

Revelation - Introduction, Part 7

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COURSE  COMMENTARY 

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Interpreting Symbols

- **Unique Use of Symbols**
The *Book of Revelation* is unique within the New Testament because of its heavy use of symbols. How one interprets these symbols has **tremendous influence** over the meaning one derives from the text.
- **Two Extremes**
 - 1) Suffering from enemies: the existence of these symbols shows that the book cannot be understood as anything other than a description of the general conflict between good and evil.
 - 2) Suffering from friends: symbols are used for unchecked speculation and sensationalism when attempts are made to interpret them in terms of current events.
- **A Denial of Logic**
Some assert that the symbols indicate the book is not subject to the normal rules of logic and language.
- **Motivation for Apocalyptic Genre**
Once the book has been categorized as **apocalyptic** or **apocryphal** in genre, interpretation focuses upon hidden, mysterious, or unstated "secondary meaning" below the text itself.

Importance of Interpretation

- **Hermeneutics**
" The word hermeneutics is ultimately derived from Hermes the Greek god who brought the messages of the gods to the mortals, and was the god of science, invention, eloquence, speech, writing, and art. As a theological discipline hermeneutics is the science of the correct interpretation of the Bible. " -- Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 11.
- **The Second of Three Critical Steps**
 - 1) Observation: examining the text to see what it contains.
 - 2) Interpretation: understanding the meaning of what has been observed.
 - 3) Application: how does the understanding affect me? How does the information apply to my life today?
- **Incorrect Interpretation**
When **interpretation** goes astray, the intended **application** no longer follows! The Word of God cannot change the reader in the way God intended without proper application which depends upon proper interpretation!

'Normal' Interpretation

- **Golden Rule of Interpretation**
"When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise." -- D.L. Cooper cited in J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, 44.
- **The 'Safety Net'**
The "analogy" of Scripture: "Scripture interprets Scripture."
- **Symbolism: License to Break the Rule?**
The "Golden Rule" is often rejected by those who utilize the presence of symbols or the genre of the book to invert normative rules of interpretation.

Why 'Normal' Interpretation?

- **The Sufficiency of Language**
God created language. God created the human brain. God intends language to be sufficient for communication between intelligent beings.
- **The Pattern of Scripture**
This is the pattern demonstrated by the prophets, apostles, and Jesus when they interpret the Scriptures.
- **The Pattern of Past Fulfillment**
Prophecy was fulfilled literally. Unfulfilled prophecy will be too.
- **An Interpretive 'Anchor'**
Once the "Golden Rule" is jettisoned, interpreters drift away upon a "sea of subjectivity."
- **Minimalistic**
Interpretation contributes the thinnest layer on top of the bare text from God: "The best interpretation... is no interpretation..."
- **The Foundation of All Interpretation**
All interpreters use "normal" (also called "literal") interpretation *most* of the time.

What Normal Interpretation is Not

- **Not 'Wooden Literalism'**
"To interpret Scripture literally is not to be committed to a 'wooden literalism,' nor to a 'letterism,' nor to a neglect of the nuances that defy any 'mechanical' understanding of language. Rather, it is to commit oneself to a starting point and that starting point is to understand a document the best one can in the context of the normal, usual, customary, tradition range of designation which includes 'tacit' understanding." -- Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 121.
- **Does not Deny Figures of Speech**
Normal interpretation does not deny typical figures of speech (e.g., simile, metaphor, hyperbole) (see Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 148-161).

Allegorical Interpretation

- **Allegorical Interpretation**
Searching for a hidden or secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of the text. The literal reading is a sort of **code** which needs to be deciphered.
- **Superior Revelation?**
Allegorical interpreters believe they are interpreting on a higher, more "spiritual" plane. Any literal or material aspect is considered inferior.
- **Motivation for Allegorical Interpretation**
Arose from a desire to reconcile Old Testament Scriptures with Greek philosophy.
- **A Convenient Tool**
Provides a convenient way to reinterpret or deny unfavorable teachings found within God's Word. "If you can't dismiss the text, then change its meaning!"

Searching for Meaning

- **Why Can't We Understand?**
Our lack of familiarity with the rest of Scripture, especially the Old Testament.
" The Apocalypticist, however, does not limit himself to O.T. imagery, but has much that is **his own**, or that belongs to the common stock of the later apocalyptic. The Woman with Child ([Rev. 12:1-2](#)) has no parallel in the O.T. " -- Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, cxxviii.
- **Where Should We Look?**
The following three sources are frequently suggested:
 - 1) the Old Testament
 - 2) pagan mythology
 - 3) Jewish apocryphal writings

Old Testament is the Foundation

- **Allusions to Old Testament from Revelation**
Swete identifies 278 references to the Old Testament (out of 404 verses). Fruchtenbaum identifies over 500.

" [Unlike apocalyptic writings] St. John's... symbols are not obscure ravings hatched from a fevered imagination; they are rooted firmly in the Old Testament (and the reason for their seeming obscurity is that very fact: We have trouble understanding them only because we don't know our Bibles). " -- Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 26.
- **The Sufficiency and Primacy of Scripture**
" But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them* , and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. " ([2Ti. 3:14-17](#))

Meaning of Numbers

- **Primary Literal Meaning**
Like elsewhere in Scripture, Numbers in the *Book of Revelation* carry a primary literal meaning.
- **Secondary Symbolic Meaning**
Revelation is unique in the frequency with which it employs numbers which have **additional symbolic meaning**. The symbolic meaning of a number is derived from a study of the use of the number throughout Scripture. The study of these symbolic meanings is known as **Biblical Numerology**.

Symbolic Meaning of Numbers

- **Two: Witness**
Example: the two witnesses of Revelation ([Rev. 11:3, 10](#)).
- **Three: Life, Resurrection, Completeness, the Trinity**
Example: the doxological triad ([Rev. 4:8](#) cf [Isa. 6:3](#)), the "unholy trinity" (the beast from the sea [Rev. 13:1](#), the beast from the earth [Rev. 13:11](#), and the dragon [Rev. 13:4](#)).
- **Four: the Entire World, the Earth**
Example: the four horsemen ([Rev. 6:1-8](#)), the four angels standing on the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds of the earth ([Rev. 7:1](#)).
- **Six: Incompleteness, Man**
Example: the number of the beast ([Rev. 13:18](#)).
- **Seven: Perfection, Completeness**
Too many examples to list!
- **Twelve: Jewish Tribes, Completeness**
Example: the twelve tribes ([Rev. 7:5-8; 14:1](#)), the woman's garland of twelve stars ([Rev. 12:1](#)).

Summary

- **The Importance of Interpretation**
The meaning we derive is dependent upon how we interpret the text.
- **Departure from 'Normal' Interpretation**
Leads inevitably to a wide range of subjective opinion. Confusion and obscurity result. "The Book of Revelation" becomes "The Book of Obscurity."
- **Watch for Interpretive Inconsistency**
Learn to recognize inconsistency in interpretive approach, both in the teaching of others and in your own studies. Understand the difference between non-literal interpretation and the proper and necessary handling of figurative language within the literal framework.

For additional information on this topic, see the [commentary](#).