

Revelation 1:12-20

Symbols



Symbols in Biblical Visions

Joseph and the vision of sheaves and sun, moon, and stars (Gen 37:5-11).

Pharaoh's dream of skinny and fat cows (Gen 41:1-7).

Dreams in Daniel (Dan 2:31-45; 4:10-27; 7:1-15; 8:1-15; 9:21-12:12).

In reading Revelation 1:12-20, we are struck with the symbols and how they are to be interpreted... this kind of symbolism is not unique to the book of Revelation.

These visions include wheat, celestial objects, beasts, statues, etc.

Daniel begins a series of apocalyptic literature that was popular before and after Jesus' time.

Apocalyptic

“The term *apocalyptic* is used in modern biblical studies to refer to a type of discourse that describes, usually in highly figurative terms, a sudden divine intervention in human history for the accomplishment of either salvific or judgmental purposes” — Richard A. Taylor

Source:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/introduction-to-old-testament-apocalyptic-literature/>

Apocalyptic literature is highly figurative/symbolic. It is used in Daniel and Revelation primarily. Also used in the Olivet Discourse where Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple.

The Apocalypse

“The revelation of Jesus Christ...” (Rev 1:1, ESV).

“Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ...” (Rev 1:1, Greek).

The apocalypse is not “the end of the world.” But the Revelation of Jesus Christ and in in breaking of God’s judgment and salvation.

Literal or Symbolic?

Revelation 1:16, “from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword”

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

“He made my mouth like a sharp sword” (Isa 49:2).

“[take up] the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17).

The Bible is the key to interpreting the symbolism of Revelation.

Reading the Bible “Literarily”

Revelation 19:15, “...from his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations...”

We must take *genre* into consideration when we read literature.

Therefore, to properly understand the apocalypse, we must read it *literarily*, which in this case means preferring symbolism over literal readings.

Psalm 104 is an example of a poetic account of creation:

Read Psalm 104:1-9

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

O LORD my God, you are very great!

You are clothed with splendor and majesty,

2

covering yourself with light as with a garment,
stretching out the heavens like a tent.

3

He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters;
he makes the clouds his chariot;
he rides on the wings of the wind;

4

he makes his messengers winds

5

He set the earth on its foundations,
so that it should never be moved.

6

You covered it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.

7

At your rebuke they fled;
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight.

8

The mountains rose, the valleys sank down
to the place that you appointed for them.

9

You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

Symbolism Gone Wrong

“In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, and their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails.” (Rev 9:7-10).

While in popular writings, no scholarly work proposes this interpretation. Most literalists reject this and believe the text is speaking about literal locusts in a literal plague.

Literalism Gone Wrong

“When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.” (Rev 6:12-13).

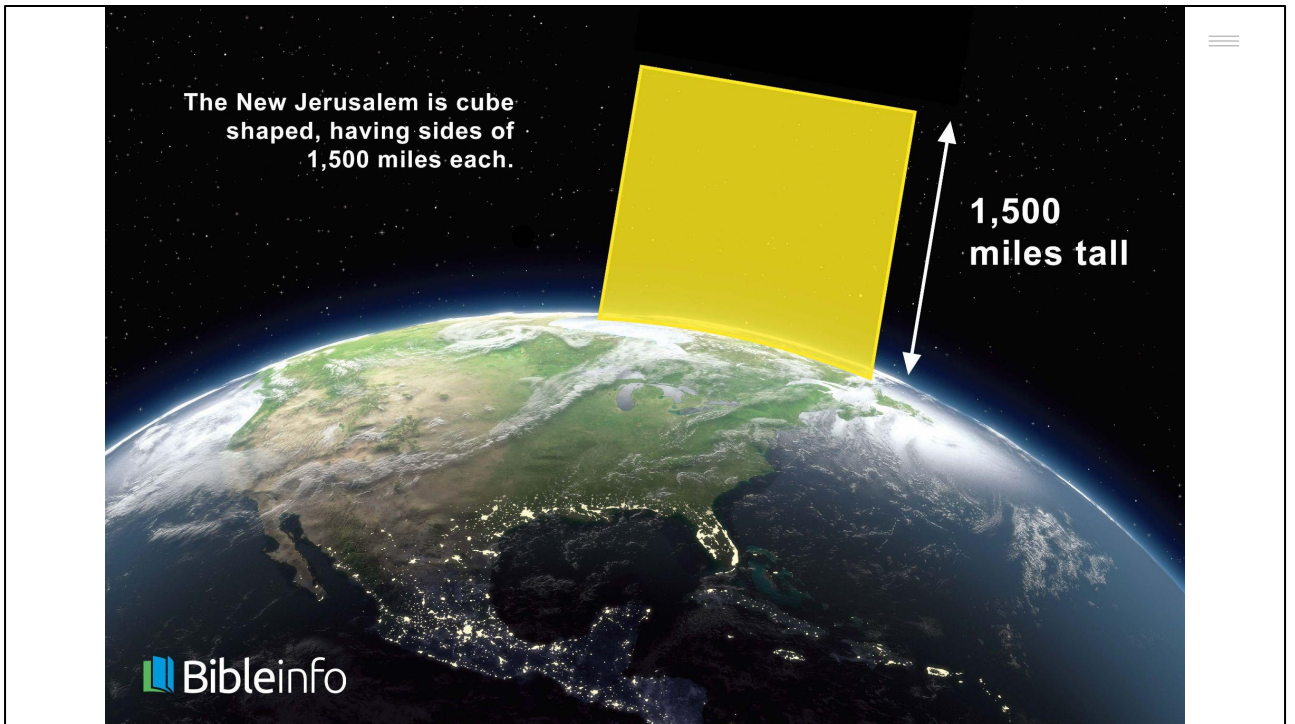
This is sometimes interpreted as catastrophic climate change!

