



How the First-Century, Asia Minor, Jewish Christians Understood the Book of Revelation

Symbols and Numbers in the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation is *apocalyptic literature*. This genre of writing was pioneered by the first-century Jewish community during Yeshua's (Jesus) time. We must understand its nature, characteristics, and symbology to interpret the text responsibly. For an overview of this genre, please see my writing *The Book of Revelation – 2. Overview - Statements and Sources*.

Apocalyptic literature includes symbolic elements that would have been readily understood by the first-century, Asia Minor, Jewish, Christian audience to whom it was written. Following is a list of some of the symbols and their meanings found in the Book of Revelation. You will see that the numbers are not literal but representative.

Why symbols? Apocalyptic writing is the most dramatic way to capture an audience's attention and to burn its message into their hearts, because it draws them into an experience of the senses, like a surround-sound theatre. The striking symbols, icons, and images have three traits: *Constant*, *fluid* and *repurposed* (example: a woman can represent a bride or a prostitute), and *transformed* for the author's own use.

This list is incomplete; additions will come as this study unfolds. You will find details about these symbols throughout the text of the study. The purpose of this list is to help you get started.

- The 7 stars in Chapter 1 represent heavenly messengers (angels) of the 7 Christian communities in Asia Minor whom John pastored. This is a *fluid* symbol, because, as we see in the 6th Seal of Chapter 6 (vs.13), the stars represent the shaking of the false angelic beings and deities in ancient mythology.
- The 7 lampstands (menorahs or candlesticks) represent the Asia-Minor Christian communities; they are the "lights of the world." (See Matthew 5:14.) Yeshua walks among His people, the lights (1:13) who were anointed and appointed to be His bright witnesses. He is moving among us, too!
- Flashes of lightning and peals of thunder are echoes back to the Israelites encounter with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai. These elements represent the flourishing, powerful, glorious, complete presence of God and His worshipping creation.
- The 4 living creatures in the heavenly Temple (in Chapters 4 and 5) represent the Kingdom of Shalom and all the beautiful, teeming life of Elohim's complete flourishing creation as He intended it from the beginning of time (Genesis 1 and 2).
- The number 12 represents the totality or entirety of something. The 24 (12+12) elders represent the totality of God's people, Jew and Gentile (12 tribes plus 12 apostles), the holy set-apart ones, born again into His kingdom, His Faithful Witnesses.
- The number 4 represents the earth's completion – 4 corners and 4 winds.

- The number 7 represents completion or fulfillment.
- 1,000 represents *infinity*, or a number *too numerous to count*, or a *satisfying, all-encompassing period of time*. The word *millennium* is not found in the book of Revelation.
- 144,000 also means a number *too numerous to count* (12 x 12 x 1,000). It implies that everyone within that number is accounted for. We are part of this accounted-for company, each sealed with His mark upon their foreheads which is the Name of the Lamb and His Father (14:1). And our names are written in the Lamb's book of life!
- The fraction $\frac{1}{3}$ represents *a lot but not all or partial*.
- 3½ years, 1,260 days, and 42 months are all the same amount of time representing the limited time of the suffering of the Faithful Witnesses (God's people). We are encouraged knowing our suffering has a limit. For more detail, please see *The Role of Faithful Witness* in 3. *Outline – Scene 2*.
- The number 666 is most likely *Gematria* which is an association in Greek and Hebrew letters of the alphabet to a corresponding number. 666 corresponds to Ceasar Nero's name. He was nicknamed *the beast*, and he represented all the worst of human beastly power in his arrogance, debauchery, and madness. For more detail, please see *The Political and Economic Challenge* in 3. *Outline – Scene 2*.
- *Armageddon* is mentioned once in Revelation 16:16. It is the Hebrew *Har-Magedon*. *Har* means *mountain*. The common theatre of war for the ancient Israelites was in the plains of Megiddo (in the Valley of Jezreel) at the foot of Mount Megiddo. Although *Har Megiddo* is an actual place in Northern Israel west of Galilee with Mount Carmel to the north, its name is a symbol of humanity's hostility against God, *not* a prediction of a worldwide cataclysmic war.
- The *chaotic sea* represents the kingdom of evil, chaos, darkness, and the human systems of power that disrupt God's order. The *glassy sea* represents Yahweh's flourishing Kingdom of Shalom.
- *Beasts* represent empires; *Heads* and *horns* represent rulers, families of rulers, or dynasties that rise and fall; crowns and diadems represent the pretense of power.
- A *Faithful Witness* is an *Image Bearer of the Slaughtered Lamb*, one who is both *an observer* (looking for the Kingdom of Shalom) and *an ambassador* (carrying the Kingdom into the world), not self-protective, but willing to non-violently stand in and for the King's purposes in the earth, even in the face of death – worshipping Him with their lives.