

# The Hermeneutics of Symbolism: How to Interpret the Symbols of John's Apocalypse

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## INTRODUCTION

REVELATION PRESENTS THE reader with an exhilarating visual experience full of numinous sights and sounds replete with dazzling colors and thunderous roars. There are images of the glorified Christ, the heavenly throne and its surrounding attendants, a standing slain lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, a beautiful sky woman crowned with twelve stars, a ferocious red dragon, a seven-headed tyrannical beast, a great prostitute, and a host of angelic beings that inspire awe, fear, and bewilderment. These highly symbolic images make Revelation a truly unique book in the NT, and it is precisely this reason it is also the most misunderstood book. How one approaches the interpretation of these symbols

impacts the entire reading of John's vision. This article posits a methodology for interpreting the symbols in the Book of Revelation. Our task, however, is complicated by the fact that not everyone agrees on the nature of symbolism. The result is at least two competing hermeneutical approaches that pits the literal versus symbolic. Therefore, before we arrive at a methodology for interpreting symbols, we must first demonstrate that a proper hermeneutic for interpreting the Apocalypse must give primacy to the symbolic nature of the text.

## THE SYMBOLIC NATURE OF JOHN'S APOCALYPSE

It is undeniable that John's Apocalypse contains a legion of symbolic and metaphorical images. When it comes to interpreting these symbols two divergent hermeneutical approaches surface: (1) *primarily literal and secondarily symbolic*; or (2) *primarily symbolic and secondarily literal*.

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The first approach advocates interpreting Revelation primarily in a literal manner unless it is impossible to do so. This view is encapsulated in the hermeneutical dictum, “[w]hen the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.”<sup>1</sup> While still recognizing the presence of symbols, this view restricts the identification of a symbol to something that is incomprehensible if understood literally (e.g., Jesus does not have a literal sword protruding from his mouth).<sup>2</sup> One popular proponent of this approach, Tim LaHaye, maintains that we must “take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate text, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, clearly indicate otherwise.”<sup>3</sup> These interpreters, usually classic dispensationalists,<sup>4</sup> argue that non-literal interpretations result in an unchecked polyvalence based on human imagination.<sup>5</sup> Charles Ryrie warned, “If one does not use the plain, normal, or literal method of interpretation, all objectivity is lost.”<sup>6</sup>

Advocates of this approach maintain that they are guarding against subjectivism which is defined as “the view that knowledge comes by one’s own experience, or that the supreme good is the realizing of a subjective experience or feeling.”<sup>7</sup> E. D. Hirsch reasoned that because the literary text does not have a special ontological status that absolves the reader from the demands universally imposed by all linguistic texts, it is possible to construe both correct and incorrect interpretations.<sup>8</sup> He therefore posited, “If criticism is to be objective in any significant sense, it must be founded on a self-critical construction of textual meaning, which is to say, on objective interpretation.”<sup>9</sup> Objective interpretation, as advocated by many classic dispensationalists, implies that one can study a text as a scientist who simply acquires the facts of an object free from any biases. The problem is that one who claims to “suppress his own viewpoints regarding what he thinks the passage should mean, so as to allow the exegetical evidence from the passage under investigation to speak for

itself,” appears to ignore the indelible impact that worldview, preunderstanding and presupposition has on an interpreter.<sup>10</sup>

Epistemologically, there are three things that critical awareness reveals about the process of knowing: (1) the observer only looks from one point of view; (2) all humans inevitably and naturally interpret the information received from their senses through a grid of expectations, memories, stories and psychological states; and (3) the lenses through which one looks is greatly influenced by the communities to which he belongs.<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that one cannot know something with certainty, but all knowledge is filtered through one’s relationship with reality. An interpreter must realize, recognize, and acknowledge that one brings his or her own set of baggage to the text of Scripture.

As a result, we find that the tendency of these interpreters is to look for the meaning of these symbols through the lenses of current events as if they were intended to refer to aspects unique to our modern setting. Literal interpreters typically maintain that the figures of speech (i.e., symbols) result from John’s attempt to describe future objects and scenarios from the limited framework of his ancient conceptions and language. They posit that John experienced some sort of spiritual time travel thrusting him into the modern world with its technologically advanced weaponry, banking, and satellite communications. The goal for interpreting these symbols, then, is to identify the one-to-one correspondence between his image and a modern parallel (e.g., the locusts are Apache attack helicopters, the mark of the beast is an implanted micro-chip, and the European Union is the revived Roman empire). The merits of this approach are that it takes the text at face value, avoids reducing it to an extended allegory, and often renders a simple straightforward interpretation. While this principle may sufficiently work in narrative and didactic genres, its application to highly figurative genres like apocalyptic proves to be problematic.

