

The Book of Revelation

Lesson 2 – Symbolism and Word Patterns

1. Symbolism

- 1.1. In apocalyptic writings, words paint a picture. The picture is not the message; rather the interpretation of the picture is the message.
- 1.2. There are no direct quotations from the Old Testament in the book of Revelation, but there are many allusions to symbols in the Old Testament. There are some symbols, which are unique to the book of Revelation.
- 1.3. What hermeneutical rules can one follow in interpreting apocalyptic symbolism?
 - 1.3.1. First, the context of the prophecy in which the symbols appear must be carefully considered. The symbol of Rev. 20:4, identified as those that lived and reigned with Christ 1,000 years, are said to have part in the "first resurrection" (Rev. 20:5-6). Premillennial interpreters consider this a physical resurrection of the righteous at the beginning of the rapture and again at the end of the tribulation, and just before a literal, 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth. Yet, Rev. 20:6 makes it clear that those who partake of the first resurrection "shall be priests of God and of Christ." But all Christians are priests now (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 5:9-10). This suggests the first resurrection is not the physical resurrection of the future, but the spiritual resurrection or conversion to Christ (John 5:24-26; Rom. 6:3-7; Eph. 2:1-6; Col. 3:1).
 - 1.3.2. A second hermeneutical principle helpful in interpreting symbols is that of analogy. Where the meaning of a symbol is well established in the Old Testament, by analogy that meaning may be applied to Revelation.
 - 1.3.2.1. For example, Isa. 1:18 reflects the understanding that white symbolizes purity. Thus purity is the idea behind the white horse (Rev. 6:2); the white robes (Rev. 7:9, 14; Rev. 3:4-5), the white garments of the 24 elders (Rev. 4:4) and the white throne of judgment (Rev. 20:11).
 - 1.3.2.2. Another example is in Rev. 13:1-10 where the beast may be identified as the Roman Empire on the analogy of Dan. 2 and Dan. 7. Both the feet of clay of Dan. 2:41-44 and the fourth beast of Dan. 7:7-8, 23, clearly refer to the Roman Empire. Therefore, Dan. 2 and Dan. 7 are actually prophecies seen to be fulfilled in the first century under the symbolism of Rev. 13, thus eliminating any need for a "revived Roman Empire" yet in the future.
 - 1.3.3. A third principle guards against interpreting any symbol in a way that would contradict any literal, non-figurative passage elsewhere in the scriptures. This principle can be applied usefully in Rev. 7:1-8, where the Jehovah's Witnesses take the number 144,000 to be literal and to apply to those who will spend eternity in heaven as over against the bulk of the righteous who will spend eternity on a renovated earth. The principle destroys this interpretation since clear, literal passages such as 1 Pet. 1:3-5 include all the saved in heaven. Not a single literal passage in the Bible teaches separate destinations for the saved.

2. Word Patterns

- 2.1. Why study word patterns?

- 2.1.1. Matt. 4:4
 - 2.1.1.1. What are these words that help men obtain eternal life?
- 2.1.2. John 6:63
 - 2.1.2.1. Christ's words are spirit and life
- 2.1.3. 2 Timothy 3:16-17
 - 2.1.3.1. Scriptures are inspired by God
- 2.1.4. The term scripture denotes "that which has been written" and in the Bible it is always referring to divine writing.
 - 2.1.4.1. The Holy Scriptures are thus composed of words. These words are those that the Holy Spirit guided the writers in using as they wrote by sacred inspiration.
 - 2.1.4.1.1. Matt. 10:19
 - 2.1.4.1.2. John 14:26
 - 2.1.4.1.3. John 16:13
- 2.2. Word Patterns in Revelation
 - 2.2.1. How to examine words
 - 2.2.1.1. Etymology
 - 2.2.1.1.1. The history of a word shown by tracing its development since its earliest recorded occurrence in the language.
 - 2.2.1.1.2. Linguistic form
 - 2.2.1.2. Grammatical form
 - 2.2.1.2.1. Tense – Type of action under consideration
 - 2.2.1.2.2. Voice – Speaker's relationship to the action (is he acting or being acted upon)
 - 2.2.1.2.3. Mood – Speaker's disposition relative to action (is he stating a fact, or commanding a response).
 - 2.2.1.3. Context
 - 2.2.1.3.1. Ultimate consideration for determining the significance of the word in a particular setting.
 - 2.2.1.3.2. Context can create a situation in which normal grammatical principles are set aside.
 - 2.2.1.4. Pattern of usage
 - 2.2.1.4.1. Examine the pattern of usage through out the writing
 - 2.2.1.4.2. A certain word can have concentration in a certain section of scripture. There might be a special emphasis for the writer.
 - 2.2.1.4.3. The following section will study word patterns that appear in the book of Revelation.
 - 2.2.2. Overcome
 - 2.2.2.1. One of the most important words in Revelation (*nikao*).
 - 2.2.2.2. Rendered in the English as overcome, prevail, conquer, and victory.
 - 2.2.2.3. It is found 28 times in the New Testament and 17 of those are found in the book of Revelation.
 - 2.2.2.4. 3 times *nikao* is used of human rulers
 - 2.2.2.4.1. The military success of the Roman Empire is depicted under the symbol of a rider on a white horse (6:2).
 - 2.2.2.4.1.1. This hints of the oppression that Christianity would have to endure.

