

Symbolism in Revelation

Some symbols are interpreted for us:

- seven lampstands are churches; seven stars are angels (1:20)
- four horses are conquest, slaughter, famine, death (6:1–8)
- red dragon is Satan (12:9)
- seven heads are seven mountains, but also seven kings (17:9–10)
- ten horns are ten kings yet to receive their kingdoms (17:12)
- the woman is “the great city” (17:18)

Colors can have symbolic associations:

- white = victory or purity (1:14; 2:17; 3:4–5, 18; 4:4; 6:2, 11; 7:9, 13–14; 14:14; 19:11, 14; 20:11)
- red = destruction (6:4; 12:3), bloodshed (6:12), fire (9:17)
- purple = royalty, luxury (17:4; 18:12, 16)
- scarlet = perverse luxury (17:3–4; 18:12, 16)
- black = mourning (6:5, 12)
- pale green = death (6:8)

Numbers can have symbolic associations:

- 3 = the spiritual realm (8:13; 16:13; 21:13)
- 3½ = tribulation (11:9; cf. Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7); likewise, 1,260 days = 42 thirty-day months or 3½ years (11:3; 12:6)
- 4 = the earth (4:6–8; 5:6, 8, 14; 6:1–8; 7:1–2, 11; 9:13–15; 14:3; 15:7; 19:4; 20:8; 21:16)
- 6 = failure (13:18 [three sixes])
- 7 = perfection or completion (1:4, 12, 16, 20; 3:1; 4:5; 5:1, 6; 8:2; 10:3; 11:13; 12:3; 13:1; 15:1, 7; 17:9); but sometimes 7 appears to signify Rome, which was built on seven hills (12:3; 13:1; 17:3, 7, 9, 11)
- 10 = totality (2:10; 12:3; 31:1; 17:3, 7, 12, 16)
- 12 = Israel (12:1; 21:12–14, 16, 21; 22:2); likewise 24 (4:4, 10; 5:8, 14; 11:16; 19:4) and 144 (7:4–8; 14:1–5; 21:17)
- 1,000 = a very great number; thousands of thousands = unimaginably large (5:11); 144,000 = a large Jewish multitude (7:4–8; 14:1–5); 7,000 = a “complete” large number, as many as necessary (11:13); 1,000 years = a very long time (20:2–7)

Animals can have symbolic associations:

- lamb = sacrifice (5:6–8, 12–13; 6:1, 16; 7:9–10, 14, 17; 8:1; 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9, 14, 22–23; 22:1, 3)
- lion = might, royalty (5:5; 10:3; cf. 13:2)
- eagle = perseverance, victory (8:13; 12:14)

Imagery often recalls the Old Testament:

- trumpet blasts (1:10; 4:1; 8:2–11:15): see Genesis 19:16–19; Joel 2:1
- blackened sun, moon like blood, falling stars (6:12–13): see Isaiah 13:10; 50:3; Joel 2:10
- plagues (8:7–9:20): see Exodus 7:17; 9:18; 10:4, 21
- hybrid beast (13:2): see Daniel 7:4–6

Some imagery is simply poetic and doesn't appear to stand for anything specific:

- “a rainbow that looks like an emerald” (4:3)
- “a sea of glass, like crystal” (4:6)

What Is the Purpose of the Symbolism?

The symbols probably are not a secret language intended to conceal the message from potential enemies. Symbolism is simply the most appropriate language for conveying the fantastic and mysterious nature of what is being revealed. The symbols offer more vague association than direct correspondence, and even when we “get” the symbols, we may feel like there is much that we don't understand. That is partly the point.

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