The problem with this approach is rooted in

the principle that the literary genre establishes the rules for how one interprets a specific text. Meaning is intrinsically bound up in genre.<sup>12</sup> The ensuing implication is that genre provides a context, assigned by the author, to communicate meaning. Because the book begins with the word Ἀποκάλυψις (Rev 1:1), many scholars have maintained that it suggests an immediate genre classification especially given the use of apocalyptic language and imagery.<sup>13</sup> The book of Revelation belongs to the apocalyptic/prophetic genre and the apocalyptic genre by definition is highly symbolic. It is not intended to be interpreted in a literal manner.

The identification of the apocalyptic genre pertains to its form, content, and function.<sup>14</sup> The apocalyptic genre exhibits several *formal* features including visionary accounts, otherworldly mediators, and symbolic language. The book of Revelation is a visionary account involving heavenly mediators and resounds with symbolic imagery. The apocalyptic genre also expresses *content* depicting dualism between the temporal and spatial realities as a way to emphasize the heavenly realities in such a way as to devalue earthly circumstances. John presents a vision of a future vindication comprised of eternal rewards in a blissful paradise for faithful Christians in contrast to their present sufferings in the midst of an unbelieving society. Finally, the apocalyptic genre *functions* to encourage piety and faithfulness in the midst of suffering or during times of crisis. The book of Revelation functions in the same way as evidenced by the promised rewards to the overcomers, the repeated exhortations for patient endurance, and the depiction of the reward for faithful Christians in the New Jerusalem. Any hermeneutic that fails to take these genre features into consideration will not interpret the symbolism properly because it assumes a literalism incompatible with the apocalyptic genre.

A rigid literal interpretation or *literalism* may inadvertently obscure the author's intended meaning. Kevin Vanhoozer correctly posed a distinc-

tion between the literal sense and literalism.<sup>15</sup> If the interpreter is concerned with authorial intention, the literal sense must not be reduced merely to letters, *langue*, or locutions. He argued that "literalistic reading is less than fully 'literal'—that it is insufficiently and only 'thinly' literal—insofar as it ignores the role of authorial intentions and communicative acts."<sup>16</sup> The literal sense relates to what the author intended for the meaning of the text and this is especially true for figurative and symbolic images. In other words, if Revelation is prophetic or apocalyptic, ascribing literalism to its numbers, proper nouns, and other images may prevent adjudicating John's intended meaning—the literal sense.<sup>17</sup> A more profitable hermeneutical approach is to reverse the interpretive order by placing the symbolic in the foreground while shifting the literal into the background.

Greg Beale makes an outstanding case for the primacy of the symbolic instead of looking for a straight one-to-one literal correspondence.<sup>18</sup> He argues that σημαίνω in Rev 1:1 conveys the idea of "communicate by symbols."<sup>19</sup> The basic glosses for σημαίνω are "to make known," "to report," or "to signify,"<sup>20</sup> but Beale convincingly demonstrates that Rev 1:1 alludes to Dan 2:28–30, 45 (LXX) where the word translated "signified" denotes a symbolic communication by means of a dream or vision. Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the colossal statue, then, is clearly visual, but it is a picture with symbolic meaning embedded in it. Although σημαίνω occurs with the general sense of "make known," its normal usage in Scripture typically implies some type of "symbolic communication."<sup>21</sup> In Rev 1:1, the connotation of "communicate by symbols" is not only confirmed by the allusion to Daniel 2, but also by its use in conjunction with δείκνυμι ("show") indicating the visual nature of the revelation. Since the book of Revelation is a symbolic means of communication, the literal approach for interpreting the "plain sense" of the image may actually distort the intended meaning of the text. Beale qualifies his approach by averring, "Of course, some parts

are not symbolic, but the essence of the book is figurative. *Where there is lack of clarity about whether something is symbolic, the scales of judgment should be tilted in the direction of a nonliteral analysis.*<sup>22</sup> Therefore, we would commend this second approach elevating the primacy of the symbolic while wanting to avoid reducing symbols to something totally spiritual by seeking to identify the theological and/or physical realities of the historical and/or future referents.

### INTERPRETING SYMBOLS IN REVELATION

The symbols of Revelation, although enigmatic, are intended to reveal meaning rather than conceal it.<sup>23</sup> The interpreter's task is to determine how the symbol functions in its context and what it signifies. To grasp the meaning of a symbol one must recognize both the mental or conceptual idea and the image that it represents.<sup>24</sup> Visionary accounts represent a genre of biblical literature employing the full arsenal of figurative language (similes, metaphors, and symbols) intended to communicate through the medium of symbolic images that burst with meaning. Symbols represent a type of metaphor in which a visual or linguistic sign (i.e., vehicle) of a known object or concept is used to express an unknown object or concept (i.e., tenor).<sup>25</sup> A symbol may be defined as "a relatively stable and repeatable element of perceptual experience, standing for some larger meaning or set of meanings which cannot be given, or not fully given, in perceptual experience itself."<sup>26</sup>

The symbols in the Apocalypse derive from John's visual experience as a means to express *in* words what cannot be necessarily expressed *with* words. As such, Edith M. Humphrey accurately remarks, "Visions are, after all, visions, and to 'decode' them into a proposition or method is to change not only the form but also the meaning."<sup>27</sup> This is quite unlike a historical narrative where the primary theological meaning corresponds rather straightforwardly to the events narrated.