- 2.2.2.4.1.2. A persecuting beast would make war against the saints “overcoming” them (11:7; 13:7).
- 2.2.2.4.1.3. The victory is temporary as ultimately the Lamb and those who identify with his cause are the victors.
- 2.2.2.5. *Nikao* is also employed of Christ numerous times.
 - 2.2.2.5.1. Jesus overcame and sat down on his father’s throne (3:21).
 - 2.2.2.5.2. His victory qualified him to open the prophetic seals, which revealed the impending events of history (5:5).
 - 2.2.2.5.3. And even though hostile forces assault him, the Lamb will overcome these enemies for he is King of kings and Lord of lords (17:14).
- 2.2.2.6. *Nikao* is repeatedly used of the victory that saints shall enjoy as a result of their sustained fidelity to the Son of God.
 - 2.2.2.6.1. Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7
 - 2.2.2.6.2. There is victory for Christians on account of the victory of the Lamb (12:11; 17:14).
- 2.2.3. White
 - 2.2.3.1. The Greek term *leukos* occurs approximately 26 times in the New Testament – 16 of these in this book.
 - 2.2.3.2. Depending upon the context, it can suggest “victory” or “purity”
 - 2.2.3.3. The “white horse” suggests success in conquest; it is used of a Roman force in 6:2 and later of the final victory of Christ at the Judgment (19:11).
 - 2.2.3.4. The whiteness of the Lord’s “hair” (1:14) likely suggests honor, dignity (Lev. 19:32; Prov. 16:31) or purity (Dan. 7:9).
 - 2.2.3.5. The “white throne” upon which the Judge of the Universe sits (20:11) may convey the idea of its gleaming brilliance, and so underscores the authority and majesty of him who occupies it.
 - 2.2.3.6. The fact that Christ is sitting on a “white Cloud” (14:14) indicates that he is victorious over death and has been crowned king.
 - 2.2.3.7. White “robes” or “garments” are common figures in this book. The symbol may suggest the pure character of the one who is so adorned. The 24 elders at God’s throne were arrayed in white garments (4:4).
 - 2.2.3.8. The Lord counsels the church in Laodicea to obtain white garments that their shame may be covered (3:18).
 - 2.2.3.9. The great multitude standing before Christ, clad in white apparel (7:9), represented those who cleansed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (7:13-14).
 - 2.2.3.10. The Lord’s heavenly army is adorned in clothes that are white and pure (19:14).
 - 2.2.3.11. Those in Sardis who do not defile their garments (by corrupting themselves with false religion or moral degeneration), Christ promises, “shall walk with me in white” denoting victory (3:4).
 - 2.2.3.12. In Pergamum, the Lord vows that those who overcome will be given a “white stone” (2:17). The “stone” may refer to the manner of jury voting – a white stone affirming innocence. It would thus be a symbol of vindication – the world may find you guilty, but the Lord will pronounce you vindicated.

