

Revelation Handout 1: Symbolism & Interpretive Criteria

Illustration of How Difficult It Is to Interpret Symbolism in Revelation:

Imagine facing the task of interpreting this fictitious vision in the Book of Revelation:

And I looked into the heavens and I saw an eagle tethered to a golden crown. Then suddenly the tether was loosed and the eagle was released. The eagle flew away to a mountain and built a nest on the mountain.

First Interpretation:

The eagle symbolizes the believer. // The golden crown symbolizes God. // The nest on the mountain symbolizes a place of rest for the eagle.

Message: A believer in Jesus can never attain to his final place of rest until he is given leave by God to do so.

Second Interpretation:

The eagle symbolizes the church. // The golden crown symbolizes the Roman emperor. // The mountain symbolizes Rome. // The nest on the mountain symbolizes occupation of the city of Rome.

Message: A prediction of the event of the Christian church, who currently is in bondage to the Roman emperor, gaining their freedom from Rome, prevailing over Rome, and establishing itself in Rome, being at peace in Rome as its home.

Third Interpretation:

The eagle symbolizes the Romans. // The golden crown symbolizes God. // The mountain symbolizes Jerusalem. // The nest on the mountain symbolizes a home or domicile in Jerusalem.

Message: A prediction of the event of God "releasing" the Romans to go to Jerusalem, destroy it, and establish their own (Roman) domicile there.

Fourth interpretation:

The eagle symbolizes the American colonies. // The golden crown symbolizes the English monarchy. // The nest on the mountain symbolizes a home for the eagle.

Message: A prediction of the event of the American colonies gaining their freedom from the English monarchy and establishing their own independent homeland.

Fifth interpretation:

The eagle symbolizes Jesus. // The golden crown symbolizes God, the absolute sovereign over creation. // The mountain symbolizes Jerusalem. // The nest on the mountain symbolizes residence in Jerusalem.

Message: A prediction of the event of God finally granting Jesus the freedom to go establish his sovereign reign over Israel and the whole world from his throne in Jerusalem.

Some Important Interpretive Criteria To Use in Interpreting Revelation:

A. The fact that an interpretation of the symbolism of a vision is possible (plausible) does not make it right.

1. Symbolism is very flexible. So there are many possible (plausible) interpretations of a vision. Being a possible (plausible) interpretation does not mean that that interpretation is what was intended by the vision.
2. History is long and complex; and the visions of Revelation are capable of many different possible interpretations. There is little question, therefore, that one could always find some event in history to correspond to whatever interpretation I want to give a vision.

B. If there is no clear reason why a particular event should be important enough to "reveal," it is highly unlikely that the vision I am interpreting is predicting that particular event. Such an interpretation would be arbitrary and false. To justify interpreting a vision as a prediction of event X, I must account for why event X in particular would likely be included among those things God chose to reveal to mankind.

1. It is not enough to claim that the prediction proves God's ability to foretell the future. The purpose of Revelation is not to prove that God is God. Its purpose is to somehow prepare the reader for what lies ahead. Only the prediction of events that do so prepare the reader are consistent with the purpose of Revelation.
2. My account for why God is predicting event X must make sense independently of my acceptance of the claim that event X was predicted by the vision.
 - a. It does no good to argue this: *As I understand the vision, God predicted event X. Therefore, God must have thought it was important for believers to know of event X in advance, otherwise he wouldn't have predicted it.* This argument assumes what must be proved: that God predicted event X.

C. No valid interpretation will construe a vision in such a way that it ignores a significant number of the details of that vision.

D. Revelation must be understood from John's standpoint, not from the standpoint of later Christendom.