

The Purpose of Symbolism in Revelation

G.K. Beale, “The Purpose of Symbolism in the Book of Revelation,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 41 (2006): 53-66.

The following is a slightly edited excerpt of an article in a scholarly journal. I have transliterated all references to the original languages [i.e., turned the Greek/Hebrew letters into their English equivalents], and simplified some of the footnotes. Additionally, if a sentence contains a technical phrase or reference, I have tried to explain it in brackets. Apart from that, the content and format remain the same. I have condensed and summarized everything in the section “Symbolism Used Predominantly for One Situation” and “Revelation’s Symbols Sedate or Shock,” and note when I quote directly from Beale. The section titled “Conclusion” is again directly from Beale’s article.

Introduction

Many of us have heard the statement that is almost a proverb, whether expressed in churches, businesses or homes, “we have done it for so long, why change it now.” This proverbial saying expresses something about our human nature: that we do not like to change. When something goes on for long enough, we get used to it. We often get so used to it that it becomes uncomfortable to change. If it is something bad to which we have become accustomed, it often takes something radical to get our attention so that we will change the bad situation.

Many of us who are parents have to do radical things to change bad behavior patterns that become habitual for our children. Perhaps we have to punish them in order to get their attention.

Many of us have heard in the news or elsewhere how teenagers or young people come under the influence of cultic religious groups and become subtly brainwashed by the group. Sometimes parents have had to hire experts who steal the children away from the cult and then use radical methods to deprogram them so that they can step back into the reality of life and change.

Over the last few years, we have heard news about massive earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes. Then we saw pictures of these things. No doubt, by seeing the tragedy, the severity of the destruction was impressed on us more than if we merely heard about it. Perhaps some Americans, who would not have otherwise taken action, were so moved by the visual images that they decided to contribute to some relief aid being sent to the various ravaged areas.

The point is that we are people who need something radical to get our attention in order to change a bad habit or in order to respond to a situation that is bad.

If this is true on the mundane, everyday level, how much more true must it be on the spiritual level. We are people who get accustomed to our sinful habit patterns. This evening we want to ask what radical actions God takes to get our attention so that we will see the seriousness of our sinful ways and take action and change.

The book of Revelation is a good place to see the radical way in which God gets our attention about these matters. How does God communicate to his people in this book? One popular approach to the Apocalypse is to try to understand the majority of the book literally as much as possible, and when this appears not to work, then interpret figuratively. Accordingly, this view understands most of Revelation’s pictures as a depiction of literal realities in the future, especially events of terrible tribulation (as, for example, portrayed in the series of seal, trumpet, and bowl plagues).

Let us investigate the most programmatic statement Revelation makes about what is its main mode of communication, which occurs at the very commencement of the book in Revelation 1:1.

Is Revelation to be Understood Primarily as Literal or Symbolic?

The Greek word *sēmainō* is used in Revelation 1:1 to indicate the manner of God’s revelation to John: “the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated [*esēmanen*] it by His angel to His bond-servant John.”

The Purpose of Symbolism in Revelation

Various English translations render this Greek word as “communicated” (NASB), “made known” (RSV, NIV, JB, ESV, NEB), “signified” (KJV, ASV, Douay),¹ and “made clear” (NETB).

The word *sēmainō* elsewhere in the New Testament and in Hellenistic Greek can have any of these ranges of meaning (albeit “made clear” is unusual), although the notion of “symbolize, signify, communicated by symbols” is not an untypical meaning (e.g., in classical Greek, the word could have the idea of giving signals, as in “giving the signal” for a military attack to begin). In this respect, it is significant to recall that the noun form for *sēmainō* is *sēmeion*, which means “sign” and that the New Testament uses for Jesus’ miracles as “signs” or “symbols” of his divine power (e.g., healing the lame man in Mark 2 was symbolic of his ability to forgive sin; feeding the multitudes in John 6 was symbolic of his ability to give and nourish spiritual life).

The word in Revelation 1:1 could mean merely “make known” or “communicated” and thus refer to a general idea of communication and not the particular mode of communication, as it sometimes does in the ancient world. The fact, however, that Revelation 1:1 is an allusion to Daniel 2:28-29, 45 confirms that here the word does mean “symbolize.”²

In Daniel 2:45 of the old Greek Old Testament [the Septuagint or LXX], this word is used to describe the symbolic vision that King Nebuchadnezzar had: “the Great God has symbolized³ to the king what will come to pass in the latter days.” This refers to a dream vision that the king had. He saw a huge statue composed of four sections of different metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron. The image is smashed by a rock that grows and fills the earth. Daniel tells the king that this vision was symbolic: the statue that was divided into four metallic sections symbolized four kingdoms (Babylon, MedoPersia, Greece, and Rome).⁴ The stone that smashed the statue represented God’s kingdom that would defeat the evil kingdoms of the world and dominate the world.