The symbolism in Revelation dominates in such a way that the passage expresses directly the theological significance and only indirectly points to the underlying event.<sup>28</sup> John communicates through symbolic imagery so as to recreate the details of his vision, but the symbols point beyond the text to spiritual, theological, and also physical realities.

Determining the denotation of a symbol is muddled by the possibility for polyvalence (i.e., "multiple meanings"). Norman Perrin attempted to resolve the tension between the single and multiple meanings of a symbol by dividing them into the categories of "steno symbols" and "tensive symbols."<sup>29</sup> Some symbols may have a one-to-one correspondence denoting a single referent ("steno symbols") and others may have a multiple range of correspondences that cannot be restricted to a single referent ("tensive symbol"). For an example of a steno symbol, in Rev 1:12–13, John sees Jesus standing among seven lampstands. These seven lampstands are identified as the seven churches of Asia (Rev 1:20). The lampstands may evoke the image of a menorah, but its meaning is restricted by the direct one-to-one correspondence to the churches.<sup>30</sup> One may detect the tensive nature of symbols in Rev 17:9–10 where the seven heads of the beast represent "seven hills" and also "seven kings." In this case, one symbol has two different referents and yet both are equally true for the meaning of the vision. This second example, however, does not completely capture the idea of a tensive symbol, because its denotation is still explicitly stated in the text.

Symbols function in such a way as to ring a bell of recognition, but they may set off a variety of bells beyond what is intended in the text. While some symbols potentially trigger a plethora of connotations, we recommend the judicious use of interpretive steps to arrive at the most probable intended meaning for a given symbol.

**(1) Recognize the symbolic imagery associated with the description of people or beings, colors, numbers, institutions, places, and events.**

The first step is to recognize the presence of symbolic imagery in the text. This should seem simple enough, but all too often interpreters fail to recognize that almost everything in the book of Revelation resonates with symbolic connotations. Think of the book of Revelation as an impressionistic painting instead of a video recording of the future world. John paints verbal pictures depicting the contents of his vision with symbolic hues and shades. His descriptions are intended to evoke a sense of wonder, awe, and worship as well as communicate prophetic eschatological expectations. This implies that most descriptions of people or beings, colors, numbers, institutions, places, and events carry a metaphorical or symbolic connotation.

This is especially true if a person, number, color, or anything else recurs throughout the book. For example, the number seven not only occurs explicitly, but it also occurs implicitly with the sevenfold repetition of certain words or phrases.<sup>31</sup> The symbolic weight of the number seven as representative of completion or perfec-

tion can hardly be overstated. Much of the imagery in the Apocalypse, however, is not symbolism, but merely designed to heighten the coloring of the picture adding vividness and movement to its scenes so a careful reading of the text will avoid making everything a symbol for something else.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, read the book of Revelation with an informed sensitivity to the symbolic nature of its language and imagery.

**(2) Look for interpretations of those symbols within the vision.** The second step is to look for an interpretation of symbols within the context of the vision narrative. Many times the intended meaning of a symbol is explicitly provided by John or a heavenly being. These are fairly easy to identify because of the formula: *symbol* + “*they are*,” “*these are*,” “*which are*” = *identification*. The following chart briefly demonstrates some of the occurrences of the self-interpreted symbols in Revelation:<sup>33</sup>

While these self-interpreted symbols do help to narrow the range of referents for a given symbol, they may also create a whole new set of ques-

#### Self-Interpreting Symbols

Reference	Symbol	Interpretative signal	Symbol Identified
Rev 1:20	Seven stars	“they are”	the seven angels of the churches
Rev 1:20	Seven lampstands	“they are”	the seven churches
Rev 4:5	Seven lamps before God’s Throne	“which are”	the seven spirits of God
Rev 5:6	The seven horns and seven eyes of the Lamb	“which are”	The seven spirits of God sent into all the earth
Rev 5:8	Gold bowls full of incense	“which are”	The prayers of the saints
Rev 7:14	The multitude in white robes	“these are”	The saints coming out of the tribulation
Rev 11:4	The two witnesses	“these are”	the two olive trees and two lampstands standing before the Lord
Rev 14:4	The 144,000	“these are”	Those who did not defile themselves and they followed the Lamb
Rev 17:9	The seven heads of the beast	“they are”	They are seven hills (Rome) and also seven kings (emperors?)
Rev 19:8	The pure white robes of fine linen	“for ... is”	The righteous deeds of the saints

tions. They sometimes interpret the symbol with another symbol. The seven lamps represent the seven spirits of God and the seven spirits of God figuratively represents the Holy Spirit. The two witnesses are identified as the two olive trees and two lampstands. The olive trees and lampstands are symbolic representations borrowed from Zechariah 4 to denote the spirit empowered people of God. Although potential confusion exists from the interpretation of a symbol with a symbol, this does helpfully limit the intended meaning of a symbol in the text. Once the referent is identified within the text it typically becomes the fixed meaning for that particular symbol in the book of Revelation.