A strictly literal reading of passages like Revelation 6:13 ("the stars of the sky fell to the earth") presents a cosmological absurdity, as stars are vastly larger than Earth, suggesting the imagery is clearly symbolic of political or spiritual upheaval.

Literalism Gone Wrong

“The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal” (Rev 21:16).

12,000 stadia is 1500 miles or 2400 kms.



From <https://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/new-jerusalem>

The height of the city is 2400 kms.

The ISS orbits the earth at 250 miles (400 kms).

The article goes on to explain that the 12 gates will be cut from a single pearl (Rev 21:12, 25).

The city will be transparent (Rev 21:11, 18, 21)

The city will be 12 foundations made of precious stones (Rev 21:14).

The walls will surround the city, being 216 ft thick (Rev 21:12, 17, 18) made of pure jasper.

There will be no sun or moon (Rev 21:23) and no night (Rev 21:25).

Symbolism Done Right

Apocalyptic symbols are best interpreted by comparison to similar figures of speech *found elsewhere in the Bible*.

E.g., The two witnesses of Revelation 11:3-5.

Jeremiah 5:14, “Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them” (cf. Jer 20:9; 23:29).

This is not human flamethrowers contra Luke 9:51-56.

These are preachers of judgment.

Preterists - Leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Idealists - The church leading up to the great persecution before Christ returns.

Numbers

In apocalyptic writing, numbers should be read symbolically rather than literally.

Seven is the number of perfection (Gen 2:1-3; cf. Rev 1:4, 11-13; 5:1, 5-6; 8:2, 6; 10:3-4; 12:3; 13:1; 15:1, 6-8).

Ten is the number of fullness (Job 19:3; Ecc 7:19; cf. Rev 12:3; 13:1; 17:3, 7, 12).

Twelve of God's people (Gen 49:28; Matt 10:2; cf. Rev 7:5-8; 12:1; 21:12, 14, 16, 21; 22:2).

Job 19:3, "These ten times you have cast reproach upon me; are you not ashamed to wrong me?"

Ecclesiastes 7:19, "Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city."

Numbers

Symbolism may be intensified by multiplying numbers together.

$144,000 = 12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 =$ The great fullness of God's redeemed people (Rev 7:3-4; 14:1-5).

New Jerusalem (1200 stadia, 144 cubits, 12 foundations, 12 gates)

Revelation 21:9, "Then came one of the seven angels...saying, 'Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.'"

The cubic structure matches the cubic dimensions of the most holy place in the temple.

The foundation stones are the same jewels that decorated the ephod of the priest.

Each foundation had the names of the apostles.

The gates had the names of the tribes.

This is not a real city. It is the people of God made holy! Perfectly holy! The bridge!

Time

Units of time are to be interpreted symbolically rather than literally.

E.g., 1,260 days (Rev 11:3; 12:6); forty-two months (Rev 11:2; 13:5); “a time, and times, and half a time” (Rev 12:14).

This time period is symbolic for a time of distress and trial for God’s people (Luke 4:25; Jas 5:17; Dan 7:25; 12:7, 11).

It is historically related to the great tribulation and abomination of desolation by Antiochus Epiphanes (167-164 BC) and the Jewish war resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem (66-70 AD).

1260 is 42 month is 3 ½ years

Luke 4:25, “But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land”

James 5:17, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.”

Daniel 7:25, “He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law; and they shall be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time.”

Daniel 12:11, “And from the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be 1,290 days.”

*** This has implications for the 1,000 years mentioned in Revelation 20. Don’t assume literal in apocalyptic!

Decreation Language

A repeated theme in apocalyptic or prophetic literature is imagery of the radical disruption and dissolution of the heavens and earth.

Revelation 6:12-17, “When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place...

Decreation Language in the Prophets

Isaiah 13:1, “The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.”

“For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light” (Isaiah 13:10).

