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Q&A#141 Why Does Revelation Use So Much Symbolism?

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Today's question: "Why does the Book of Revelation use so much symbolism? Some reasons might perhaps include: to hide its meaning from outsiders, to describe the ineffable, to point out the inner reality of what's being described, and so on. Are these correct? What other purposes might there be for the symbolism in Revelation? I'd love to hear your thoughts on this."

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, why does the book of Revelation use so much symbolism? Some reasons might perhaps include to hide its meaning from outsiders, to describe the ineffable, to point out the inner reality of what's being described, and so on. Are these correct? What other purposes might there be for the symbolism in Revelation? I'd love to hear your thoughts on this.

As you read through the entirety of scripture, you'll see symbolism throughout, and the sort of symbolism that you encounter is something that develops over the course of the

biblical revelation. So as you start off in the book of Genesis, in Genesis chapter 1, there are a number of elements introduced at that stage that are already connected with some sort of symbolic import and made part of a wider picture. So there's a seven-day pattern.

The number seven has significance because it's connected with the specific event of the creation of the world, the seven-day pattern. With the Sabbath day, it's connected with that as well. Human beings connected with God as the image of God, connected with the ruling council as the image of God.

There's connections between human beings and the sun, moon, and stars, which rule in the heavens. And there are patterns of days of forming, days of filling, and there are various other symbolic entities, such as light, which begins the creation, and the fish, which populate the seas, and then the land is distinct from the seas. All these sorts of elements develop in their meaning over time.

So it's like putting a snowball on the top of a very steep slope full of snow and just rolling it down, and it picks things up as it speeds on its way down. And at the end, it becomes this big ball. And in many ways, this is what scripture is like.

There are certain balls of symbolism set rolling at the very beginning, and then by the end, by the time you reach the book of Revelation, there are a great many ways in which they've accumulated further meaning and brought with them the whole of the biblical story is connected in various ways through these symbols. At the very end of Revelation, you see many of the symbols from the beginning. You see a new Adam, and you see a new Eve, Christ and the church.

You see themes of a garden, rivers flowing out of the garden, trees in the garden, a garden city, which is covered with gold that has gates of pearl, and all these sorts of things. And these themes play off the symbolism of the story of Genesis chapter 1 and 2 in particular. There are other ways in which we can see symbolism develop in scripture, not just through these more basic symbols of the world and the sort of fabric of reality in particular places, but you can see the symbolism that develops through stories.

So we see Babel on the Great, and Babel on the Great is associated with a range of different things in the biblical narrative. It's something, again, it's a symbol that develops. It starts at Babel, and then from there it develops in various ways throughout the story of Israel and the exile and then the return from exile, and it connects a number of different themes and aspects of symbolism.

It represents something. And so by the time you've reached the book of Revelation, that symbol is one that is very charged with a lot of different meanings. It can draw a whole cluster of biblical themes together.

Likewise, when you read about, let's say, the prophets that you encounter in the book of

Revelation, people who have fire coming out of their mouths, that's drawing upon symbolism that has been developed throughout the whole of the Old Testament and into the New. It's connected with themes of Pentecost, along with themes maybe reminding you of people like Elijah and the other prophets that have fire placed upon their mouths and fire placed in their hearts as God's word is placed within them. Now, when you're reading symbol, symbol is a sort of language, the way that James Jordan has described it, and I think it's a helpful way to think about it.

When you are reading typical language, we'll find that there are certain connections that the language draws, but symbol is a far more charged sort of language. There's a great wealth of connections that can be forged through symbol, particularly as those symbols have travelled throughout the entirety of the biblical narrative to that point. When you hear trumpet blasts bringing down a city, seven trumpet blasts, it reminds you of the fall of Jericho, and the fall of Jericho and the Rahab, the harlot in the city of Jericho.

And now the city itself is described as a harlot, and the harlot city connects with various prophecies of the Old Testament where you have Jerusalem compared to a harlot city, or you have some other ways in which the Babylon theme and Jerusalem as an adulterous city, those themes being connected together. Now, when you get to Revelation, they're connected together in a far more subtle way, in a far more developed way, because there's a lot more symbolism that has been introduced to the picture since then. When you're dealing with a book like Revelation then, you're dealing with a vast network of symbolism that draws these threads from the entirety of the Old and New Testament.

It's the last book of the Bible for a reason. If you do not know the rest of your Bible very, very, very well, you will struggle to read Revelation. I think that's probably part of the reason why it's written in symbolism.

It's written for the understanding of the wise, those who have trained themselves in the reading of Scripture as a whole. And if you're not really embedded within this covenant text, you're going to struggle to read the book of Revelation. It's a book that fascinates newcomers to the Bible, often.

It's a book that promises all these sort of vague and cryptic revelations about the truth, but it's not really about revelations. It's the revelation of Jesus Christ. It's a particular revelation, and it's a revelation by Jesus Christ.