**(3) Determine if the symbol stems from an allusion to the Old Testament.** A third step for adjudicating the meaning of a symbol relates to the use of the OT. The entire text of John's vision is saturated with allusions to the OT. John frequently employs the language and imagery of the OT to provide his readers with a framework for understanding the significance of what he saw. This does not imply that John was performing an exegesis of the OT, but rather he borrows the wording, images, themes, and eschatological expectations from the OT. These allusions are pressed into the service of the textual imagery. The interpreter must first determine if the text alludes to an OT subtext. After the allusion is verified, the interpreter should seek to understand the meaning of the OT passage in its context. Next, one needs to compare carefully the similarities and differences between the OT and its allusion in Revelation. Once the texts are compared one may see how John ascribes a particular meaning to the OT language and imagery by using and reworking it into the account of his vision.

For example, in Rev 11:4, John states that these two witnesses are the two olive trees and two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the Earth. The positive assertion that "these are" followed by the two plural nouns with the article suggest that John expected his readers to figure

out their identity.<sup>34</sup> This verse constitutes a direct allusion to Zech 4:1–14 regarding Joshua (the post-exilic high priest) and Zerubbabel (the post-exilic Davidic descendent).<sup>35</sup> Zechariah sees one lampstand with seven lamps sitting upon it and seven oil channels keeping the lamps supplied with olive oil. An olive tree stood flanked on the left and right side of the lampstand. The trees provide the olives to keep the bowl of the lampstand supplied with oil. The interpreting angel explicated the meaning of the image that it is the Holy Spirit who accomplishes the task of rebuilding the temple. Zechariah inquires as to the exact identity of the two olive trees and discovers that they are the two anointed ones (Zerubbabel and Joshua) who serve the Lord of all the earth.

Despite the obvious lexical parallels between Zech 4:1–14 and Rev 11:4, John diverges from Zechariah's vision in that he sees two lampstands instead of one. John also equates the trees *with* the lampstands, but in Zechariah they are kept distinct.<sup>36</sup> This suggests John modified the imagery so as not to equate his vision as simply a rehashing of Zechariah's. The alteration from one lampstand into two comprises the most striking differences between Rev 11:4 and Zech 4:2. The reason for this shift probably rests with the fact that the symbol of lampstands in the Apocalypse is used to denote the churches (Rev 1:20). The symbol of the two witnesses is best understood as referring to the spirit empowering his people with prophetic authority as a testimony against the nations.<sup>37</sup>

**(4) Compare the symbol with other apocalyptic writings to determine if it is a common symbol with a relatively standard meaning.** John primarily uses OT imagery, but he may occasionally employ imagery belonging to the common stock of apocalyptic writings.<sup>38</sup> Some images have no parallels in the text of the biblical canon.<sup>39</sup> A comparative reading of other apocalyptic texts and Jewish writings may shed light on the book of Revelation. Before launching into these texts, a few caveats are in order.

First, any existing parallels between Revelation and these writings do not necessitate, demand, or imply any form of literary dependence on the part of the author of the book of Revelation.<sup>40</sup> What it does indicate is that the authors of these writings all had access to certain traditions circulating independently of the apocalypses existing in either oral or written form.<sup>41</sup>

Second, these are not exact parallels in that they rarely share identical wording. When examining a potential apocalyptic parallel, it is very important to observe the distinctions and understand how the variations affect the meaning of the symbol when used in the book of Revelation.

Third, the date of a given writing deserves serious consideration because the symbolic parallel may derive from the book of Revelation if the work appeared later. Nevertheless, this may provide a glimpse into the tradition history of the imagery by seeing how other writings employed similar imagery. An awareness of these traditional apocalyptic images helps to clarify some of the symbolic imagery in the book of Revelation.

Richard Bauckham demonstrates the exegetical and hermeneutical value of this comparative analysis by examining four images in the book of

Revelation. These are the blood up to the horses' bridle (Rev 14:20b); the completion of the number of martyrs (Rev 6:9–11); the giving up of the dead (Rev 20:13); and the silence in heaven (Rev 8:1).<sup>42</sup> The chart below summarizes his findings.

The interpretation of these symbols in Revelation is possible without the additional parallels in apocalyptic literature. These parallels, however, help establish a more nuanced and stable understanding of the imagery employed.

