

Interpreting Symbols

2.7 - Interpreting Symbols

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It is readily apparent that the book of Revelation is unique among New Testament books in its heavy use of symbols. What is not so apparent is how much the approach one takes to understanding the symbols flavors the understanding of the text. Fruchtenbaum has observed the tendency toward two extremes:

The existence of these symbols has led to two extremes. One extreme states that the existence of these symbols shows that this book cannot be understood and must simply be interpreted in terms of a general conflict between good and evil, the good winning out in the end. Beyond this, they say the book is not to be understood in any great detail. This is how the book has suffered from its enemies. In the second extreme, the symbols are used for unchecked speculation, sensationalism, and all kinds of guesswork in trying to interpret these symbols in terms of current events. Such speculation has resulted in farfetched interpretations, and changes are made as current events change. It has also led to date-setting. In this area, the book of Revelation has suffered at the hands of its friends. There is a balance between the two extremes.¹

The schemes which interpreters have proposed in order to try and “understand” the book of Revelation run from one extreme to the other, but most often deny a straight-forward reading in favor of obscure theories involving the symbols it contains:

E. Boring has summarized an approach to interpretation of symbols in the Apocalypse that has come to be widely held. In his view, the symbols are not to be decoded into propositional language that refers to objective realities, but are to be left as nonobjectifying pictorial language that only points to ultimate categories of language. . . . Revelation’s language **does not adhere to the laws of logical propositional language** and is noninferential because John attempts to communicate the reality of God’s transcendent world by words bounded by space and time. [emphasis added]²

One wonders how the book can claim to be revealing information *to show His servants* (Rev. 1:1⁺) if the language failed to “adhere to the laws of logical propositional language and is noninferential”? In this section, we discuss what is perhaps the most important aspect of studying the book of Revelation: *how to read and understand the text*. While this may sound simple, it is amazing how frequently the principles of normative reading and comprehension are jettisoned when expositors come to the book of Revelation.

2.7.1 - The Importance of Meaning

Most interpreters of the book of Revelation admit that they bring with them a certain amount of “interpretive baggage”—biases and pre-understandings which flavor their assessment of the facts of history and the text. These have a huge effect upon the interpretation of the book of Revelation for two primary reasons:

1. The book is often categorized as being written in an apocalyptic literary [genre](#) by design.
2. The book contains numerous symbols.

Once a work is defined to be apocalyptic in genre, the door is opened to a wide array of interpretive treatments as it becomes fashionable to understand the surface-level literary work on the basis of hidden, mysterious, or unstated secondary meaning below the text itself. The inclusion of symbols leads in this direction as various interpreters see license in the symbology for a further separation between the meaning of the text and the *real intent* of the author. The wider the gap which can be asserted between the text itself and the intended meaning of the author, the greater the room for conjecture and supposition by the interpreter. When given free reign with the book of Revelation, the sad result of such license is often the very negation of the stated purpose of the book of Revelation:

The Apocalypse (“unveiling”) has become Apocrypha (“hidden”). This should not be. The book was written to *show* those things which were coming to pass, not to obscure them in a maze of symbolism and dark sayings. Great blessing was promised to all who would read (or even hear) the *words* of the book of this prophecy (Revelation 1:3⁺), but how could anyone be blessed by words he could not even understand?³

Even when the interpreter forgoes a tendency to look for meaning “below” the text, there are still a variety of ways in which meaning can be understood:

Some identify the meaning with the human author’s intention, while others hold that meaning is identical with God’s intention. Still others claim that meaning is as broad as the canonical interpretation of the text. And finally, there are a group of NT scholars who would identify apostolic hermeneutics with first-century Jewish hermeneutics.⁴

Feinberg identifies the following ways to define meaning:

1. The intention of the author.
2. The understanding of the author.
3. The understanding of the readers in the prophet’s day.
4. The significance (application) of the text.
5. The use of the text elsewhere in the [NT](#).

Thus, it becomes vital to spend some time discussing the way in which meaning comes from the text.

2.7.2 - The Art and Science of Interpretation

The practice of interpretation is known as [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.⁵

Bible study consists of three primary steps: *observation*, *interpretation*, and *application*.⁶ After observing the text, interpretation should yield the understanding of God’s Word which He intended resulting in its fruitful application in the life of the reader. If interpretation goes astray, then a proper understanding will not result and the application of God’s message to the life of the reader will not be what God intended. Our position is that the book of Revelation is to be interpreted normally, like any other writing, and especially like the rest of the Scriptures. We part company here from those who seek to classify the book as being representative of the *apocalyptic genre* so they can apply a mystical or spiritual “spin” to the text and make it mean all manner of things. D.L. Cooper gives a reasonable definition of normal interpretation in his ***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.—***The Golden Rule of Interpretation***, D.L. Cooper⁷

The rule includes the important phrase, *studied in the light of related passages*. This is the biblical equivalent of a “safety net.” In the same way that trapeze artists performing on the high-wire are protected by a net below which catches them in the event of a fall, comparing Scripture with Scripture provides a doctrinal “safety net” to keep the interpreter from “falling” into an inconsistent understanding or interpretation. This principle is also known as *the Analogy of Scripture* or *Systematic Theology*: the systematic study of the Scriptures across all the books of the Bible to arrive at a self-consistent understanding of any particular topic. This principle is founded upon the [inerrancy](#) and [inspiration](#) of Scripture. That the inspired books, being ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit (2Pe. 1:19-21), are without error and consistent in their teaching from Genesis 1:1 through Revelation 22:21⁺. When we encounter what *seems* to be an inconsistency (commonly referred to as a “Bible Difficulty”), we must assume that the problem is one of our own understanding and *not* God’s Word. The experienced student of the Word will recognize how frequently what appeared to be contradictory turned out, upon further insight, study, and illumination, to be by design.⁸ Notice that the **Golden Rule** holds that we adhere to the plain sense of Scripture and not seek any other sense *unless* there are good reasons for doing otherwise. These reasons must be found in the immediate context of the passage under study or related passages. It is not sufficient to simply classify the book of Revelation as an apocalypse and therefore *turn the rules of interpretation upside-down* as does this commentator:

A failure to take full account of [the apocalyptic] feature has led to some of the most outlandish teachings on this book by some whose rule of interpretation is “literal, unless absurd.” Though this is a good rule when dealing with literature written in a literal genre, **it is the exact opposite in the case of apocalyptic literature, where symbolism is the rule, and literalism the exception.** [emphasis added]⁹

Notice how this commentator appeals to the *apocalyptic genre* in order to dismiss normative interpretation and to assert that we should *avoid* normative interpretation in favor of pure symbolic conjecture! The easy answer to this proposal is to simply ask,

"Whose symbolic interpretation?" No real answer can be given. This is because there is an infinite variety of interpretations possible when using symbolic conjecture. The result is that no two interpreters hold to the same meaning except in a handful of areas. This fact alone disqualifies a non-literal framework because it has *factually demonstrated* its bankruptcy at conveying a reliable message from God. In effect, it makes the book of Revelation unknowable by man. The recommendation that normalcy be inverted reminds us of our high-school literature class where we read Melville's *Moby Dick* and then spent weeks guessing at obscure, hidden, multiple meanings which the author "might" have intended. It was great fun and students were awarded an "A" for creativity, but I often thought of how Melville would likely turn in his grave if he heard the things he was *supposed* to have communicated! But interpreting God's Holy Word is the antithesis of the high-school literature class, for here *creativity* is awarded a grade of "F!" Why do we insist on normalcy in our interpretation of *all* of Scripture? Couch identifies a number of reasons:

