

General help for understanding symbols in Revelation

The book of Revelation can be difficult to understand. One reason is that the book explains things we can see and things we can't see. The book talks about government and wars and churches and hunger, all things that happen on earth. It also talks about things that happen in heaven, and how things happen from God's perspective. Those two things can be confusing sometimes. If you don't understand some verses, it is important to know if it is happening in the spiritual world we can't see, or if it is happening in this world we can see.

The book of Revelation also uses many symbols. These symbols mean or stand for something else. For example, the lampstands in chapter one are symbols for churches. When you read "lampstand," you should understand "church." There are different kinds of symbols used.

1. Numbers.
2. Living things. These include animals, people, and strange beasts.
3. Colors.
4. Natural things. These are things you see in the world like stars, the earth, sun, moon, hail, etc. If the verses use a natural symbol, then it means something you can see on earth. For example, Revelation 8:6 talks about a third of the earth burning up, a third of the trees, and a third of the grass burning up. Those things are natural, so it is not talking about the spiritual world. That verse is talking about some disaster we will see on earth.
5. Many other symbols are used. If the symbols are not normal things we see or experience on earth things, the verses are talking about something that happens in the spiritual world, something we don't see. An example is the dragon/serpent in Revelation 12.

Jesus

Alpha & Omega	Name for God the Father (Rev. 1:8, 21:6), name for Jesus (22:13)
Beginning & End	Name for God the Father (Rev. 21:6) and Jesus (Rev. 22:13)
First and Last	Name for Jesus (Rev. 22:13)
Key of David	A key shows power and control. David was a great king. Because Jesus has the key of David, that means Jesus is a great King with full power.
Lamb	Name for Jesus as the Lamb of God, the willing sacrifice for sin.
Lion of tribe of Judah	Name for Jesus. Shows His power, strength, and that He is king.
Root of David	Name for Jesus, meaning He is from David's family. Actually means He began David's family, He is the head and leader of it.

Numbers

- 1/3 (one third) A part, doesn't mean literally one third. Usually used for part of something in God's creation that sin destroyed.
- 3 Three is normally God's number, meaning the Trinity. In Revelation, the devil tries to copy God. Revelation chapter 13 talks about a dragon and two beasts, adding up to 3. Three can be used to mean the whole spiritual world.
- 4 Mostly used for four living creatures. Four because they represent all directions, all space? Used with the earth, means the whole earth. (like 4 directions – north, south, east, west)
- 5 In Revelation, used for 5 months. Means a limited time. It won't go on forever.
- 6 People. Not quite 7, because we are not perfect.

- 7 Perfection, or complete. God's number. Can mean something is holy, perfect, from God.
- 10 Completeness. Nothing missing, nothing more to add.
- 12 There are 12 families in Israel. In the N.T., 12 means God's people, Jews and non-Jews.
- 24 Used for 24 elders. Could be 24 elders for 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles.
- 42 months, or 1,260 days, 3 ½ (three & one-half) years, or "time, times and half a time". These are all the same. The number means the time of much persecution. It is not literally 3 ½ years long.
- 666 6 is the number meaning man. 666 is the number meaning the second beast, usually called the antichrist. It is three 6's, which could emphasize that the antichrist is man and not God. Or the three 6's could be related to the number 3, the dragon and the two beasts.
- 1,000 Rev. chapter 20 talks about believers ruling for 1,000 years with Christ. This does not mean exactly 1,000 years. It means the whole time between Jesus' first and second coming.
- 144,000 All of God's people, really emphasized. 12 means God's people, and 10 means complete. Cubed (10x10x10) is holy and perfect. 144,000 is 12x12x10x10x10 (2 - 12's and 3 - 10's), so this is really all of God's people, holy and perfect.
- Thousands upon thousands, 10 thousand times 10 thousand. Means more than you can count.

Stones and Colors

- Pearls, jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chryoprase, jacinth, amethyst. All just show riches and beauty. John uses them most of the time to try to describe how beautiful heaven is.
- Many colors Several times, many colors are used to describe God, or heaven, or Jerusalem, or God's throne, or other beautiful things. The colors don't mean anything specific. It is only John's way to try to explain how beautiful something is.
- Black Death, maybe famine (much hunger, starving to death).
- Gold Means a king, or glory.
- Pale or Pale Green Sickness or death.
- Green Green like a tree or plant means life, usually eternal life.
- Rainbow Shows God's glory. A normal rainbow has a beginning and end. This rainbow is a complete circle around God's throne.
- Red depending on how it is used, could mean blood, could mean war.
- Scarlet and purple Usually mean riches like a king has. Scarlet and purple cloth were very expensive.
- White Means either clean, pure, or victory and triumph. If it means victory, it is not always a good victory. The white horse in Rev. chapter 6 means victory, but it is not a victory from God. In Rev. 16, Jesus rides on a white horse, and that means Jesus' victory. His people have white clothes on, which means Jesus' cleanness and perfection.