2.2.4. Almighty

- 2.2.4.1. The Greek word *pantokrator* derives from two roots that mean, “to hold all.” It suggests one who holds all things or persons within his grasp.
- 2.2.4.2. The word is used 10 times in the entire New Testament, and 9 of those instances are in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22).
- 2.2.4.3. Those who faced death for the cause of Christianity might have easily wondered if God was in control.
- 2.2.4.4. The book relays to the reader that no matter how dismal circumstances may appear, a time of reckoning is coming; it will at the “great day of God, the Almighty” (16:14).

2.2.5. Throne

- 2.2.5.1. The English word “throne” is a transliteration of the Greek word *thronos*, a word suggesting dignity, power, or a seat of authority.
- 2.2.5.2. This word is found 62 times in the New Testament and 47 of those are in Revelation.
- 2.2.5.3. The influence of devil in the city of Pergamum is stressed by suggesting that this is where “Satan’s throne” dwells (2:13).
 - 2.2.5.3.1. Pergamum was an ancient concentration of false worship. It was a center for the worship of Asklepios, the “god of healing.” The city also contained shrines for the worship of Zeus and Athene. But most importantly, Pergamum was a major city of Caesar worship.
 - 2.2.5.3.2. Satan exercised great sway in this community. The powerful influence of the persecuting “beast” is described as a throne granted by Satan (13:2), but later a divine bowl of God’s wrath is poured out on the devil’s throne, and his kingdom is darkened (16:10).
- 2.2.5.4. Jesus promised that all who overcome will sit down with him on his throne (i.e. share his regal glory), even as he overcame and sat down with his Father (3:21).
- 2.2.5.5. At the end, Christ will deliver his mediatorial reign back to God (1 Cor. 15:24-28), nevertheless, he will share a royal splendor with the Father throughout eternity (22:1).
- 2.2.5.6. Jehovah’s heavenly authority is frequently symbolized as a “throne” in revelation (4:2; 5:1; 6:16; 7:9, etc).
- 2.2.5.7. The 24 elders around his throne possess delegated authority (4:4), yet they acknowledge the supreme rule of God (4:10). In chapter 20:11, the “white throne” is that of the final judgment.
- 2.2.5.8. In an environment where it must have appeared that Satan and his henchmen were occupying the thrones of power, the Lord wants his people to know that such, in fact, is not the case. Deity still rules and reigns supreme, in spite of how the temporary scene seems.

2.2.6. Crown

- 2.2.6.1. The Greek New Testament has two words for “crown”.

- 2.2.6.2. The first is *stephanos*, the victory crown – a symbol of triumph – presented, for instance, to the winner of a race. *Stephanos* is found 18 times in the New Testament, and 8 of those are in Revelation.
- 2.2.6.2.1. Those who remain faithful, even if death is the cost, will receive the “crown of life” (2:10).
- 2.2.6.2.2. Care must be taken that no one “take your crown” (rob you of your victory – 3:11). This signifies a child of God can fall from grace.
- 2.2.6.2.3. Triumph of powers is suggested by the crown in some passages. The assault of certain political powers is represented in the term crown (6:2; 9:7).
- 2.2.6.2.4. The church, under the figure of a woman, is crowned with 12 stars (12:1), probably symbolic of the Lord’s apostles, leaders representing the Lord’s authority (21:14).
- 2.2.6.2.5. In Rev. 14:14-16, John sees one “like unto a son of man” sitting on a white cloud, and wearing a “golden crown.” He comes forth with a sharp sickle and the harvest is effected. Most commentators see this as a reference to Christ, the crown being emblematic of the fact that the Son of Man has conquered and thus has the right to judgment.
- 2.2.6.3. The other Greek term for crown is *diadem*. *Diadem* occurs only 3 times in the New Testament and all 3 are in this book.
- 2.2.6.3.1. *Diadem* is the crown of royalty. The dragon, who persecutes the woman (church), is described as having diadems on his seven heads (12:3), probably suggesting the devil’s claim to regal authority (Matt. 4:8-9), and his extraordinary power over his subjects.
- 2.2.6.3.2. The beast, pagan Rome, that ascends from the sea (13:1), also is adorned with 10 *diadems* – likely with the same import as suggested of the dragon.
- 2.2.6.3.3. The divine Christ, who comes to render judgment, is arrayed with “many diadems” (19:12). The Messiah is vastly superior to his enemies, and will destroy them all.
- 2.2.7. Lamb
- 2.2.7.1. The Greek New Testament contains two words for “lamb.”
- 2.2.7.2. *Amnos* is found 4 times (John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19). Each of these passages figuratively designate Christ as being in some fashion like a lamb.
- 2.2.7.3. The other word, *arnion*, is employed 29 times in the New Testament and 28 of those occurrences are in Revelation. Note these characteristics of the Messianic Lamb:
- 2.2.7.3.1. The Lamb has been slain (5:6, 9, 12; 13:8), but he is “standing” (5:6) (raised from the dead), and he is alive for evermore (1:18).
- 2.2.7.3.2. The Lamb is the leader of his people (7:17; 14:1-4). In 7:17 Christ is represented as both a lamb and a shepherd.