Those who are committed to a *normal* reading of Scripture offer at least three reasons: *First*, the obvious purpose of language is to enable effective communication between intelligent beings. Words have meaning and in their normal usage are intended to be understood. . . . God is the originator of language. When He spoke audibly to man, He expected man to understand Him and respond accordingly. Likewise, when God speaks to man through the inspired writings of His apostles and prophets, He expects man to understand and respond accordingly. . . . A *second* reason for a *normal* reading of Scripture concerns the historical fulfillment of prophecy. All the prophecies of the Old and New Testament that have been fulfilled to date have been fulfilled literally. . . . Thus, . . . all prophecies which are yet to be fulfilled will be fulfilled literally. A *third* reason concerns logic. If an interpreter does not use the normal, customary, literal method of interpreting Scripture, interpretation is given over to the unconstrained imagination and presuppositions of the interpreter.¹⁰

Neglect of this last reason is most evident in the widely-varying imaginative interpretations of the non-literal interpreters. Once the "tether of normative interpretation" is cut, the helium balloon of the interpreter's imagination floats ever further afield from the intended meaning of the text. **This single factor accounts for the majority of nonsense which is offered as commentary on the book of Revelation.** As an example of how quickly those who forsake literal interpretation choose to ignore the pattern of previously-fulfilled literal prophecy, Couch's second reason for normalcy, consider Beale's statement which asserts that the plagues in Revelation are unlikely to be literal like those recorded elsewhere in Scripture:

The parallel with Exodus does not supply unambiguous demonstration in support of a literal fulfillment. All that it shows is that the two descriptions are homologous, that is, that they have an essential relation in some manner. But the nature of that relation needs to be determined. Are they homologous in their physical form and effects, or in theological significance, or both? The images depicted certainly refer to actual events **on the referential level.** . . . In Revelation the fire and hail are to be understood on the symbolic level as representing particular facets of divine judgment that can be drawn out further by thorough **exegesis of the theological meaning of this particular Exodus plague.** [These] **speak of God depriving the ungodly of earthly security.** [emphasis added]¹¹

Beale denies literal fire and hail in the book of Revelation as found elsewhere in Scripture asserting that the reader is to seek for a *theological meaning* beyond the plain text. The fire and hail are themselves no longer important, but the theological meaning *behind* the text is now primary. But *who* determines the meaning behind the text and *how* is it determined? A perusal of the writings of expositors employing this approach readily reveals the enormous subjectivity which enters upon the process of answering these questions to arrive at an interpretation. Another key advantage of normal interpretation is it is *minimal*, contributing the barest interpretive layer over the inspired text from God. "The *best* interpretation of a historical record is *no* interpretation but simply letting the divine Author of the record say what He says and assuming He says what He means."¹² The "thicker" the layer of interpretation required to make sense of the underlying text, the greater the danger that the commentator will wind up adding to or subtracting from the meaning intended by God (Rev. 22:18-19+).¹³ This minimalist interpretation is the way a reader would most likely understand the text when absent from the guidance of an allegorical interpreter.

If one were on a desert island and read Revelation for the first time, how would he normally interpret the book? The answer would be "actual and literal," unless there was an amillennialist and allegorist around to say, "No, no, these events are not real! They have some hidden meaning that no one is sure of, but don't let that bother you!"¹⁴

In opposition to the practice of literal interpretation, some interpreters grossly misrepresent what it means to interpret literally:

Would we understand the Twenty-third Psalm properly if we were to take it "literally"? Would it not, instead, look somewhat silly? In fact, if taken literally, it would not be *true*: for I daresay that the Lord *doesn't* make every Christian to lie down in literal, green pastures.¹⁵

As Ramm explains, literal interpretation is not the ridiculous caricature that the previous commentator attempts to portray it as:

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.^{[16](#)}

Literal interpretation recognizes variations in the style of the text and maintains a consistency of interpretation driven by the text itself, not the predilections of the interpreter:

It is not true that the premillennialists require every single passage to be interpreted literally without exception. They do hold, on the other hand, that if the language is symbolic, it is to be governed by the laws relating to symbols; if figurative, by the laws dealing with figures; if typical, by the laws connected with types; if literal, by the laws of non-figurative speech.^{[17](#)}

All interpreters utilize this normal literal approach *most of the time*. For example, in interpreting John’s words:

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Rev. 1:9^{[18](#)})

There is almost universal agreement that the “island that is called Patmos” is Patmos! And that John is located on that island, and that he is there due to his connection to the Word of God. Where the difference comes in, is that some interpreters *change their interpretive process* when they encounter passages employing symbols, prophecy, or especially controversial doctrine. In these passages, they jettison normal interpretation in favor of conjecture about symbols thereby reducing the text into an allegory concerning spiritual principles. This “dual hermeneutic” is employed much like the gearshift in an automobile. On the major “freeway” of the gospel text, they generally stay in literal gear. But when a prophetic off-ramp or doctrinal mountain looms ahead, they shift into a non-literal gear. This inconsistency leads to all manner of confusion and allows for the most amazing conclusions which are often in *complete contradiction* to the plain meaning of the text! McClain recognizes this “gearshift” between two systems of interpretation:

It should be clear, however, that regardless of the terms chosen to designate the anti-millenarian scheme of prophetic interpretation, it is a combination of two different systems, shifting back and forth between the spiritualizing and literal methods. The hermeneutical plow is pulled by ‘an ox and an ass.’ For this reason, the scheme may be appropriately be called eclectic.^{[18](#)}

Even those who use literal interpretation when viewing [OT](#) passages in the light of the [NT](#) often fall into this inconsistent approach when they come to the book of Revelation:

Two or three generations ago, students of prophecy received incalculable help from the simple discovery that when the Holy Spirit spoke of Judea and Jerusalem in the Old Testament Scriptures He meant Judea and Jerusalem, and not England and London; and that when He mentioned Zion He did not refer to the Church. But strange to say, few, if any of these brethren, have applied the same rule to the Apocalypse. Here they are guilty of doing the very thing for which they condemned their forebears in connection with the Old Testament - they have ‘spiritualised.’ . . . What then? If to regard ‘Jerusalem’ as meaning *Jerusalem* be a test of intelligence in Old Testament prophecy, shall we be counted a heretic if we understand ‘Babylon’ to mean *Babylon*, and not Rome or apostate Christendom?^{[19](#)}

Couch describes the two main approaches to interpretation as they relate to prophecy:

Among evangelicals there are generally two major camps regarding how prophetic passages should be read. Amillennialists will generally allegorize large portions of the prophetic Word, especially passages that speak of the Second Advent of Christ and the establishment of the one thousand year literal Davidic kingdom. In contrast, premillennialists, following the teaching of the early church, treat the Second Coming with the same literal hermeneutic as they would the First Coming of Jesus. They hold that the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, should be understood literally from a normal reading unless typology or poetry is used. And even then, premillennialists believe that “literalness” is implied behind the figure of speech or illustration used.^{[20](#)}

The most serious charge that can be leveled against non-literal interpretation is that of perverting the promises of God. God’s promises, both in the OT and NT, were given to specific recipients using words which they understood in the context in which they lived and in which the promises were given. When a nonliteral view of these passages is adopted, this robs the original recipients of the promises as God gave them:

Adopting a nonliteral view of the Old Testament kingdom prophecies raises some disturbing questions: What did those prophecies mean to those to whom they were addressed? If prophecies seemingly addressed to Israel really apply to the church (which did not exist at that time), did God give revelation that failed to reveal? And if those prophecies were meant to apply symbolically to the church, why were they addressed to Israel? What meaning could such prophecies have in their historical settings? Ironically, many who spiritualize Old Testament prophecies reject the futurist interpretation of Revelation because it allegedly robs the book of its meaning for those to whom it was written. Yet they do the very same thing with the Old Testament kingdom prophecies.^{[21](#)}

God's promises involve both ends of the communication channel: the things God said and *what those who received His promises understood them to mean in the original context*. It is not permissible, after the fact, to make what God said mean something different which would have been entirely foreign to those who originally received His word. Allegorization and spiritualization do just that.