**(5) Look for any possible connections between the symbol and the cultural-historical context.**

The fifth step looks beyond the text in an attempt to set the imagery within the cultural and historical context of first-century Asia Minor. Two thousand years of history separates modern readers of the book of Revelation from the social, cultural, and political environment of the original recipients. Some of the confusion regarding the imagery of the Apocalypse derives directly from the fact that John wrote to people that all shared a common understanding of their surrounding culture within the Roman Empire. Images of beasts, kings, and cities wielding enormous military and political power over its citizens may seem strange and foreign to the modern reader living in North America. To

**Apocalyptic Parallels**

<b>Symbol in Revelation</b>	<b>Apocalyptic Parallels</b>	<b>The Essential Symbolic Connotation</b>
The blood up to the horse's bridle (Rev 14:20b)	1 Enoch 100:3; 4 Ezra 15:35–36; y. Prayer of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai 9; Greek Tiburtine Sybil 183–184; Greek Apocalypse of Daniel 4:6–8=6:1–3	Ta'an. 4:8; Lam. R. 2:2:4; b. Gitt. 57a; All these texts use this imagery to express the massive slaughter of a battle.
The completion of the number of martyrs	1 Enoch 47:1–4; 4 Ezra 4:35–37; 2 Baruch 23:4–5a	All these texts involve the idea that a certain number of people are necessary to complete (Rev 6:9–11) an eschatological moment.
The giving up of the dead (Rev 20:13)	1 Enoch 51:1; 4 Ezra 4:41b–43a; 7:32; Pseudo-Philo, LAB 3:10; 33:3; 2 Baruch 21:23; 42:8; 50:2; Apocalypse of Peter 4:3–4, 10–12.	All these texts use this as imagery for the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. The person returns to life from the place of the dead.
The silence in heaven (Rev 8:1)	Testament of Adam (Syriac I; II; III; Greek, Armenian); and other rabbinic writings.	All these texts suggest that silence occurs in heaven corresponding with the time of prayer in the earthly temple. The relationship between prayer and silence is maintained by Rev 8:3–5.

the readers of John's vision in Asia Minor, however, they would have picked up on the cultural connotations associated with these images.

This would be equivalent if someone writing in the year 2009 refers to "smoke ascending from the twin towers." People would instantly recall the dreadful events of September 11, 2001, and the World Trade Center. Fast forward two thousand years into the future, someone in China reads the reference to "twin towers" and he or she may completely miss the allusion to those events. A historically informed reading of the text will often clear up the haze of certain symbols. The mark of the beast in Rev 13:18 provides an example of how some symbols are wedded to the historical context.

A beast rises to power and persecutes the Christians while imposing an economic form of allegiance by requiring all people to receive a mark on their heads or right hands (Rev 13:16–17). According to Rev 13:17, this mark corresponds to the name of the beast as it is represented by a numerical value (i.e., "the number of his name"). John proceeds to provide the specific number for the beast's name as six hundred sixty six. That one can arrive at some definite identification of this number is evidenced when John avers "here is wisdom" and calls for an intelligent mind to calculate the number.<sup>43</sup> The term "calculate" indicates that one could use some sort of mathematical solution to solve this riddle. Consequently, most interpreters have turned to the practice of gematria for answers.

Gematria refers to the practice of ascribing numerical values to Greek or Hebrew letters. This practice was widely adopted by ordinary citizens, rabbinic exegetes, and apocalypticists. One famous example, cited by Adolf Deissmann, of a graffito in Pompeii reads, "I love the girl whose number is 545."<sup>44</sup> Jewish rabbis also accepted and employed gematria as a hermeneutical principle (rule 29 of the 32 *middot*).<sup>45</sup> The *Epistle of Barnabas* follows this principle when reading Gen 14:14:

For it says, "And Abraham circumcised from his

household eighteen men and three hundred." What then was the knowledge that was given to him? Notice that he first mentions the eighteen, and after a pause the three hundred. The eighteen is I [= ten] and H [= 8]—you have Jesus [IH = the first two initials of Ἰησοῦ]—and because the cross was destined to have grace in the T [Greek symbol for 300] he says "and three hundred."<sup>46</sup>

The Sibylline oracles frequently exhibit the propensity for using gematria in prophetic utterances.<sup>47</sup> One notable example of a Christian redaction using gematria in the Sibylline oracles gives the numerical value of Jesus' name (Ἰησοῦ) as 888:

Then indeed the son of the great God will come, incarnate, likened to mortal men on earth, bearing four vowels, and the consonants in him are two. I will state explicitly the entire number for you. For eight units, and equal number of tens in addition to these, and eight hundred will reveal the name.<sup>48</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that scholars believe John may have employed this tactic when he gives the number of the beast's name.