2.2.7.3.3. The Lamb is the redeemer and owner of his international kingdom (5:9, 10; 14:4), and the husband of his spiritual wife (19:7-9).

2.2.7.3.4. The Lamb is also a judge whose anger against evil will be revealed in the Great Day of God (6:16; 14:10).

2.2.8. Beasts

2.2.8.1. The term “beasts” is common in the English translation of the Bible, especially in the King James Version.

2.2.8.2. The Greek term *zoon*, found 23 times in the New Testament (20 in Revelation), merely denotes “a living creature.”

2.2.8.2.1. It is used exclusively of “the four living creatures” who stand before the throne of God and give glory, honor, and thanks to the Lord (4:8-9), and who perfectly serve him (5:14; 6:1-7).

2.2.8.2.2. It is inappropriate to render it as “beasts” in Revelation, in view of the negative connotation of the term.

2.2.8.3. *Therion* is also translated as “beast,” but it is a wild beast. The word occurs 46 times in the New Testament, 39 of which are in Revelation. In Revelation, *therion* signifies 2 malignant creatures which represent determined enemies of Almighty God and His Holy cause. Many scholars believe these beasts are symbolic of pagan Rome, and later, Papal Rome. This will be discussed in detail in a later lesson.

2.2.9. Horses

2.2.9.1. The word *hippo* is mentioned 16 times in the New Testament, 15 of those are in the book of Revelation.

2.2.9.2. The obvious reason for the use of the horse-symbol in Revelation is the Old Testament background that emphasizes the use of this magnificent animal as an instrument of war.

2.2.9.2.1. Of the some 150 references to horses in the Bible, approx 90 occurrences are figurative or prophetic in character.

2.2.9.3. Old Testament law forbade Israel to “multiply horses” (Deut. 17:14-16), because the horse was a war machine, and the people of God needed to learn to trust in their creator, rather than their own military prowess (Psa. 33:17; Ezek. 17:15).

2.2.9.4. In Revelation, the horse becomes a symbol of hostile, persecuting forces against Christianity (6:2-8), or providential instruments for the punishment of evil men (9:7).

2.2.9.5. The Lord Jesus is seen victoriously riding a white horse in the battle which will see his enemies destroyed (19:11).

2.2.9.6. His faithful servants also follow him on white horses (19:14), suggesting that they partake of the triumph accomplished by the Son of God.

2.2.10. For Ever and Ever

2.2.10.1. Sometimes the word “forever” figuratively denotes a limited period of time (Ex. 12:14). However, when the term “for ever and ever” is used in the New Testament, it is always suggests that which is unending in duration. This phrase is found 19 times in the New Testament, 13 of those in Revelation.

- 2.2.10.2. The Father and the Son live for ever and ever (1:18; 4:10; 10:6; 15:7), and are worthy of glory, dominion, etc, for ever and ever (1:6; 4:9; 5:13; 7:12).
- 2.2.10.3. Both the Lord and his people will reign for ever and ever (11:5; 22:5), but God's enemies will be defeated and punished for ever and ever (14:11; 19:3; 20:10).