2.7.3 - The Rise of Allegorical Interpretation

Because the book of Revelation is categorized as *apocalyptic* literature and contains numerous symbols, it undergoes a great deal of abuse due to allegorical interpretation. But what exactly is allegorical (also known as *mystical*²²) interpretation and where did it come from? Zuck offers the following description of *allegorization*:

Allegorizing is searching for a hidden or secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of a text. In other words the literal reading is a sort of code, which needs to be deciphered to determine the more significant and hidden meaning. In this approach the literal is superficial, the allegorical is the true meaning.²³

Completely in line with Zuck's description is the following statement by Trench regarding his understanding of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2+):

The dream of an actual material city to be let down bodily from heaven to earth, . . . has been cherished in almost all ages of the Church by some, who have been unable to translate the figurative language of Scripture into those **far more glorious realities** of the heavenly [πολιτεία](#) [politeia], whereof those figures were the vesture and the outward array. [emphasis added]²⁴

Notice how the language of Trench confirms the statement of Zuck: the allegorical meaning represents *far more glorious realities*. The literal text represents figures which are the *vesture* and *outward array*. According to Trench, the true (allegorical) meaning is "clothed" by the representation of the literal text. Presumably, the interpreter must remove this outer garment of literal text to see the deeper and *more glorious* reality beyond.²⁵ Trench doesn't inform us that each interpreter that does so finds a *different* glorious reality!²⁶ Using allegorical interpretation, it is possible to "find" all manner of meanings beyond the plain sense of the text:

To cite a few examples [of allegorical hermeneutics]: The journey of Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran is interpreted as the imaginary trip of a Stoic philosopher who leaves sensual understanding and arrives at the senses. The two pence given by the Good Samaritan to the innkeeper has the hidden meanings of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The river Euphrates means the outflow of manners and is not an actual literal river in Mesopotamia. Pope Gregory the Great's interpretation of the Book of Job is equally disheartening: "The patriarch's three friends denote the heretics; his seven sons are the twelve apostles; his seven thousand sheep are God's faithful people; and his three thousand hump-backed camels are the depraved Gentiles!"²⁷

While it is tempting to chuckle at these examples from early Christianity, what is alarming is how often equally obscure results attend modern interpreters of the book of Revelation. So where did this tendency begin? Evidence is lacking within Scripture that Jesus or the Apostles understood the Old Testament in this way.

The allegorical interpretation of Sacred Scriptures cannot be historically proved to have prevailed among the Jews from the time of exile, or to have been common with the Jews of Palestine at the time of Christ and His apostles. Although the Sanhedrim and the hearers of Jesus often appealed to the Old Testament according to the testimony of the New Testament writers, they give no indication of the allegorical interpretation. Even Josephus has nothing of it.²⁸

The flowering of allegorical interpretation as applied to Scripture can be traced to Jews in Alexandria Egypt who were interested in accommodating the [OT](#) Scriptures to Greek philosophy as a tool for removing or reinterpreting what were considered embarrassing anthropomorphisms and immoralities in the OT.

Two names stand out in Alexandrian Jewish allegorization: Aristobulus and Philo. Aristobulus, who lived around 160 B.C., believed that Greek philosophy borrowed from the Old Testament, and that those teachings could be uncovered only by allegorizing. . . . Philo (ca. 20 B.C. - ca. A.D. 54) . . . sought to defend the Old Testament to the Greeks and, even more so, to fellow Jews. He was led to allegorize the Old Testament, . . . because of his desire to avoid [seeming] contradictions and blasphemies.²⁹

Observe how often Christian aberrations have arisen from a faulty attempt to defend the Scriptures before skeptics. [Preterism](#), and its belief that non-believers reject Scripture because Jesus' prediction to come "soon" was misunderstood, is a recent example. Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155-216) was influenced by Philo and proposed a system of interpretation where any passage of the Bible might have up to five meanings.³⁰ Thereafter, Origen, who studied Platonic philosophy and is thought to have been a pupil of Clement, went so far as to say that Scripture itself demands that the interpreter employ the allegorical method.

Amillennialist Schaff is fair when he describes the great hermeneutical failings of Origen: "His great defect is the neglect of the

grammatical and historical sense and his constant desire to find a hidden mystic meaning. He even goes further in this direction than the Gnostics, who everywhere saw transcendental, unfathomable mysteries."³¹

[Origen] lays down the principle that the true meaning of prophecy is to be found only by going beyond the literal and historical sense to the spiritual; and he says specifically of the Apocalypse that the mysteries **hidden in it** can be understood only in this way. His whole interpretation of the book is therefore spiritual rather than literal. [emphasis added]³²

[Origen's](#) interpretive approach had great influence on those who would follow in the Middle Ages, as did Augustine (354-430) who, like Philo, saw allegorization as a solution to Old Testament problems.³³ The allegorical system of interpretation prevailed throughout most of the Middle Ages:

During the Middle Ages, the fourfold sense of Scripture was taught. Medieval scholars took Origen's threefold sense—the literal, the moral, and the spiritual—and subdivided the spiritual into the allegorical and the anagogical. As schoolman Thomas Aquinas affirmed, 'The literal sense is that which the author intends, but God being the Author, we may expect to find in Scripture a wealth of meaning.' An example of how the fourfold sense was worked out during the Middle Ages is Gen. 1:3, 'Let there be light.' Medieval churchmen interpreted that sentence to mean (1) Historically and literally—An act of creation; (2) Morally—May we be mentally illumined by Christ; (3) Allegorically—Let Christ be love; and (4) Anagogically—May we be led by Christ to glory.³⁴

Although Aquinas endorsed looking beyond the primary meaning of the author, he did recognize some of the dangers of allegorization. "Aquinas put forward a threefold argument against allegory: (1) it is susceptible to deception; (2) without a clear method it leads to confusion; and (3) it lacks a sense of the proper integration of Scripture."³⁵ All three of these significant drawbacks are evident in much interpretation of the book of Revelation today.