Living Things

- Angels The book of Revelation has many angels. They are truly angels, and don't mean anything else.
- Beast Many people think a beast means one person who will do terrible things. Really, a beast probably means many people who will do the same kinds of terrible things.
- Dragon The devil. Also called a serpent (snake).
- Elders There are 24 elders. 12 represent O.T. believers, 12 represent N.T. Christians.
- Eyes Used with God, many eyes means that God sees everything. Usually means the Holy Spirit.

Four living creatures Also called cherubim or seraphim. We think these are like God's personal servants. They are very close to God and His throne and they carry His word.

Horse Horses were usually used in war, so a horse means war or maybe strength and power.

Lion Shows power.

Locusts Locusts are always terrible for farmers. They eat and destroy many crops. So many locusts usually means very little food. In Revelation, locusts can mean much loss and destruction.

Michael Michael is called an archangel. In some places in the Bible, it seems like Michael is another name for Jesus. In other places, it seems like Michael is an angel and not Jesus. Probably, Michael is a very high angel who leads God's army of angels.

Woman in Rev. 12 This woman first means the Old Testament Jewish believers, then means the church. The dragon (the devil) wants to kill the child born from Old Testament promises (Jesus), then wants to destroy her (the church).

Miscellaneous

Altar In the O.T., the place for sacrifice and prayers to God. In Revelation, the altar can mean God with His people, it can mean worshipping God, it can mean the church.

Book of life the names of everyone who believes in Jesus and is saved.

Bow, sword Things used in war; means war.

Bowl of incense Means the prayers of God's people.

Censer Holds hot coals and incense for prayers.

Clothes A picture of a person's soul. If the clothes are clean, the person is righteous. If the clothes are dirty, the person is full of sin and is not righteous.

Cloud Shows God is there. God or Jesus often come on or in a cloud.

Crown Means being a king, or having glory and honor.

Earth Sometimes the earth is simply the place things happen. If the earth is a symbol, it often means the unbelievers or false religion.

East Or the place the sun rises. This often is connected somehow with God. If something is from the East, it could be from God, or from the land of Israel, or connected with God's people.

East, west, north, south All four directions together means the whole earth.

Face of a man Intelligence, ability to think and reason.

Four corners of the earth Means the whole earth

First resurrection The first resurrection means having faith in Jesus. When you believe in Jesus, you are alive in Him. Your body will die, but you will never die the second death (hell). The second resurrection is when Jesus comes again and your body rises from the grave.

Gates A gate is the way into a city when it is open, it is a way of protecting the city when the gate is shut. Jesus is the gate, our only entrance into heaven. Notice in Revelation chapter 21 that the gates are never shut. That is because there is no night and no danger in heaven.

Heads The heads on a beast mean kingdoms or kings. So if a beast has 7 heads, that means 7 kingdoms or kings. Note: here, 7 does not mean from God. It is a sign that the beast is trying to copy God and be like God.

Horns A horn shows power. The horns on the beast in Revelation mean kings, so 10 horns means 10 kings.

Iron scepter Ruling with an iron scepter means ruling very strictly, or very harsh, cruel, mean.

Jerusalem Jerusalem can mean God's people, or it can mean heaven. The New Jerusalem always means heaven.

Lake of fire	Hell.
Lampstand	Usually means a church. We show God's light to the world.
Left	Usually means the weak side. You don't have God's favor.
Manna	God's food that gives life.
Moon	Can mean the moon in the sky. Like the sun, can also mean all creation, or it can be a symbol of beauty and glory.
Mount Zion	Means Jerusalem. Mount Zion and Jerusalem both often mean heaven.
Pillar in temple	A strong place in God's temple that will never leave.
Right	Usually means the side of power, the side of justice. Means having God's favor.
Robes	The same meaning as clothes. A picture of a person's soul. If the robes are clean, the person is righteous. If the robes are dirty, the person is full of sin and is not righteous.
Sack cloth	Shows much repentance and sorrow for wrong doing and sin.
Seals	Hide the secrets of the future. Only God knows them, only God can open the seals.
Second death	The second death means to go to hell. The first death is that we are dead in sin.
Sharp, double-edged sword	God's word.
Spirits of God, Seven Spirits	Means the Holy Spirit
Star	A star means several things. It can mean a star, it can mean an angel, it can mean a demon (angel who rebelled against God). The Bright Morning Star is Jesus.
Sun	Sun can mean the sun in the sky. With the moon and stars, it can mean all of creation. Or it can be a symbol of beauty and glory.
Throne	God's throne, the place where God is. The center of all His glory and power.
Tree of life	Eternal life. Back in Genesis 2, when you eat from the tree of life, you will live forever.
Trumpet	God's way of announcing things.
Water of life	Water often means life, especially connected to Jesus means eternal life.
Wedding	A picture of when the church and Jesus will be together in heaven.
Wine	Can mean wine. If the verse talks about drinking the cup of wine, it means you accept what is given to you, or it can mean you must take what is given to you. If people drink the wine of God's anger, it means God is punishing them and they must accept it. If people drink the wine of immorality, it means they share in doing terrible sins. Cup means the same thing as wine.