

Revelation Handout 2: Interpreting the Symbols in Revelation

How we understand the basic meaning and “story” of Revelation hinges on what meaning we assign to the various symbols used in Revelation. But God did not bother to supply us with a key that explicitly indicates the meaning of each and every symbol. Since God did not provide us with such a “key” to the meaning of the symbols in Revelation, how can we possibly determine what the symbols mean?

Determining what the symbols means is a dialectical process. We must move back and forth between a hypothesis about what the symbol means and a hypothesis about what event the vision is predicting.

Important Factors that Contribute to My Determination of the Meaning of a Symbol in Revelation:

- 1. The meanings of that particular symbol that are inherently possible.**
Example: It is inherently possible that a lion symbolizes “kingship” or “ferocity” [fierceness]. But it is not inherently possible that a lion symbolizes “cowardice.”
- 2. The pattern of usage of that symbol within the Bible generally.**
Examples: “wormwood” is a symbol of something that is destructive or deadly, Rev. 8:11 [cf. its usage throughout Bible] // meaning of “seal on forehead,” Rev. 9:4 [cf. Deut. 6:8, 11:18]).
- 3. The pattern of the usage of that symbol within the symbolic prophetic literature.**
Example: Rev. 11:4, “olive trees” cf. Zechariah 4:11–14.
- 4. The pattern of the usage of that symbol within Revelation itself.**
Examples: The meaning of “one-third,” Rev. 8:7 etc. // the meaning of “Abyss” = place where evil is confined while being restrained, Rev. 9:2 // the meaning of “Euphrates” = protective barrier to invasion, Rev. 9:14–15 // the meaning of “lake of fire” = place of destruction (incineration), Rev. 20:14.
- 5. Explicit definition of that symbol given internally.**
Example: The meaning of “eye,” Revelation 5:6.
- 6. Implicit clues to the meaning of that symbol given internally within the vision.**
Examples: The meaning of “scroll” [“book”], Revelation 5:1 / clue > written on the front and the back // meaning of Lion, Rev. 5:5 / clue > tribe of Judah, Root of David // the meaning of “measuring” must take Rev. 11:2 into account.
- 7. The meanings of the symbol that are possible if one is to understand the vision as a meaningful and coherent prediction.**
Example: Rev. 5:1, the “book” cannot be the “book of life” (as in Rev. 20:15) in the context of this vision.

8. The possibility that an O.T. prophecy (or an O.T. event) has been turned into a symbol within the book of Revelation.

Examples: Rev. 11:6, the use of "power to shut up the sky" as a symbolic identification of Elijah // the use of 3.5 years as a symbol in various places // Rev. 20: 8, the use of "Gog and Magog" as a symbol.

Important Factors that Contribute to My Determination of what Event a Vision is Predicting:

- 1. My sense of the overall outline of the future presented by other biblical books.**
Am I looking at an event that has been predicted by other prophecies elsewhere in the Bible?
Am I proposing an event that is consistent with the overall pattern of the future that I can discern from other biblical prophecies?
 - 2. My sense of the overall outline of the future presented by the book of Revelation.**
Am I proposing an event that is consistent with the overall pattern of the future that I can discern from other biblical prophecies?
 - 3. My sense of the overall message and purpose of Revelation.**
What events would make sense for God to predict, given the message and purpose of Revelation?
-

Question that is determinative of a symbol's meaning:

Which possible meaning of the symbol (given all the factors for determining the symbol's meaning listed above) *makes the most sense in light of what event the vision is most likely describing and predicting* (given all the factors for determining the event listed above)?