Augustine's allegorical interpretation of Bible prophecy dominated the understanding of eschatology during the medieval period. It found acceptance also with the Roman church and among the leaders of the Reformation. Even today, Augustinian eschatology is held by large segments of the Christian church.³⁶

Even the Reformers, who cast off the darkness of Medieval allegorization in so many areas, failed to escape the influence of those who went before them in their understanding of the book of Revelation.³⁷ As we've observed in the origination of this method of interpretation, there was a *motive* for its use. This remains the case today. At times it has simply been unbelief:

As someone has said, "The Book of Revelation isn't hard to understand—it's hard to *believe!*" The main reason why so many have resorted to allegorical interpretations is that they have found the literal meaning of its prophecies difficult to accept, scientifically, and aesthetically, and have tried to "explain" them on some less offensive basis.³⁸

At other times, the motive has been to teach unorthodox doctrines twisted from the proper understanding of the text, something which has been with us all along:

Metaphysical cults, theosophical cults, divine science cults, pantheistic cults all base their interpretation of Holy Scripture on the theory that the meaning of Scripture is plural. The first meaning is the ordinary historical or grammatical one; and the second meaning is the one the cultist brings to Scripture from the particular metaphysical system or religious system he is pushing.³⁹

Even as far back as [Tertullian](#), the dangerous freedom offered by figurative interpretation for manipulating the meaning of the text was recognized. "On the proper method of interpreting prophecy Tertullian stated: 'Now to upset all conceits of this sort, let me dispel at once the preliminary idea on which they [heretics] rest their assertion that the prophets make all their announcements in figures of speech. Now if this were the case, the figures themselves could not possibly have been distinguished, inasmuch as the verities would not have been declared, out of which the figurative language is stretched. And, indeed, if all are figures, where will be that of which they are the figures? How can you hold up a mirror for your face, if the face nowhere exists? But, in truth, all are not figures, but there are also literal statements.' "⁴⁰ As we will see as we progress, allegorical interpretation is frequently used by Christians who hope to avoid the plain implication of the teaching of Scripture. Christian Reconstructionists utilize forms of allegorical interpretation in order to work around passages in the book of Revelation which do not conveniently fit into the newspaper events surrounding the times prior to 70 A.D. Since John's writings clearly indicate a coming time of wrath and judgment upon the earth, their motive is to attempt to remove this reality in favor of a more optimistic future for Christianity:

Reconstructionism's interest in this subject stems from its optimistic outlook regarding Christianity's ability to gain control of secular society. Because Revelation is admittedly pessimistic in this regard, the system's scheme for disposing of this unfavorable evidence is to relegate its fulfillment almost entirely to the past, to a time prior to A.D. 70.⁴¹

Those who stand opposed to God's promises made to the Jewish nation find the plain sense of Revelation 20± much to their disliking as it suggests the fulfillment of the Messianic Kingdom prophecies scattered throughout the OT. Again, allegorical

interpretation provides the “solution” in that the thousand years (Rev. 20:4⁺) becomes an indefinite period and the physical rule and reign with Christ represents the current spiritual standing of the believer. Never mind that interpreting the first resurrection (Rev. 20:4-5⁺) as being *spiritual* and the second (Rev. 20:12⁺) as *literal* runs rough-shod over the rules of sound [hermeneutics](#). The net result of allegorical interpretation is to place a veil of darkness over God’s divine Word. It takes that which God has graciously revealed to the saints and subjects it to the dark vagaries of human imagination and speculation. The result is predictable. Those who major in it remain as much in the dark regarding the Second Coming of Jesus as many Jews were in relation to His predicted suffering at the First Coming.⁴² Concerning the inconsistency of the allegorical method and the damage which results, Seiss notes:

Good and able men have satisfied themselves with it; but, on the same principles of interpretation, there is not a chapter in the Bible, nor a doctrine of our holy religion, which could not be totally explained away. By a happy inconsistency do they not so treat other portions of Scripture, or they would transmute the whole Revelation of God into uncertainty and emptiness.⁴³

Having examined a long list of these symbolic and allegorical interpretations, and followed the processes by which their authors have tried to apply them, I have not found one which does not completely break down under the weight of its own cumbrous unfitness. They each and all fail to explain the facts and relations of the record, and treat John as a half-demented sentimental old man, trying to make a grand poem out of a few dim anticipations touching the earthly fortunes of the Church, which could have been better told in one well-written chapter. They are, at best, the wild guesses of men who have never got hold of the real thread of the matter, whilst under the necessity of saying something.⁴⁴

2.7.4 - Understanding Symbols and Figures

Having discussed the prevalence and dangers of allegorical interpretation, we now discuss how to understand the many symbols and figures found throughout the book of Revelation. This is the area where many commentators, in our view, take a wrong turn. They utilize the symbolic content of the book as license to depart from normative interpretation which then fuels their departure from the plain meaning of the text. As we previously mentioned, one way in which this is done is by using the symbolic imagery within the book to cast it into the *apocalyptic genre*, similar to many uninspired (and fraudulent) writings which contain similar literary devices. Once this is done, interpreters such as [Gregg](#) can attempt to turn [hermeneutics](#) on its head. Another approach, perhaps best illustrated by Beale, is to see in the symbols a sort of encoding in which the truth of God’s message is veiled in symbols for transport across the page. The use of symbols becomes an “obvious” indication that non-literal interpretation is *intended*. Beale uses one of *several* possible meanings of a single Greek word to justify hundreds of pages of non-literal exposition:

[Σημαίνω](#) [Sēmainō] [“signified,” Rev. 1:1⁺] can overlap with the more general and abstract idea of “make known” in the sense of “indicate,” “declare,” “be manifest.” But its more concrete and at least equally common sense is “show by a sign,” “give (or make) signs (or signals),” or “signify” . . . [σημαίνω](#) [sēmainō] typically has the idea of symbolic communication when it is not used in the general sense of “make known.” . . . Of its five other NT occurrences, two have the sense of “make known” (Acts 11:28; 25:27), . . . three others are in John’s Gospel where it summarizes Jesus’ pictorial description of crucifixion (John 12:33; 18:32; 21:19). . . . The symbolic use of [σημαίνω](#) [sēmainō] in Daniel 2 defines the use in Rev. 1:1⁺ as referring to symbolic communication and not mere general conveyance of information . . . [indicating] that a symbolic vision and its interpretation is going to be part of the warp and woof of the means of communication throughout Revelation. . . . Some commentators contend that since Revelation sometimes explicitly explains the meaning of an image in a vision there is a “presumption that, where expressions are not explained, they can normally be interpreted according to their natural [i.e., literal] meaning, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise”. . . . But the results of the analysis of Rev. 1:1⁺ indicated that **this rule should be turned on its head: we are told in the book’s introduction that the majority of the material in it is revelatory symbolism . . . Hence, the predominant manner by which to approach the material will be according to a non-literal interpretive method.** [emphasis added]⁴⁵

Elsewhere Beale states:

As we have seen, Rev. 1:1⁺ programmatically introduces the pictorial visions of the book as **having a symbolic meaning without any one-to-one relation to literal historical events.** [emphasis added]⁴⁶

Having conveniently dispatched normative hermeneutics, Beale fails to offer anything substantive in its place. As with all interpretations which major on “symbolic meanings,” the meaning is to be found in *the interpreter’s own ideas*. Contrary to Beale’s assertion that the symbols are “without any one-to-one relation to literal historical events,” Osborne follows most literal interpreters in recognizing the symbols as *representing* literal events and personas.⁴⁷ As Thomas observes, Beale has made the mistake of confusing the way in which the revelation was made (via symbols) with how it should be interpreted by those who follow:

The verb [σημαίνει](#) [esēmanen] (“he signified”) in Rev. 1:1⁺ furnishes an advance notice of the symbolic nature of God’s communication with John. This has nothing to do with how the resultant communication should be interpreted, . . . [interpreters] fail to distinguish between the process of revelation and that of interpretation.⁴⁸

It is also frequently the case that commentators attempt to utilize the appearance of one symbol as license to treat the entire passage in a symbolic way.⁴⁹ But each symbol must be treated individually as there are numerous cases where symbols are embedded among non-symbolic vision.