2.3. Numbers

2.3.1. Numbers are important symbols in the book of Revelation.

2.3.1.1. A special form of symbolism in Revelation regards the use of numbers and their prominence in Revelation warrants separate consideration. The most significant numbers in Revelation are 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 666 and 144,000.

2.3.1.1.1. Seven is the most prominent number, being used fifty-four times.

2.3.1.2. One – represents unity

2.3.1.3. Two – Represents strength as in two witnesses or the disciples being sent out two by two

2.3.1.4. Three and Four

2.3.1.4.1. Three – a Divine number as in the Godhead

2.3.1.4.2. Four – a world number as in the corners of the earth

2.3.1.4.3. Three is relatively rare in Revelation considering its popularity in the Old Testament and the rest of the New Testament. It is associated with divine judgment in Rev. 8:13; 9:18; 16:19. It is possible that by the time of the New Testament it was associated with the Godhead and considered the divine number. Its real significance may be in conjunction with four, the worldly number ("four corners of the earth"), which like three is associated with judgment in Rev. 7:1 and Rev. 20:8. Four is the number of living creatures around the throne of God (Rev. 4:6), who are connected with missions of judgment upon the earth (Rev. 15:7). In any case, since three and four equal seven (the obvious number of completeness or perfection), the totality of all existence (divine and worldly realms) is implied in that number.

2.3.1.5. Six and Seven

2.3.1.5.1. Six – a human number, incomplete or imperfect indicating man and his imperfection.

2.3.1.5.2. Seven

2.3.1.5.2.1. Seven (*hepta*) is used 88 times in the New Testament, 56 of those are in Revelation.

2.3.1.5.2.2. Seven is utilized to suggest completeness, fullness, and inclusiveness.

2.3.1.5.2.2.1. Seven indicates perfection.

2.3.1.5.2.3. The expression "seven spirits" (1:4; 3:1; 4:5) suggests completeness of the Holy Spirit's work.

2.3.1.5.2.4. The expression "seven lampstands" signify the seven churches of Asia, and the "seven stars" are the messengers representing these churches (1:20). Seven is chosen

because they perfectly illustrate the challenges and needs of the Lord's people in any day.

2.3.1.5.2.5. The mysterious scroll of chapter 6 is sealed with "seven seals," which may indicate that the document was absolutely validated, or perhaps the seven seals hint of the fullness of the historical revelation about to be unfolded.

2.3.1.5.2.6. Christ is described as having "seven horns," symbolizing his perfect power and authority, while the "seven eyes" of the lamb may point to the savior's omniscience (Zech. 4:10), as well as his cooperative labor with the Holy Spirit (Rev. 5:6).

2.3.1.5.2.7. "Seven angels" represent a complete company of heavenly servants, ready to do the bidding of God Almighty, and the "seven trumpets" which they have depict the perfect judgments of Jehovah which are to be visited upon the earth (8:2).

2.3.1.5.2.8. The "seven thunders" later mentioned suggest a similar idea (10:3). Likewise "seven plagues" (15:1), and "seven bowls of wrath" (15:7; 16:1) suggest the thoroughness of divine punishment upon the Lamb's foes.

2.3.1.5.3. 666 in Rev. 13:18 is capable of various explanations. In ancient times the letters of the Greek, Latin and Hebrew alphabets served as numbers. Thus, any person's name could be translated into a numerical value. Many different and imaginative attempts have been made in all three languages to work back from 666 to some infamous name such as Nero or Domitian. Perhaps the true explanation lies in the fact that six is so obviously short of seven, the perfect number. Thus tripling 6 into 666 intensifies and symbolizes the utter failure of evil. Since the name "Jesus" in Greek adds up to 888, it has been suggested that 666 is an intended contrast. Jesus is as far beyond 777 as evil is below it.

2.3.1.6. Ten – represents complete power

2.3.1.7. Twelve - may have originated by multiplying four by three, clearly is the number signifying God's people under the two covenants (Rev. 21:12, 14). To indicate they form a large number, the two are multiplied by each other and then by one thousand yielding the 144,000 of Rev. 7:4 and Rev. 14:1.

3. There are many other words that could have been a part of this lesson, but time necessitates that we limit ourselves to these very important words that will help shape the remainder of our study.