If the number of the beast (666) corresponds to the practice of gematria, then the arduous task of assigning the proper name remains. In the earliest extant exegesis of Rev 13:18, Irenaeus assumes John's use of gematria.<sup>49</sup> Irenaeus cautions his readers regarding attempts at naming the beast by his number because if too many names are found adding up to the number, then how will they know which one pertains to the antichrist?<sup>50</sup> He then proceeds to discuss the names *Evanthas* (ΕΥΑΝΘΑΣ), *Lateinos* (ΛΑΤΕΙΝΟΣ), and *Teitan* (ΤΕΙΤΑΝ) as three possibilities having been suggested in his day.<sup>51</sup> He admits that they all add up to 666, but he carefully avoids positing any of those names as candidates for the beast.<sup>52</sup> Remarkably, Irenaeus completely fails to entertain the notion that the number identifies any

past Roman emperors. In his view, the beast is someone who has yet to come to power. Most modern commentators, however, maintain that the beast must have referred to someone identifiable to John's audience so they look to well known historical figures.

Among the multitude of names that have been suggested for the mark of the beast, Nero Caesar seems the most viable of all the candidates. Although this suggestion was virtually unknown prior to 1831, it is widely accepted on reasonable grounds.<sup>53</sup> Transliterating the name Nero Caesar from Greek into Hebrew renders נרון קסר, which when added up equals 666.<sup>54</sup> Incidentally, transliterating the name from Latin into Hebrew would omit the final *nun* (!) and arrive at the variant reading of 616.<sup>55</sup> The name Nero Caesar could feasibly account for both the accepted and variant readings. What is more, John may have intended to identify the beast as Nero by means of isopsephism.<sup>56</sup> Isopsephism is a technique whereby the two different names or phrases refer to the same thing because the numerical value is identical.<sup>57</sup> John intimates the number of the beast (θηρῶν) is the number of his name. Interestingly, the numerical value of "beast" (θηρῶν) when transliterated into Hebrew (תריון) is 666.<sup>58</sup> Bauckham suggests, "Thus John is saying that the number of the *word* beast (תריון) is also the number of a man (נרון קסר)."

Another reason why Nero might be the name relates to Rev 17:9 and the Nero *redivius* myth. Rev 13:18 and 17:9 are verbally and thematically linked by the appeal for a mind with wisdom.<sup>59</sup> The purpose of this, then, is to link the beast of chapter 13 with the eighth king of 17:11 who is also "the beast which once was, but now is not." This association corresponds to the expectation of a coming king who is either Nero or like Nero in his savagery.<sup>60</sup> Despite the apparent plausibility of this identification it cannot be afforded absolute certainty because the overall symbolic nature of numbers in the Apocalypse.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, Ireneaus' caution regarding attempts at positive identifica-

tion still remains relevant in any discussion of this mysterious number.

**(6) Consult scholarly treatments of the symbol in commentaries and other works.** The sixth step is to see how scholars have interpreted the symbols. This step may actually occur in tandem with steps one through five. The complex nature of symbolism requires the mature insights of seasoned experts who have devoted serious time and study to the text of Revelation. Keep in mind, however, that serious time and study does not guarantee that their interpretation is plausible or probable. Avoid depending on any one commentator. Each scholar brings his or her own set of presuppositions to the text that may produce radically differing interpretations. One commentator may say that a symbol has a multiple range of meanings and another may posit a very particular referent with astounding confidence. While scholars may not have all the answers, they have certainly thought through the issues and their years of reading the text will, more often than not, provide a very helpful understanding for the meaning of Revelation's imagery.

**(7) Remain humble in your conclusions.** Interpreting the book of Revelation requires a massive amount of humility and an openness to return to the text again and again. Once you have completely studied the text, avoid thinking that you have now unlocked all the mysteries of the Apocalypse. Continue to research. Repeat steps one through six on a regular basis. This will prevent us from falling into the temptation of thinking that we alone have the right interpretation of this mysterious and complex book. No one except Jesus has the final answer on the meaning of the book of Revelation. While this may seem a bit discouraging, it is actually intended to encourage a life-time of Bible study.

## CONCLUSION

The book of Revelation has rightly earned a reputation for posing a legion of varying interpretations. These interpretations typically reflect a person's presuppositions, theological positions,

agendas, and imagination. To be sure, this is part and parcel of biblical interpretation as a whole, but we must try to adjudicate the validity of these interpretations. In this article, I have argued that, due to its genre, interpreters of the book of Revelation should recognize the primacy of symbolism. This will avoid the excessive tendency among some interpreters to read newspaper eschatology into the Apocalypse. I also have provided seven steps that maximizes one's ability to adjudicate the meaning of the symbolic imagery. I do not suppose that the methodology proposed in this article will resolve all the difficulties or answer all questions. The method advocated does, however, offer a hermeneutically informed framework for approaching the symbols in John's Apocalypse.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>David L. Cooper, "An Exposition of the Book of Revelation: The Great Parenthesis," *Biblical Research Monthly* (1954): 84.