Once a prophecy is found to contain symbols, interpreters often succumb to the temptation of treating everything else in that prophecy as symbolic. . . . The presence of symbols in a prophecy, however, does not indicate that everything else in that prophecy is symbolical. The designation of symbols must be on an individual basis. Each symbol must be carefully examined, weighed, and adequately supported by strong evidence before a symbolical designation is made. Symbols are not cheaper by the dozen.⁵⁰

Symbols are frequently employed in the book of Revelation within similes where resemblance is emphasized.⁵¹

Revelation is interpreted from a *literal* base, taking into account *comparative language* that points to a literal ultimate meaning. Two words indicate that comparative language is being used: [ἥσ](#) [hōs] and [ὅμοιος](#) [homoios]. Hos and words related to it are used sixty-eight times in Revelation and approximately 416 elsewhere in the New Testament. Homoios is used twenty-two times in Revelation and about twenty-six times in the rest of the New Testament. Both words are used for comparison and should be translated "Like, as, like as, it seemed to be, something like, etc." [Often, hos] indicates John is comparing what he sees (something beyond his own experience or comprehension) to the closest known object with which he is familiar. . . . John uses comparative language to describe a literal event, not a symbolic or even figurative event, and certainly not an allegorical event.⁵²

Symbols employed within simile have several advantages over other literary forms of communication. A simile can carry *richness of communication* which a simple non-symbolic statement cannot (e.g., the description of the [Beast](#) in Rev. 13:2⁺). Simile is also used when that which is being described exceeds the experience of the writer and the symbol is the best analogy at hand for the writer to convey the *sense* of what he is seeing (e.g., the description of the demonic locusts in Rev. 9:7-10⁺). The utilization of simile *is not license for interpreting the comparisons within the text as some form of purely symbolic communication*. As for determining whether a literal object or figurative symbol is involved, we note several guidelines:

First, the interpreter should accept as symbols that which is so designated in the context or seen under the harmony of prophecy. . . . *Second*, the interpreter should accept as symbols those elements that are truly impossible in the realm of reality, taking care to note that eschatological times are real times. . . . [But the] prophetic Scriptures contain many descriptions of the future that are possible or plausible. In such instances, the interpreter should not assign these to the realm of symbolism.⁵³

To these we may add a third from Tan:

The determination of what is figurative and what nonfigurative in prophecy is a question centuries old. From Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* to the present, interpreters have attempted to give different rules and guidelines. . . . the key to determining the figurative from the nonfigurative lies in ascertaining whether a given word or act is at variance with the essential nature of the subject being discussed. If a word or act, taken in the literal sense, fails to harmonize with either the flow of thought in the text or context, or with the analogy of Scripture, it is to be understood as figurative. Otherwise, it is nonfigurative.⁵⁴

As an example, Tan's guideline can be applied productively in the case of the binding of Satan:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is *the* Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-2⁺)

To answer the question whether the chain is literal, one need only observe that Satan is spirit and cannot be bound by material objects. Therefore, the chain is *figurative* of the bondage under which Satan will be placed. Learning to identify which aspects of a passage are figurative and which are literal is essential for correct interpretation:

Some seem to believe that if *anything* in a given passage is symbolic, then *everything* must be symbolic In contrast, the approach recommended here can be illustrated by considering the statement, "It was raining cats and dogs outside." . . . The key to a correct interpretation is (a) to recognize that there can be both literal and figurative elements in the same text and (b) to seek to discern which aspects of the text fall into which category. In this illustration, for example, "It was raining . . . outside" should be taken *literally*, and the "cats and dogs" should be taken *figuratively*. Both the literal and the figurative function together to communicate that it was raining very hard.⁵⁵

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of determining whether a passage conveys figurative or literal events is found in the fact that prophetic content can span periods of time far beyond the time when the vision was first given. Thus, things which seemed clearly to be figurative at the time of writing due to their impossibility (e.g., the two hundred million horsemen in Rev. 9:16⁺; the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations viewing the dead bodies of the two witnesses in Rev. 11:9⁺) later become literally possible (e.g., a large world population; the advent of worldwide broadcasting). Writing almost one-half century ago, Tenney observed:

The object like a burning mountain cast into the sea (Rev. 8:8⁺), the opening of the bottomless pit (Rev. 9:2⁺), and many other episodes must be interpreted symbolically if they are to be taken as applying to current or to past history. If they are yet to come, they may be a more accurate description of actual phenomena than most expositors have realized, for the physical and psychical researches of recent years have opened to the mind of man worlds that in John's time were completely unknown. The atom bomb, guided missiles, and the scientific devices of modern warfare have made the Apocalypse seem much less apocalyptic [dramatic hyperbole] than it did fifty years ago.⁵⁶

The fact that Revelation 19⁺ sets forth the Second Coming of Christ which has obviously not yet occurred renders unlikely the stance of Osborne and others who hold that all the symbols found in the book were understood by the original readers:

We no longer need to guess what modern events may be prophesied, for every symbol was understandable to the first-century readers. . . . we seek . . . the background knowledge from the first century to unlock the tensive symbols and to see what the original readers would have understood when they read them. This is not a perfect science, of course, and **scholars debate the background behind each symbol**. [emphasis added]⁵⁷

Since some of the symbols relate events which have not yet been fulfilled, we cannot simply assert they were all understood by the original readers. For one thing, it is highly unlikely that the original readers had access to the entire corpus which came to be recognized as the [canon](#) of Scripture, thereby lacking perhaps the most important key to understanding some of the symbols in the book of Revelation: the comparison of related passages (analogy) of Scripture. (See our discussion on the [audience and purpose](#) of the book for more on this.) The insistence that all symbols were understood by the readers of John's day ignores the reality that not even John understood everything which he saw (Rev. 7:13-14⁺). It is important to notice that John is told to write, "what you see" (Rev. 1:11⁺) rather than what he *understood*. In other words, John was to record his *immediate* experiences and visions. He was not given the vision and then told to cogitate over it for a period of time to eventually produce a literary masterpiece in the apocalyptic genre perfectly understandable to first century readers! Fortunately, many of the symbols are explained in their immediate context. And we are also blessed with the entire corpus of [inspired](#) Scripture which we can apply to gain an understanding of what John relates.⁵⁸ It is worth mentioning another aspect of symbols in prophetic Scripture: the tendency of literal interpreters to render symbolic descriptions by way of literal drawings. While these may be interesting or even provocative, it is generally a disservice to the prophetic text to utilize the symbols in such a way. Trench observes the priority of symbolism within the Jewish tradition as being that of conveying truth rather than rendering form:

This description of the glorified Lord (Rev. 1:16⁺), . . . may suggest a few reflections on the apocalyptic, and generally the Hebrew symbolism, and on the very significant relations of difference and opposition in which it stands to the Greek. Religion and Art for the Greek ran into one another with no very signal preponderance of the claims of the former over the latter. Even in his religious symbolism the sense of beauty, of form, of proportion, overrules every other, and must at all costs find its satisfaction; so that the first necessity of the symbol is that it shall not affront, that it shall satisfy rather, the aesthetic sense. . . . But with the Hebrew symbolism it is altogether different. The first necessity there is that the symbol should set forth truly and fully the religious idea of which it is intended to be the vehicle. How it would appear when it clothed itself in an outward form and shape, whether it would find favour. . . as satisfying the conditions of beauty, this was quite a secondary consideration; may be confidently affirmed not to have been a consideration at all; . . . but rather that it should remain ever and only a purely mental conception, the unembodied sign of an idea;—I may observe, by the way, that no skill of delineation can make the Cherubim themselves other than unsightly objects to the eye.⁵⁹

The results of such renderings are often held up to ridicule as the result of the literal method of interpretation. But this misunderstands the purpose of such symbols as being primarily art form rather than representative of characteristics which are not as easily conveyed textually. All the more so when such figures are described by simile providing a definite clue that the image conveyed by the text is only an approximation of the reality being described.