The symbolic use of *sēmainō* in Daniel 2 defines the use in Revelation 1:1 as referring to symbolic communication and not mere general conveyance of information. Therefore, John’s choice of *sēmainō* over *gnōrizō* [the much more common verb meaning “to make known”] is not haphazard but intentional. This conclusion is based on the supposition that John uses Old Testament references with significant degrees of awareness of Old Testament context.

The nuance of “signify” or “symbolize” in Revelation 1:1b is also confirmed by its parallelism with *show* (*deiknymi*) in the first part of Revelation 1:1, because “show” throughout the book always introduces a divine communication by symbolic vision (4:1; 17:1; 21:9-10; 22:1,6,8). In fact, regardless of any generally synonymous word John could have chosen here instead of *sēmainō* (whether it be *gnōrizō* or other like terms), it still would have the sense of communicate by symbols because that is the mode of communication in Daniel 2 and the mode of revelation conveyed by *deiknymi* [“to show”] elsewhere in the book.

In this light, the dictum of the popular approach to Revelation—interpret literally unless you are forced to interpret symbolically—should be turned on its head. Instead, the programmatic statement about the book’s precise mode of communication in 1:1 is that the warp and woof of it is symbolic, so that the preceding dictum should be reversed to say “interpret symbolically unless you are forced to interpret literally.” Better put, the reader is to expect that the main means of divine revelation in this book is symbolic.

If the main mode of communication in Revelation is that of symbolism, how should we interpret the symbols? Some are defined clearly by John himself: seven stars equal seven angels (1:20); seven lampstands equal seven churches of Asia Minor (1:20); seven lamps of fire equal seven Spirits of God (4:5, i.e., the Holy Spirit); bowls of incense equal prayers of the saints (5:8); great dragon equals Satan (12:9);

¹ NASB has a marginal reading of “signified.”

² For example, compare Dan. 2:28 (LXX) which reads, “he showed...what things must take place in the latter days” with Rev. 1:1, “to show...what things must take place quickly.”

³ This is a rendering of the Aramaic verb *yēda* ‘ which has the default meaning of “to know” and is in a causative form which means “to make known.”

⁴ Some commentators identify these nations differently, but it not pertinent to our point to enter in to that discussion.

The Purpose of Symbolism in Revelation

the saints' fine linen, bright and clean equals the righteous acts of the saints (19:8). Whenever these defined symbols appear later in the book without any explanation, it is probable that they mean the same thing as defined by John earlier. The two lampstands in Revelation 11:4 are an outstanding illustration of this (thus, the two witnesses are likely not individual prophets but the corporate church in its prophetic and witnessing role).

Unfortunately for interpreters, most of the symbols in Revelation are unexplained by the book. Nevertheless, the majority are explained to a significant extent by the Old Testament contexts from which they come: the Lamb in 5:6-8 is better understood by going back to the Passover Lamb and the Isaiah 53 sacrificial lamb (in terms of substitutionary atonement).

All of the numbers are symbolic and are understood against their Old Testament background: seven equals the number of completeness (seven days of creation, seven days of the week, complete judgment [Lev. 26:18,21,24,28], fullness of wisdom [Prov. 9:1]). So, for example, the completeness of judgments in Revelation is designated by seven seals, trumpets, and plagues. In addition, the fullness of the Holy Spirit is referred to as the seven Spirits who are before his throne.

Thus, the main mode of communication in Revelation is that of symbolism. Therefore, we should interpret Revelation primarily in a symbolic fashion and not primarily in a literal fashion, especially when we are interpreting the images in the visionary portion of the book (chaps. 4-22).

Why is symbolism the main mode of communication? Neither Paul nor the other New Testament writers use this as a main way of communicating. Why does John do so in Revelation? No doubt, one reason is because the visions could not be expressed by words alone, because John saw things he could not put into words. Therefore, he puts them into pictures. In addition, the symbols show continuity with the Old Testament, because many of the symbols come from there. In addition, the symbols are likely there in order to make the diligent reader of God's word dig deeper in order to get the richer treasures. If you do not *work* at understanding the book, you will have difficulty grasping its message.

The main way, however, to understand why there is so much symbolism in Revelation is to understand that John is a prophet like Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. To understand the way John communicates as a prophet, we must understand how Jesus and the Old Testament prophets communicated their revelation from God. So what is the use of symbolism by Old Testament prophets and by Jesus?

Symbolism Used Predominantly for One Situation⁵

Beale spends a good portion of his article discussing the *reason* prophets in the OT used symbolism, and then connects this to why Jesus used symbolism and parables in his teaching. He then applies this to John's use of symbolism in the book of Revelation, arguing that the background of the OT and Jesus help us understand John's purpose for communicating symbolically.