<sup>2</sup>John F. Walvoord, "The Theological Context of Premillennialism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993): 390; Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991), 146. Zuck offers six guidelines for interpreting figurative language: (1) always take a passage in the literal sense unless there is good reason to do so otherwise; (2) the figurative sense is the intended if the literal would involve an impossibility; (3) the figurative is intended if the literal meaning is an absurdity; (4) take the figurative sense if the literal would demand immoral action; (5) note whether a figurative expression is followed by an explanatory literal statement; and (6) sometimes a figure is marked by a qualifying adjective, as in "Heavenly Father" (Matt 6:14).

<sup>3</sup>Tim LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 17.

<sup>4</sup>Dispensational futurism, associated with dispensational premillennialism, began with the teachings of J. N. Darby that were popularized in America by C. Larkin, D. L. Moody, C. I. Scofield, and L. S. Chafer. The twentieth century witnessed the development of

dispensationalism into three distinct expressions: (1) *classic* dispensationalism (Darby, Scofield, Chafer); (2) *revised* dispensationalism (J. Walvoord, C. Ryrie, D. Pentecost, T. LaHaye, and R. Thomas); and (3) *progressive* dispensationalism (D. Bock, C. Blaising, R. Saucy, and M. Pate). The distinguishing difference between classic, revised, and progressive dispensationalism is hermeneutical. The hermeneutical hallmark of classic dispensationalism is a consistent and insistent commitment to the literal interpretation of prophetic Scripture. This hermeneutical approach has resulted in a particular theological system that makes a strict and consistent distinction between Israel and the church. The church is merely a parenthesis inserted between God's dealings with Israel, and thus the Book of Revelation focuses on the future of ethnic and national Israel.

<sup>5</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 30.

<sup>6</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 29.

<sup>7</sup>Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 52.

<sup>8</sup>E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967), 210.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Robert L. Thomas, "A Critique of Progressive Dispensational Hermeneutics," in *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy; Eugene: Harvest House, 1995), 417.

<sup>11</sup>N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 36.

<sup>12</sup>Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 236.

<sup>13</sup>On the genre of apocalypse see John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9; Adela Yarbro Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism," *Semeia* 36 (1986): 7. In 1979, John J. Collins, in conjunction with a group of noted scholars, authored the first standardized definition for the apocalyptic genre. This definition emphasized the form as a narrative framework involving an otherworldly mediator and the content as containing both temporal (eschatological salvation) and spatial (supernatural world)

elements. It lacked, however, any reference to the function of an Apocalypse. As such, a subsequent study group lead by A. Y. Collins, David Hellholm, and David E. Aune added an amendment in 1986 stating that an apocalypse is “intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence the understanding and behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.”

<sup>14</sup>Lars Hartman, “Survey of the Problem of Apocalyptic Genre,” in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism* (ed. David Hellholm; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), 332–36. So David E. Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 65–96.

<sup>15</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 310.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>17</sup>D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 90.

<sup>18</sup>G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 50–55.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>20</sup>BDAG, 920.

<sup>21</sup>Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 51.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 52 (emphasis added)

<sup>23</sup>Contra M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 54.

<sup>24</sup>Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 228.

<sup>25</sup>Ian Paul, “The Book of Revelation: Image, Symbol and Metaphor,” in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (ed. Steve Moyise; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 135.

<sup>26</sup>Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1962), 92.

<sup>27</sup>Edith M. Humphrey, *And I Turned to See the Voice: The Rhetoric of Vision in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 21.

<sup>28</sup>Vern S. Poythress, “Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1–6,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*

36 (1993): 42. Poythress also suggests that proper interpretation of the symbols in Revelation must take account of the distinction of at least four levels of communication: (1) the *linguistic* level, consisting of the textual record itself; (2) the *visionary* level, consisting of the visual experience that John had; (3) the *referential* level, consisting of the historical reference; and (4) a *symbolic* level, consisting of the interpretation of what the symbolic imagery actually connotes about its historical referent.

<sup>29</sup>Norman Perrin, “Eschatology and Hermeneutics: Reflections on Method in the Interpretation of the New Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 10–11. These terms were first used by Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, 555. Perrin’s contribution to this subject is very helpful, but it is not without its criticisms. His bifurcated categories run the risk of over simplifying the way a symbol is used in the text. To determine that a symbol is either steno or tensive often does not do justice to the way that some symbols retain both steno and tensive elements. It does not always take account of the evocative impact of the so-called steno symbols. What is more, it fails to provide a method for adjudicating the meaning of a symbol in a given text. See also the critiques of John J. Collins, “The Symbolism of Transcendence in Jewish Apocalyptic,” *Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research* 19 (1974): 5–22; and Humphrey, *And I Turned to See the Voice*, 21 n. 10.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 56. He argues that once the lampstands are identified as the seven churches, then all other appearances of lampstands in the Book of Revelation refer to the churches unless specified otherwise.