2.7.5 - Understanding Numbers

We find numbers employed throughout Scripture, but perhaps no more densely packed than in the book of Revelation. Two opposite errors are often encountered when dealing with numbers in Scripture: (1) numbers are interpreted symbolically to derive fanciful teachings; (2) numbers are treated strictly literally and their symbolic significance is denied. We hope to avoid both of these extremes in our approach to the book.

2.7.5.1 - The Abuse of Numbers

Concerning the abuse of biblical numerology,⁶⁰ Trench has well observed:

In all speculations upon numbers we may very profitably lay to heart the wise caution of Fuller, [*A Pisgah Sight of Palestine*, b. iii. c.

6.] . . . “For matter of numbers fancy is never at a loss. . . . But such as in expounding of Scripture reap more than God did sow there, never eat what they reap thence, because such grainless husks, when seriously threshed out, vanish all into chaff.”⁶¹

This caution applies not only to numbers, but to the interpretation of symbols and typology. In the case of numerology, symbols, and typology, God undeniably conveys *more* than the surface text itself suggests, *the problem is in determining how valid* are the additional insights one may gain. As soon as the meaning attributed to a number, symbol, or type is carried beyond what God intended to convey, then we are eating Fuller’s “grainless husks.” So due caution must be exercised, especially by teachers.⁶² Beale provides us with illustrations of the most common abuse of numbers: a denial of any literal value and substituting a figurative meaning in its place:

The seven kings [of Rev. 17:10⁺] are not to be identified with any specific historical rulers but represent rather the oppressive power of world government throughout the ages, which arrogates to itself divine prerogatives and persecutes God’s people.⁶³

The name “Christ” appears seven times and the name “Jesus” fourteen times. “The Lamb” is used of Christ twenty-eight times, seven bringing the Lamb and God together. The 7 x 4 appearances of this title underscore the universal scope of the Lamb’s complete victory. . . . Twelve is the number of God’s people, which is squared to indicate completeness and multiplied by one thousand to connote vastness. [Rev. 7:4⁺; 14:1⁺]⁶⁴

Notice how Beale puts his interpreter’s “spin” on the numbers in order to deny their literalness with phrases like *to indicate* and *to connote*. Some interpreters seem to despair of dealing with the numbers in the book of Revelation in any sort of literal way. This can be carried to such an extreme as to totally deny any literal meaning while *failing to provide a figurative understanding in its place*.⁶⁵ Here we meet with both confusion (we can’t know what the numbers mean) and [anti-supernaturalism](#) (we can’t know the *writer’s intention*—never mind that he was told simply to record what he was shown). When it comes to numbers and their meaning in the book of Revelation, it is not uncommon for interpreters to ask the reader to exchange his gold (the number’s literal meaning) for fool’s gold (a fanciful, vague interpretation, or perhaps no interpretation at all). It may be valid in some cases to understand an additional well-recognized figurative meaning connoted by a number, but this should not be done *in lieu of its literal value*. There were, after all, twelve *actual* sons of Israel (Gen. 35:22-26) and Jesus ministered to twelve *actual* disciples (Mat. 10:2-5).

2.7.5.2 - Literal Understanding of Numbers

In studying the book of Revelation, one is immediately struck by the prevailing bias of many commentators *against* understanding numbers in their normative, literal way. For example, the length of half of Daniel’s seventieth week is described in a number of related passages (Dan. 7:25; Dan. 9:27; 12:7; Rev. 11:2-3⁺; 12:6⁺, 14⁺; 13:5⁺). This obvious strong witness to understanding this period in a literal way is simply set aside for another meaning:

We cannot insist on a literal meaning for the three and a half years of the tribulation period or the thousand years of the millennium. They could be literal, but the numbers function symbolically in the book and probably signify a lengthy period of time that is under God’s control.⁶⁶

We are being asked to trade gold for fool’s gold! Rather than understand three and a half as denoting a specific period of time specified by God,⁶⁷ we are asked to accept the alternate meaning which our interpreter says is *probably* correct! There is a strong bias against literal understanding of numbers in the book of Revelation. Even when the text seems quite explicit as to the identification of what is being described, commentators refuse to take the text at face value:

Let us consider the meaning of numbers in the book. . . . While some (Seiss, Walvoord, Thomas) tend to consider them literally, they are forced to some **creative interpretations**, for example, regarding the 144,000 who are sealed in Rev. 7:4-8⁺. Walvoord . . . believes this means that 12,000 sealed in each tribe are those selected to be God’s special witnesses through the tribulation period, but it seems more likely that the numbers in the book are meant symbolically **as was common in ancient apocalypses**. [emphasis added]⁶⁸

Notice how those who adhere to a literal interpretation and who arrive at a uniform understanding are said to be employing “creative interpretations.” That the exact opposite is the case can be easily demonstrated by noting the wide variation in interpretation among the commentators who take the 144,000 Jews as being non-Jews. Here again we see an appeal to the literary [genre](#) including a host of non-[canonical](#) writings to undermine the straightforward text. We are told that we should not understand the 144,000 Jews to be 144,000 individuals nor Jews, because this book is to be read like any other “ancient apocalypse” where symbols serve as the vehicle for communicating inspirational musings and obscure political inferences. Never mind that the text goes to great lengths to make sure we know these are Jews (each of the twelve tribes is individually listed) and their appearance at this point in the events of the book of Revelation is in perfect accord with the doctrine of the believing Jewish remnant which runs throughout Scripture (1K. 19:18; 2K. 19:4, 30; 21:14; 25:22; Isa. 1:9; 6:13; 7:3; 10:20-22; 28:5; 37:4, 31-32; 46:3; 59:21; 65:8; Jer 5:10; 5:18; 23:3; 50:20; Eze.