After interacting specifically with the usage of symbolism and parables in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Beale concludes, "Thus, the parables of the prophets served to judge intractably unrepentant people but shock the faithful remnant out of their spiritually numb and lethargic condition" (pg. 58). Isaiah's commission in Isaiah 6:9-10 is especially significant in this discussion, and as Beale notes, Jesus alludes to this frequently in regards to his own mission and preaching.

According to Beale, Jesus uses symbolic parables for the same exact reason, pointing to Matthew 13 as a prime example: "Therefore, like the prophets, Jesus took up symbolic forms of warning in addition to using symbolic action, parables, and words. This change in 'warning form' is effective only with the faithful remnant, which in Matthew 13 is represented by Jesus' disciples. Symbolic warnings shock true believers out of their spiritual laziness in going along with the sinful status quo of the unbelieving majority" (pg. 59).

Whether being used by the OT prophets to distinguish true Israel (i.e., "the righteous remnant") from false Israel, or used by Christ to separate believers and unbelievers, the result of symbolic parables is that believers are enlightened through shock, but the unbeliever is hardened.

⁵ Important note: In the following two sections, I (Matt Quintana) have condensed and summarized Beale's argumentation in the original article.

The Purpose of Symbolism in Revelation

The repeated phrase at the end of each address to the church in Revelation 2-3, “he who has an ear, let him hear,” is an allusion to Matthew 13, likely connected with Isaiah 6:9-10 as well. In the seven letters, the calls to hear proceed the main body of visions (ch. 4-22), “so that the following parabolic visions in this latter section function as symbolic shock treatment for the churches who have begun to hear the message in chapters 1-3. Thus, the repeated hearing formulas in Revelation 2-3 prepare for the symbols of the following chapters, the latter of which also interpret the former” (pg. 60-61).

Here is what Beale says is the bottom line for why symbolism is used: “*The reason that the prophets, Jesus, and John used symbols is so that Israel and we should perceive spiritual reality and not merely listen to abstractions about it*” (pg. 61).

Revelation’s Symbols Sedate or Shock

Beale argues that this is the main point of the repeated phrase “he who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” He writes, “People are to look at the picture and then apply it to their lives. This can cause us to look at the truth and at reality in a different way so that we can be shocked back into the reality of our faith. God’s people too often do not want to hear the truth, and if it is presented straightforwardly to us to convict us of sin, we will not accept the fact of our sin. We will rationalize it away” (pg. 61).

Making things practical, Beale asks, “What are some areas of our lives to which we are spiritually insensitive? Is it a wrong relationship? Have husbands and wives become complacent about nourishing one another and their children with God’s Word? Perhaps parents are so busy in their jobs that they rarely see their family and are complacent about this. They may think this is not ideal, but, on the other hand, they may also think it is not too harmful of a situation. Some pastors may become complacent about not nourishing their congregations with God’s Word in the way they should be, and when this happens it can provide fertile ground for some in congregations to be open to accepting false teaching from sources outside the church. What sin are we complacent about and about which we need to be shocked? *Revelation’s symbols either sedate or shock us back into the reality of our relationship with God. Will we be spiritually sedated or shocked into repentance?*” (pg. 62)

He continues, “‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ John is saying to us *that Revelation’s symbols either sedate or shock us back into the reality of our relationship with God. Is there a sinful area in our lives that we do not think is really that bad? Will we be sedated or shocked into the reality of what our relationship with God demands us to do in this situation?*” (pg. 64-65).

Conclusion

Therefore, the reason that John uses symbols for the faithful is so that we should actually see and perceive spiritual reality and not merely listen to abstractions about it, and, accordingly, be shocked concerning those sins about which we have become anesthetized.

You have heard the expression, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” This is especially the reason why God communicates to us through pictures in Revelation. A friend of mine who was a carpenter was building an addition onto our house. He saw a garden snake in my back yard while I was there looking at the progress on the addition, and he picked it up and threw it at me as a joke. If you only heard him tell this story you would only perceive half of the gravity of that situation. You see, we are from Texas, and most of the snakes I saw there were poisonous. If my wife had taken a picture of the expression on my face when he threw the snake at me, you would grasp much better the horror on my face and the severity of the situation.

If you merely heard about or read about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II, you would not have grasped the gravity of the devastation. If you had seen actual pictures of it, you would have better perceived the severity of the destruction.

It is the same in our spiritual lives. Sometimes we get so accustomed to and comfortable with sinful situations that we need radical pictures presented to us so that we can perceive the true gravity of our spiritually destitute condition. By the way, not just the book of Revelation, but God’s Word in general, even in the nonsymbolic sections, has this function of helping us to perceive reality from God’s viewpoint and

The Purpose of Symbolism in Revelation

not merely our own viewpoint Symbolic portions of God's Word, however, do this in a very concrete, pictorial manner.