Here is the description of God’s judgment against Babylon by the Medes (13:17).

Decreation Language in the Prophets

Isaiah 34:4-5, "All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction."

Cf. Jer 4:24; Ezek 32:7; Hos 10:8; Joel 2:31; Nah 1:5; 3:12

Here is the description of God's judgment against Edom.

Jer 4:24, "I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro."

Ezekiel 32:7, "When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark;
I will cover the sun with a cloud,
and the moon shall not give its light."

Hosea 10:8, "The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed.
Thorn and thistle shall grow up
on their altars,
and they shall say to the mountains, "Cover us,"
and to the hills, "Fall on us.""

Joel 2:31, "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes."

Nah 1:5, "The mountains quake before him;
the hills melt;

the earth heaves before him,
the world and all who dwell in it.”

Nah 3:12, “All your fortresses are like fig trees
with first-ripe figs—
if shaken they fall
into the mouth of the eater.”

Decreation Language in Revelation

Therefore, it is best to interpret decreation language as God's climactic judgment and salvation.

Rev 6:17, "for the great day of their wrath has come."

Rev 11:18, "The nations raged, but your wrath came"

Rev 16:19, "to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath."

When decreation language is used, we have indicators that judgment is in view.

See also 2 Peter 3:10-13 where it talks about the elements being burned up. This is symbolic of the Lord's judgment, not climate change!

Symbolism Summary

1. The visions of Revelation must be read symbolically.
2. Unless the meaning of symbols are immediately given (e.g., Rev 1:20; 7:12, 15, 18), Scripture is the interpretive key.
3. Numbers are used symbolically.
4. Time is used symbolically.
5. Decreation language should be read symbolically as God's climactic judgment and salvation.

#3. Who are the seven spirits in Revelation 1:4 (cf. Rev 3:1; 4:5; 5:6)?

#4. Millennium. The key, bottomless pit, chain, are all symbolic. Would not the 1000 years be symbolic too?

Questions??

Summary of Revelation 1:12-20

1. Introduces Christ as the revelator.
2. Uses symbolism to portray Christ as pure, powerful, sovereign, and glorious. He is the Creator and will bring God's purposes to pass. He is the resurrected one, having authority over death and life.
3. He calls John to write what he sees about things that are and things about to take place (1:19).
4. He gives an interpretation of some of the symbols (1:20).

#2 I asked AI to draw Christ in Revelation 1:12-16. He had white hair, eyes were on fire, face shining, and a sword coming out of his mouth and seven stars in his hand and his feet appeared to be on fire. AI is a literalist.

#2 this is not a police sketch. It is word-art.



Christ's "Hair"

Head and hair white like wool, like snow (v. 14)

Eternal existence, perfect wisdom, absolute purity, and divine authority.

Daniel 7:9 (the Ancient of Days has white hair); white = purity and victory throughout Revelation.

Christ's "Eyes"

Eyes like a flame of fire (v. 14)

All-seeing omniscience and piercing judgment that nothing escapes. Nothing is hidden from him.

He searches hearts and minds (Rev 2:23); fire = judgment and purification.

Christ's "Feet"

Feet like burnished bronze glowing in a furnace (v. 15).

Unyielding strength and judgment that crushes opposition. He treads the winepress of God's wrath (Rev 19:15).

Daniel 2 & 7 (metal imagery for kingdoms); bronze = strength; furnace-refined = tested and unbreakable.

Christ's "Voice"

Voice like the sound of many waters (v. 15)

Majestic, irresistible authority; a voice that drowns out all others.
No one can silence or contradict him.

Ezekiel 43:2 (God's voice); Psalm 29 (voice of the Lord over the waters).

Christ's "Right Hand"

Right hand holding seven stars (v. 16, cf. v. 20).

Complete authority over the churches and their leaders. The seven stars = the angels (or messengers/pastors) of the seven churches. He holds, protects, and directs his churches.

Christ's "Mouth"

Sharp double-edged sword coming out of his mouth (v. 16).

The power and finality of his word of judgment and truth. He conquers and judges simply by speaking; the sword is the Word of God.

Hebrews 4:12; Isaiah 11:4; Revelation 19:15, 21.

Christ's "Face"

Face shining like the sun in full strength (v. 16)

Undiminished divine glory that overwhelms human beings. The unveiled glory of God in Christ.

Transfiguration (Matt 17); Acts 26:13 (Paul on Damascus road); Exodus 34 (Moses' face after seeing God).

The Vision of Christ

1. This is the same divine figure who appeared to Daniel — the eternal Son of God.
2. He now exercises all authority over the churches.
3. He sees everything, judges everything, and nothing can stand against his word.
4. He is simultaneously terrifying in holiness and judgment, yet intimately present among his churches.
5. Purpose: to comfort suffering believers and to warn complacent or compromising churches.