(Rev 21:12)
number for total Church (7:4,
14:1)
Church representatives (4:4)
(Israel 12 + Church 12)
Antichrist's number, (13:18)
counterfeit trinity (16:13)
Holy Spirit (1:4, 4:5)
completeness
home of evil spirits (9:1, 20:1)
sacrifice (6:9, 16:7)
prayer (8:3, 9:13)
Satan (12:9, 20:2)
great battlefield in Israel (16:16)
capital of world empire (14:8, 16:19,
17:5, 18:2, 10, 21)
making money through
preaching (2:14)
world empire (13:2)
Antichrist (13:8)
False Prophet (13:11)
enormous bloodshed (14:20)
names of redeemed (3:5, 20:12)
Church (19:7,)
New Jerusalem (3:12, 21:2, 9)
restrainer (20:1)
royal authority (3:11, 4:4, 6:2,
13:2, 14:14, 19:12)
reward of eternal life (2:10)
place of refuge (12:6, 14)
authority of God's word
(1:16, 2:16, 19:15)
representative of birds (4:7)
universal proclamation (8:13)

eagle's wings (Ex 19:4)	divine providence (12:14)
Egypt (Ex 7:13)	stubborn inhabitants of Jerusalem (11:8)
fiery mountain falls into the sea	nuclear bomb? (8:8)
fire (Isa 66:16, Mt 5:22)	hell (14:18, 20:14)
	anger (19:12)
foundations	teaching of the apostles (21:14)
Gog and Magog (Ezek 38:2)	eschatological enemies from the north (20:8)
gold	genuine riches/value (3:18, 21:18)
great blazing star	ballistic missile? (8:10)
Hades (Gen 37:35)	home of spirits of the dead, Hebrew: Sheol (1:18, 20:13)
hail and fire mixed with blood	modern warfare (8:7)
harp	worship instrument (5:8, 14:2, 15:2)
head	king (13:2, 17:3)
horn (Dan 7:24)	leader and his authority (12:3, 13:2, 11, 17:12)
incense (Ps 141:2)	prayer (5:8, 8:3-4)
iron scepter (Ps 2:9)	toughness/strictness (2:27, 12:5, 19:15, false prophetess (2:20)
Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31)	key to Messiah's kingdom (3:7)
key of David (Isa 22:22)	Jesus' power to redeem (1:18)
keys of death and Hades	Christ as sacrificial victim (5:6, 12:11, 13:8)
Lamb (Jn 1:29)	Messiah as victorious military leader (14:1, 17:14)
Lamb's wedding feast (Hos 2:19)	celebration of union with Christ (19:7)
lampstand (Zech 4:2, 11)	local church giving light (1:12, 20) two witnesses (11:4)
leaves of tree of life (Ezek 47:12)	healing for the nations (22:2)
lightning (Ex 19:16)	God's royal decrees (4:5, 8:5, 11:19, 16:18)
linen, bright and clean	righteousness of the saints (15:6, 19:8, 14)
lion (Gen 49:9)	king of Judah (5:5)
lion (Ezek 1:10)	representing wild animals (4:7)
lion's teeth (Joel 1:6)	fierceness (9:8, 17, 13:2)
living creatures (Ezek 1:6)	of creation (4:6, 5:6, 7:11, 14:3)
living water of life (Zech 14:8)	life communicated by God's Spirit (7:17, 21:6, 22:1, 17)
locusts (Joel 1:4, 6)	great army (9:3, 7)
morning star (Num 24:17)	Messiah as harbinger of a new

	dawn (22:16)
New Jerusalem	glorified Church (3:12, 21:2)
one-third of the stars	fallen angels? (12:4)
open door (Isa 22:22)	evangelistic access (3:8)
opening the seals	revelation of world's destiny (6:1)
ox (Ezek 1:10)	representing domestic animals (4:7)
pale horse (Zech 6:3)	harbinger of death (6:8)
palm branches (Lev 23:40)	celebration (7:9)
precious stones/jewels (Ex 28:15-21)	glory (18:12, 21:11, 19)
prostitute (Isa 23:17)	immoral commerce (17:1, 15)
	immoral attraction of city life (19:2)
rainbow (Gen 9:13)	covenant (4:3, 10:1)
red dragon (Isa 27:1)	Satan (12:3)
rider on black horse (Zech 6:2)	harbinger of hunger (6:5)
rider on red horse (Zech 6:3)	harbinger of war (6:4)
river of the water of life (Ps 46:4)	Holy Spirit (22:1)
river spewed by Satan (Isa 43:2)	wave of persecution or distress (12:15-16)
root of David (Isa 11:1, 10)	Messiah, descendant of David (5:5, 22:16)
scales	food scarcity (6:5)
scroll (little, open) (Ezek 3:1-3)	10:2, 8, 12–16 (contents)
scroll (rolled up) (Ezek 2:9-10)	5:1, 6-18 (contents)
sea (Dan 7:2-3)	rebellious nations (13:1, 20:13, 21:1)
sea becoming blood	'red tide' algae? (16:3-4)
sea of glass (Ex 24:10, Ezek 1:22)	peace at God's throne (4:6, 15:2)
second death	hell (2:11, 20:6, 14, 21:8)
sickle (Joel 3:13)	harvesting tool (14:14, 18)
Sodom (Gen 19)	immoral city (11:8)
star that fell from heaven	Satan (9:1) (Isa 14:12)
stars in Jesus' hand (Gen 1:16)	luminaries, pastors (1:20)
sun and moon & 12 stars (Gen 37:9)	Jacob and family (12:1)
sword (Isa 3:25)	war (6:4, 13:10)
throne (Isa 6:1)	royal rule (2:13, 3:21, 4:2, 6:16, 7:9, 13:2, 16:10, 20:4, 21:5, 22:5)
thunder (Ps 18:13)	God's voice (4:5, 8:5, 10:3, 11:19, 16:18)
tree of life (Gen 2:9)	source of eternal life (22:2, 14, 19)
tribes of Israel (Gen 29-30)	God's people (7:4, 21:12)
trumpet (1 Sam 13:3)	news announcer (8:2, 10:7, 11:15)

white hair (Dan 7:9)
white horse (Zech 6:3)
white robe (Rev 3:4)
white throne
wine (Jer 51:7)
winepress (Isa 63:2-3)
woman's hair
Zion (Ps 2:6, Isa 24:23)

venerable (1:14)
harbinger of conquest (6:2, 19:11)
imputed righteousness (6:11, 7:9)
final judgment (20:11)
attraction of city life (17:2, 18:3)
God's punishment (14:12, 19:15)
antennae (on tanks)? (9:8)
Messianic rule (14:1)