I remember some years ago, that I made an appointment with an oral hygienist to check and clean my teeth; I had not been for a checkup in a long time. While sitting in the dental chair during a two-minute break in the procedure, I glanced at some pictures on the wall directly opposite me. They pictured the progressive stages of gum disease, from healthy gums all the way to gums that appeared to be rotted. When the hygienist came back in to continue, I asked her where I was located in the series of pictures. She said that my gums were on the road heading toward the set of pictures that depicted the rotted gums. I said, "But my gums feel fine; how can they be diseased, since they do not hurt?" She responded, "That is the genius of gum disease: it does not hurt badly until it is too late." The pictures of the stages of gum disease together with her interpretative commentary shocked me into the reality of my condition. Since then, I have brushed my teeth typically two times a day and flossed every day. By so doing, I was able to halt the onset of imminent gum disease and have been able to maintain healthy gums. Sometimes sin is like gum disease: we may not feel the spiritual hurt until significant harm has happened. We need the parabolic pictures of Revelation to shock us into the reality of our sin and spark us back into a healthy relationship with God.

Therefore, Revelation's symbols either sedate or shock us back into the reality of our relationship with God. The phrase about Israel in unbelief "not hearing" from Isaiah 6:10 and Matthew 13:15 is turned by John positively to "he who has an ear, let him hear," as Ezekiel (see Ezek. 3:27) and Jesus (Matt. 13:9,43) had also done before him. The transformation makes it an address to the faithful who have begun to fall under spiritual anesthesia but nevertheless still have "ears to hear." Those within the covenant community of the Asia Minor churches who never responded to Jesus' exhortation show that they "have no ears" to hear God's exhortation because they do not know the Lord. Such people will suffer the same judgments that John's Revelation depicts happening to the unbelieving world. This is a situation that has been true throughout church history and will continue until our Lord returns.

Will we be sedated or shocked into the reality of what our relationship with God demands in the particular sinful situations in which we find ourselves? If we read Revelation, or any part of God's Word, and we are never moved to change our sinful habit patterns but are sedated or remain insensitive to our sin, then perhaps we may not be Christians at all (and we certainly should not be assured that we are). If so, we need to trust in Christ's redemptive work. Then the Holy Spirit comes in to us, giving us a new heart and eyes to see and ears to hear, and the Spirit gives us a sensitivity to God's Word, and motivates us to respond to it.

Perhaps we are Christians but are not motivated to change certain sinful areas of our lives, even after reading God's Word. I especially encourage all of us in this condition to pray for a desire to change. If we do not have a desire to pray in this manner, then we should read the images in Revelation which may stimulate us to want to please God by revealing to us pictorially the destitute spiritual reality we are in because of being complacent with sin and spiritual mediocrity.

Others in the church may have their ears very attuned to God's voice in Scripture and respond accordingly by both desiring to obey God's Word and by actually obeying it. May such people continue to be given grace to hear God's voice, and to do God's Word.

Revelation promises great blessing to those who hear and obey its message: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Rev. 1:3). May God give us grace, so that if we have ears, we will hear what his symbols are saying to us.

The Purpose of Symbolism in Revelation

Here are two additional quotes on the symbolism in Revelation:

“The symbols have a parabolic function and are intended to encourage and exhort the audience. They portray a transcendent new creation that has penetrated the present old world through the death and resurrection of Christ and the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. John’s vision communicates values that run counter to the values of the old world and provide ‘a structure of meaning that grounds’ the lives of Christians in the new world and spells out the eternal significance and consequences of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection and of the readers’ present choices and behavior. John thus seeks to motivate the readers not to compromise with the world but to align their thoughts and behavior with the God-centered standards of the new creation. They are to see their own situation in this world in the light of the new world, which is now their true home. The literary form of symbolic parable appears whenever ordinary warnings are no longer heeded, and no warning will ever be heeded by those who are spiritually stiff-necked and intent on continuing in disobedience. In the ministries of the OT prophets and of Jesus parables are a sign of judgment and serve to harden the majority of the covenant community, shock the remnant who are genuine saints back into their proper spiritual senses, and jolt a remnant among the majority of unbelievers into truly believing. John’s use of symbolism has the same function.”⁶

“To interpret Revelation we need to engage it as John wrote it—figuratively and symbolically. Recognizing John’s use of symbols and images does not negate the book’s truthfulness—far from it. Instead, Revelation describes reality using word pictures, and so our job as readers is to reorient our imaginations—our beliefs about the world and its powers—through understanding and appropriating John’s vision in our own day.”⁷

⁶ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): 69.

⁷ Matthew Y. Emerson, *Between the Cross and the Throne: The Book of Revelation* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016): 19.