<sup>31</sup>Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), 28–37.

<sup>32</sup>Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), cxxxiii.

<sup>33</sup>For examples of the interpretation of other symbols in the text, see Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (repr., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007), cxxxiv; and Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 29–30.

<sup>34</sup>Marko Jauhianen, *The Use of Zechariah in Revelation*

- (WUNT 199; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 91.
- <sup>35</sup>Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1964), 65; R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (International Critical Commentary; 2 vols.; New York: Scribner's, 1920), 1.283; Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 576–79; David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 612–13; Stephen Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 277; Jauhianen, *The Use of Zechariah*, 89–92.
- <sup>36</sup>Jauhianen, *The Use of Zechariah*, 91.
- <sup>37</sup>See Alan S. Bandy, “The Prophetic Lawsuit in the Book of Revelation: An Analysis of the Lawsuit Motif in Revelation with Reference to the Use of the Old Testament” (Ph.D. diss. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), 295–302.
- <sup>38</sup>Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, cxxxiii.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup>Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 88–91.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid., 88.
- <sup>42</sup>Ibid., 38–83.
- <sup>43</sup>This appeal is paralleled in Rev 17:9 with a slight variation and most likely links the beast of Revelation 13 with the beast of Rev 17:9–14. This appeal alludes to Dan 12:10.
- <sup>44</sup>Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan; New York: Harper, 1922), 276–78.
- <sup>45</sup>H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. Markus Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 29. So Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 771.
- <sup>46</sup>Barn. 9.8.
- <sup>47</sup>*Sib. Or.* 1.137–46; 3.24–26; 5.12–51. The later oracles exhibit an increased tendency for gematria (e.g., *Sib. Or.* 11:29–30, 92, 114, 189–90, 208, 256, 266). Cf. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 772; Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 355 n. 26.
- <sup>48</sup>*Sib. Or.* 1.324–25 (Collins, OTP). So 3 *Baruch* 4:3–7, 10; Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 389; G. Bohak, “Greek-Hebrew Gematrias in 3 *Baruch* and in Revelation,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 7 (1990): 119–21.
- <sup>49</sup>Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.1. He also addresses the variant reading of 616, but concluded that it must be a scribal error.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid., 5.30.3.
- <sup>51</sup>Ibid. See also the text critical analysis of J. Neville Birdsall, “Irenaeus and the Number of the Beast: Revelation 13:18,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel*, BETL 161 (ed. A. Denaux; Leuven: Leuven University, 2002), 349–59.
- <sup>52</sup>Of the possibilities he seems to dismiss *Evanthas*, but is more inclined to accept *Lateinos* (Romans) and *Titan* (Titan). He sees a probable correlation between the Roman empire and the last kingdom represented in Daniel’s vision. Irenaeus, however, favors the term *titian* because it has six letters; the titans were figures from pagan mythology. There has never been a ruler with the name Titan.
- <sup>53</sup>Bauckham notes that “it was apparently suggested independently by four German scholars in 1831 (O. F. Fritsche), 1836 (F. Benary), and 1837 (F. Hitzig, E. Reuss). Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 387 n. 10. See also Arthur S. Peake, *Commentary on Revelation* (London: 1920), 323; D. Brady, *The Contributions of British Writers between 1560 and 1830 to the Interpretation of Revelation 13.16–18 (The Number of the Beast)*, BGBE 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 292.
- <sup>54</sup> $\aleph = 200 + \beth = 60 + \gamma = 100 + \delta = 50 + \epsilon = 6 + \zeta = 200 + \eta = 50 = 666$ . The usual Hebrew form of Caesar Nero (קיסר נרון) adds up to 676. Evidence supporting the shorter form without the *yod* has been confirmed by a document found at Wadi Murabba’at. See Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 770; D. R. Hillers, “Revelation 13:18 and a Scroll from Murabba’at,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 170 (1963): 65.
- <sup>55</sup>Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 387; J. Christian Wilson, “The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation,” *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 598.
- <sup>56</sup>Franz Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1922), 96–97; Bauckham,

*Climax of Prophecy*, 386.

<sup>57</sup>For examples of this method see Seutonius, *Nero* 39; Y. Ber. 5a; Lam. R. 1:15.

<sup>58</sup>Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 389.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 394.

<sup>60</sup>Bauckham confirms this identification of Nero as the eighth king who was one of the seven by the use of triangular numbers. In short, he demonstrates that 666 is a doubly triangular number. It is a triangle of 36, which is a triangle of 8. The relationship of 666 with the number 8 is significant for Bauckham because the antichrist will be the eighth king, who was also one of the seven. Thus, Nero who was one of the seven will also be the eighth. Since his number is a triangle of 36 and a triangle of 8 the beast must be Nero. Although complex and convoluted, Bauckham presents a fascinating argument. See *Climax of Prophecy*, 390–404.

<sup>61</sup>Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 725–26.