It's not the revelations of John the Revelator or something like that. We think about very much within our society, I think people imagine the book of Revelation, they talk about the book of revelations, as akin to the prophecies of Nostradamus or something like that. It is not at all like that.

It's a very different sort of book, and it's built not just upon veiled code about events that are about to come to pass, but a deep symbolic presentation of the meaning and the

significance of these things in the light of the entirety of covenant history. So when you're reading about the fall of Babylon the Great, you're reading about themes that draw your mind back to Genesis chapter 11, to the exiles, drawing your mind back to the story of the fall of Jericho, the deliverance of Rahab, and that makes you maybe question the relationship between the harlot and the bride that appears, the two cities. Now these two cities are other themes come to mind.

Then you question how does the harlot relate to the woman that goes into the wilderness in chapter 12? In all of these different dense clusters of symbols, we can see the revelation of Jesus Christ emerging through that as we trace it back through the pages of scripture and see the way that these symbols have developed and how these things lead us into a vast network of connections. It's one of the things that symbol can do really well in a way that other forms of language cannot. Symbols multiply connections and so when you're dealing with a symbol like Jesus dressed at the beginning as he's described at the beginning of the book of Revelation, there's a cluster of symbols there.

It connects him to a priest but also connects him to a bridegroom. It connects him to the beloved of the Song of Songs. He's someone who's a new king, a new priest and he's someone who's standing and walking amidst these candlesticks and other things that might connect him to temple themes.

And all of those things help you to develop a broader understanding of what's taking place. Christ is the bridegroom. Christ is also connected with the heavenly temple.

The church is a bridegroom but it's also the bride but it's also part of the temple. It's candlesticks and these various images as they develop give you a deeper understanding of what's taking place. Now if you just had a blow-by-blow account in code about what is going to happen in the future, it would be a very different sort of book.

It would be a book that did not actually reveal Jesus Christ so much as just give you some prognostications about future disasters and some sort of apocalypse as we'd use that term in a more general secular sense. But this text is one that is not of that type. It's a text that reveals Jesus Christ in the whole of the scripture in part because it's drawing upon symbols from the entirety of the biblical text.

As you read through the book of Revelation you will see themes taken up from just about every part of the Bible prior to it. It really draws these different themes together and when you've read it in terms of its deep symbols you'll find that its meaning just expands. There are ways in which you can see the city of Babylon and the harlot city and all these sorts of themes expanding not just into oh that means Jerusalem but into a great connection of images from the Old Testament and the New that help you to understand how everything fits together in a deeper way.

And so there is a way in which it is hiding things from outsiders but I don't think it's

primarily about hiding things from outsiders as revealing them to insiders, to those who it is given to know the truth of the kingdom. I think its purpose in that sense is very similar to parables. Parables tell you something very important.

They're signs about and there's also signs about what Jesus is doing in his ministry that he performs, miracles and other things. So Jesus, when he turns the water into wine at the wedding feast, that's a miracle, it's a sign of power but it's a lot more than that. It's a sign that tells you something about who Jesus is.

As the one who provides wine in the wedding feast he's playing the role of the bridegroom. It begins his ministry. It's connected with turning water into blood in the first of the plagues but now it's a different sort of thing.

It's water into wine. It's a positive sign rather than a negative sign of judgment. It's a lot of other things as you explore it and that's because it's a sign.

It's not just a proof of his power, it's a demonstration of who he is to the people who have eyes to see. Likewise with the book of Revelation. If you read the book of Revelation really carefully and you read it in the light of the rest of scripture you will see revealed in it Jesus Christ.

You'll see revealed in it the truth of what's taking place in Christ's work, particularly in the final wrapping up of the old covenant and that overlap period between old and new covenant and the establishment of the new covenant age. There are other things that you could argue that the symbolism of Revelation does. I think it does give us a way of understanding things that are mysterious to us.

The world of the heavenly world and how it relates to the world of our immediate sense and sight. It does that in part by drawing upon its symbols and images from the temple perhaps and the garden and other things like that. But I think the main purpose is to give us a language or to work with a language that enables us to see a lot more of what's taking place.

Help us to see the musicality of the entirety of scripture. Scripture is a vast symphony as it were and this climactic movement at the very end, this revelation of Jesus Christ, brings all these themes together in this climactic presentation of their truth. And as you read it with understanding, you will find that it brings together all these different areas of symbolism in the scripture.

A whole vast network of symbolism just comes alive and you begin to understand that this symbolism is the language of scripture come into its own. It's revealing that this is where all these things end up. These balls as it were, these snowballs that have been moving all the way down through the text of scripture, have now reached their destination and look at where they have arrived.

These threads of narrative have now reached their resolution and that resolution helps you to read from that vantage point back through the entirety of scripture and see where these things are moving towards. And so symbolism is very important. It's one of the ways in which we can read the book of Revelation not just as an isolated text of prophecies about some events in the future written in an obscure code, but as the final text of the whole of the biblical canon that draws together all of the themes of the canon and brings them to its full climax and conclusion.

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