5:3; 6:8-10; 9:8, 11; Eze. 11:13; Joel 2:32; Mic. 2:12; 7:18; Zec. 11:10; 13:8-9; Rom. 9:6, 27; Rom. 11:5, 17, 25; Gal. 6:16; 1Pe. 1:1; Rev. 12:17⁶⁹. We believe the correct view on the interpretation of numbers within the book of Revelation is to understand them in their primary, literal sense, but to also recognize biblical numerology where certain numbers appear with special emphasis throughout Scripture and carry additional meaning beyond the bare facts they record:

The fact is that no number in Revelation is verifiably a symbolic number. On the other hand, the nonsymbolic usage of numbers is the rule. It requires multiplication of a literal 12,000 by a literal twelve to come up with 144,000 in Rev. 7:4-8⁷⁰. The churches, seals, trumpets, and bowls are all literally seven in number. The three unclean spirits of Rev. 16:13⁷¹ are actually three in number. The three angels connected with the last three woes (Rev. 8:13⁷²) add up to a total of three. The seven last plagues amount to exactly seven. The equivalency of 1,260 days and three and a half years necessitate a nonsymbolic understanding of both numbers. The twelve apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel are literally twelve (Rev. 21:12-14⁷³). The seven churches are seven literal cities. Yet confirmation of a single number in Revelation as symbolic is impossible.⁷⁰

Numbers may be understood literally, but even when understood in this way, they often carry with them also a symbolical meaning. Hence the number seven, . . . refers to seven literal churches . . . Yet by the very use of this number (which speaks of completion or perfection) the concept is conveyed that these were representative churches which in some sense were complete in their description of the normal needs of the church.⁷¹

For example, we understand that God completed His creation within a literal six-day period and rested on the seventh (Gen. 2:1; Ex. 20:11; 31:17). We also understand that He did this *by design* as a pattern to establish the working week for man (Ex. 20:9; 23:12; 31:15; etc.). The number has a two-fold significance. *First*, it has a literal meaning: the creation spanned six 24-hour days. *Second*, it has a symbolical meaning: the number seven carries the meaning of rest or completion. To deny the primary literal meaning in order to major on the secondary symbolism would be an error. So too would be an interpretation which denies the secondary symbolism. When we interpret numbers primarily in their literal sense, we are in the company of the earliest interpreters to whom the Scriptures were entrusted: the Jews. Prior to the [rise of allegorical interpretation](#), the rabbis understood the Scriptures in the same way as literal interpreters today. For example, the last 'seven' of Daniel's seventy sevens (Dan. 9:24-27) are understood as a literal period of seven years.⁷² When we read the book of Revelation, we do not enter some strange *Alice in Wonderland* world where normative communication is set aside in favor of speculation. Those commentators who do so would never dream of applying similar methods of interpretation to other passages of Scripture. In the gospels they understand twelve apostles as twelve apostles, three days as three days, and so on. The existence of symbols and categorization of writing as *apocalyptic genre* are not license for jettisoning the primary literal meaning of numbers.

2.7.5.3 - The Symbolic Meaning of Numbers

Having established the primacy of understanding numbers in their literal sense, we must also recognize biblical numerology: the study of the use of numbers throughout Scripture to convey meaning beyond the literal value. This is a large subject which we cannot treat with much depth other than to describe the symbolism conveyed by some of the most frequently found numbers in the book of Revelation. Even though many numbers clearly have an associated symbolism found in their pattern of usage throughout Scripture, not every occurrence of a given number necessarily carries the symbolic value.

2.7.5.3.1 - Two: Witness

The number two appears in the book of Revelation in association with the two witnesses (Rev. 11:3⁷⁴, 10⁷⁵) who are the "two olive trees and two lampstands standing before the God of the earth" (Rev. 11:4⁷⁶). These witnesses ([μαρτυροῖν](#) [matysin] from [μάρτυς](#) [martyr] from which we derive *martyr*), furnish a testimony ([μαρτυρίαν](#) [martyrian]) of the power and judgment of God to a rejecting world. They serve as witnesses both before and after their death: by the miraculous powers which God grants them while living (Rev. 11:5-6⁷⁷) and by their subsequent resurrection which causes great fear to fall on those who see them rise (Rev. 11:11⁷⁸). The basis for two as the number of witness is found in the Law of Moses which prescribes that judgments be made on the basis of at least two witnesses (Num. 35:30; Deu. 17:6; 19:5; 1K. 21:10 cf. Mat. 18:16; 2Cor. 13:1). God, Who can swear by no other, frequently employs the two witnesses of 'heaven and earth' to underscore His promises (Deu. 4:26; 30:19; Ps. 50:4; Isa. 1:2) as did Moses (Deu. 31:28; 32:1).⁷³ The two-fold use of God's created order as a witness is found within a frequently misunderstood passage in the book of Revelation where a sign consisting of "a woman clothed with the **sun**, with the **moon** under her feet" [emphasis added] (Rev. 12:1⁷⁹) appears. Here, the ordinances of the *sun* and *moon* serve as witnesses to the promises which God makes elsewhere to this woman: that the *nation of Israel* (Jer. 31:35-36) and the *Davidic throne* (Ps. 89:35-37; Jer. 33:20-22) will never cease to exist before Him. Throughout the New Testament, reference is made to "the law and the prophets" as the two-fold witness against those who reject God (Mat. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:44; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom. 3:21). For example, Paul states: "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, **being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets**" [emphasis added] (Rom. 3:21). The importance of this witness is emphasized in Jesus' teaching concerning the richman and

Lazarus in Luke 16. When the rich man, tormented in *hades*, appealed to Abraham to warn his five brothers to avoid his fate, Abraham responds:

Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' (Luke 16:29-31)

It is no accident that it is Moses (representing the law) and Elijah (representing the prophets) who appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mat. 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:30). Many have noted the similarity between the miraculous activities of the two witnesses of Revelation 11⁺ and those of Moses and Elijah recorded in the Old Testament. Regardless of the actual identity of the two Revelation witnesses (see commentary on Rev. 11:3-13⁺), the similarity of their ministry to that of Moses and Elijah seems intended to underscore their role as witnesses to *the law* and *the prophets*. Within the "unholy trinity" of the [Beast](#), the [False Prophet](#), and Satan, it is significant that there are *two* human personages: the *two beasts* which rise from the sea and the earth, respectively (Rev. 13:1⁺, 11⁺). These two men stand as witnesses to the depravity of man, as empowered by Satan. Both are *beasts*, both *rise* from distinct human populations (the sea being a reference to *Gentile* nations and the earth a possible reference to the *Jewish* nation). The second beast has *two horns* which may emphasize his special role as a *witness to the first beast*, to whom he directs the attention and worship of those who dwell upon the earth.

2.7.5.3.2 - Three: Life, Resurrection, Completeness, the Trinity

The number three appears in the book of Revelation in association with the doxological triad (Rev. 4:8⁺; cf. Isa. 6:3), the amount of grain sold for a set price during famine conditions (Rev. 6:6⁺), the remaining trumpet judgments to be sounded (Rev. 8:13⁺), the number of plagues by which a third of mankind is killed (Rev. 9:18⁺), the amount of time during which the two witnesses lie dead before their resurrection (Rev. 11:9⁺, 11⁺), the number of demonic spirits associated with the "unholy trinity" (Rev. 16:13⁺),⁷⁴ the division of Jerusalem by the great earthquake (Rev. 16:19⁺), and the number of gates on each side of the wall of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:13⁺). In association with the number three, we observe that in the six days of creation, God pronounces the work of each day as "good" with the exception of day two (Gen. 1:6-8). It appears that the pronouncement expected for day two is held until the third day. Thus, the third day is pronounced "good" twice (Gen. 1:10, 12). Some have called the third day, the "day of double blessing." It appears that our attention is drawn to the third day and it is pronounced as "doubly" good because the third day is the day on which *life* first appears.⁷⁵ Not only does life first appear on day three of creation week, but Jesus is raised on the third day.⁷⁶ The raising of the two witnesses on the *third* day (Rev. 11:11⁺) correlates with this association of life or resurrection with day three. Yet in the book of Revelation, the majority of the appearances of three seem to connote completeness, much like the way leaven (sin) works its way *completely* through the *three* measures of meal (Mat. 13:33; Luke 13:21).⁷⁷ This would seem to be the case in Revelation 8:13⁺ where the final three woes are set apart as being of special significance. Here again, three denoting completeness or thoroughness.⁷⁸ The complete eternity of God is expressed as the One "who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1:8⁺), indicating His complete oversight of events within the domain of time. Another significant use of three is in reference to the Trinity (Rev. 16:13⁺). For example, the threefold repetition of "Holy" in Revelation 4:8⁺ may refer to each of the persons of the Trinity (or as some have observed, merely be a Semitic artifact—a triplet denoting *intensity*, cf. Eze. 21:27; Jer. 22:29).⁷⁹ The thrice repetition of six as the number of the [Beast](#) (Rev. 13:18⁺) signifies the mimic of the true Trinity by the "unholy trinity" consisting of the beast from the sea (Rev. 13:1⁺), beast from the earth (Rev. 13:11⁺), and Satan (the dragon, Rev. 13:4⁺). Three unclean spirits like frogs come out of this unholy trinity and perform signs to gather the kings of the earth and all the world to do battle against God (Rev. 16:13-14⁺). Here there seems to be a reference to completeness as well as triunity—they lead the *entire world* in opposing God.⁸⁰

