

VISUAL GUIDE TO THE SYMBOLS OF REVELATION



Revelation is full of strange, complex imagery, but John isn't just being esoteric! Numbers, animals, and other everyday objects take on symbolic value as he tries to express the inexpressible to us.

NUMBERS

Notice how these numbers function like adjectives! Rather than expressing a literal quantity, they point us toward a quality.

144,000

12

is always the number of God's people (a reference to the 12 tribes of Israel).

12

is also the number of the apostles.

1,000

is the number of absolute, complete community.

144,000

is the total when they are multiplied together.

Therefore, when John writes about this number, he is symbolically showing that each and every one of God's people is there. Jewish and Gentile believers are united, and no one is left out.

666

6

is the number of imperfection and false divinity (as opposed to seven, representing fullness and perfection). Repeating something three times is like saying it's the utmost (777 is holy, holy, holy).

666

is thus, the utmost or ultimate imperfection. It is the absolute opposite of God.

CAST OF CHARACTERS



LAMB

This is Jesus! John expects a roaring lion but sees a slain lamb covered in blood, which shows how Jesus subverts our expectations. He claims victory over evil by laying down his life and allowing evil to overcome him.



FOUR HORSEMEN

These represent conquest, war, economic injustice, and death.



WOMAN AND CHILD (CHAPTER 12)

The child represents the Messiah, and the woman might represent Israel or Eve. Either way, the woman and child carry God's purposes for the world.

THE UNHOLY TRINITY



BEAST

Represents nations who become like Babylon when they exalt their own power and economic security as a false god and then demand total allegiance.



“BABYLON THE PROSTITUTE”

Archetype of humanity in rebellion against God. John is also specifically pointing to Rome, which was the newest version of this archetype.



DRAGON

Like the serpent in the garden, this dragon represents the source of evil.

IMPORTANT OBJECTS

Notice that these are not timeless symbols. They are specific to the context of the first-century church's culture, so understanding what they mean for us requires understanding this context first!



LAMPSTANDS

These represent the seven churches. Jesus stands among the seven lampstands (chapter 1), living and dwelling with his people.



SEVEN STARS

The Romans observed seven stars in the sky that never moved (the moon, sun, and planets). They represented control over the cosmos.



DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Roman symbol of authority.



SCROLL

Often used in Rome to designate authority and power. God's scroll represents the Divine authority to guide history to its conclusion.

JUDGMENTS



SEVEN SEALS

Like a newsreel of the tragic events that occur in every age of human history, these show us why we need God to heal and judge the world!



SEVEN TRUMPETS

God calls the people of the earth to wake up and repent, as he did with Pharaoh in the Ten Plagues. In fact, the first five trumpets replay the plagues (see Ex. 7-11).



SEVEN BOWLS

Divine judgments that once again repeat the Exodus plagues. God brings justice and rescues His people from their enslavement to the dark powers of the world.