2.7.5.3.3 - Four: the Entire World, the Earth

The number four appears in the book of Revelation in association with the living creatures (Rev. 4:6⁺, 8⁺; 5:6⁺, 8⁺; 6:1⁺, 8⁺; 14:3⁺; 15:7⁺; 19:4⁺), the four horsemen of the first seven seals (Rev. 6:1-8⁺), the four angels (Rev. 7:1-2⁺) standing on the four corners of the earth (Rev. 7:1⁺) holding back the four winds of the earth (Rev. 7:1⁺), the four horns of the altar (Rev. 9:13⁺), the four angels bound at the great river Euphrates (Rev. 9:14⁺) who are released to kill a third of all mankind, and the four corners of the earth to which Satan travels to gather the final battle (Rev. 20:8⁺). The symbolic meaning of the number four in the book of Revelation seems clear: it is the signature of the world or of global effect.⁸¹

Four . . . is the signature of the world Four is stamped every where on this the organized world. Thus, not to speak of the four elements, the four seasons, neither of which are recognized in Scripture, we have the four winds (Eze. 37:9; Mat. 24:31; Rev. 7:1⁺); the four corners of the earth (Rev. 7:1⁺; 20:8⁺); the four living creatures, emblems of all creaturely life (Rev. 4:6⁺), and each of these with four faces and four wings (Eze. 1:5-6); the four beasts coming up from the sea, and representing the four great world-empires which in the providence of God should succeed one another (Dan. 7:3); the four metals composing the image which sets forth the

same phases of empire (Dan. 2:32-33); the four Gospels, or the four-sided Gospel, in sign of its designation for all the world; the sheet tied at the four corners (Acts 10:11; 11:5); the four horns, the sum total of the forces of the world as arrayed against the Church (Zec. 1:18); the enumeration, wherever this is wished to be exhaustive of the inhabitants of the world by four, kindreds, tongues, peoples, and nations (Rev. 5:9⁺ cf. 7:9⁺; 10:11⁺; 11:9⁺; 14:6⁺; 17:15⁺). For other significant enumerations by four, see Eze. 14:21; John 5:3; Rev. 6:8⁺.⁸²

The first four of the seven seals, the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” (Rev. 6:1-8⁺), are each represented by a rider on a horse whose action has *worldwide* effects. The worldwide or global connotation of the number four derives from the directions of the compass (North, South, East, West, cf. Eze. 7:2) and may be why there are four living creatures which are *around* the throne (Rev. 4:6⁺) surrounding it in all four primary directions. This same directional emphasis is seen in the camp of Israel which camped around the [tabernacle](#) in the wilderness in these four primary directions (Num. 2:1-34; 23:10). This same arrangement is reflected in the tribal names associated with the twelve gates surrounding the New Jerusalem: 3 tribal names written on the gates in each of the four directions (Rev. 21:13⁺). The living creatures seen by John bear a striking resemblance to Ezekiel’s cherubim⁸³ (Eze. 1:10; 10:14) which appear to support the “chariot throne” of God as it travels in *any direction* (Eze. 1:12; 10:16-17), yet with notable differences. Each of Ezekiel’s cherubim have *four* faces (a cherub or ox, a man, a lion, and an eagle) whereas John’s *four* living creatures each have a different face (a calf, a man, a lion, and an eagle). See [Four Gospels](#). The global emphasis of the number four is also seen in the *four* angels which kill a third of *all mankind*.⁸⁴

2.7.5.3.4 - Five: Provision, Fullness, Grace

The number five appears in the book of Revelation in association with the time period (five months) during which the locusts torment those men without the seal of the living God (Rev. 9:5⁺, 10⁺) and as the number of kings which have fallen when John is shown the mystery of Babylon (Rev. 17:10⁺). Although perhaps more subtle than other biblical numerology, five appears to be associated with the idea of provision, fullness, or grace. The waters of the flood were on the earth *five* months (150 days) before they subsided (Gen. 7:24). In the reunion of Joseph with his brothers, Benjamin’s serving was *five* times that of the other brothers (Gen. 43:34). Benjamin was given *five* changes of garments (Gen. 45:22) whereas his brothers were only given one. When *five* of Joseph’s brothers are presented before Pharaoh, it is to obtain the best land for their flocks (Gen. 47:2-6). David selected *five* stones with which to slay Goliath (1S. 17:40).⁸⁵ When David lacked provisions, he requested *five* loaves of bread (1S. 21:3). Jesus fed the multitudes using *five* loaves of bread (Mat. 24:17; Mark 6:38; 8:19; Luke 9:13; John 6:9). See also [Bullinger, [Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance](#), 135-149]. From these examples we conclude that those upon whom the locusts are unleashed for *five months* (Rev. 9:5⁺, 10⁺) receive the full provision of torment which God has in store for them.

2.7.5.3.5 - Six: Man’s Incompleteness, Human Will

The number six appears in the book of Revelation in association with the six wings of the living creatures (Rev. 4:8⁺)⁸⁶ and the number of the [Beast](#) (666, Rev. 13:18⁺). Since man was created on the sixth day (Gen. 1:26-27), six is considered to be the ‘number of man.’ The repetition of the number thrice in association with the number of the Beast is understood to denote the ‘trinity of man’ or ‘satanic trinity’ (Satan, the Beast, and the false prophet). “Six is the number of man, who was created on the sixth day. In Revelation 13:18⁺ it represents the number of the ultimate man, the Antichrist: 666.”⁸⁷ The number six seems to denote specifically the will and independence of man (i.e., sin) as evidenced by the mention of the number of fingers and toes of men who were notably powerful in their defiance of God (2S. 21:20; 1Chr. 20:6).⁸⁸ Six also denotes incompleteness, being one less than seven, the number of completeness or perfection. The Menorah has one central stem out of which six stems branch (Ex. 25:32-33). Some see this as an indication of man’s incompleteness (the six branches) made complete only with the addition of Messiah (the central branch). As Jesus said, “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) In the same way that six days of work are incomplete without the seventh day of rest, man’s utmost effort when *independent of God* results in incompleteness and failure.

Six days were appointed to him for his labour; while *one* day is associated in sovereignty with the Lord God, as His rest. *Six*, therefore, is the number of *labour* also, of man’s labour as apart and distinct from God’s rest. . . . the number is significant of *secular completeness*.⁸⁹

In the book of Revelation is presented the final great effort of the *human secular system* to achieve its ends apart from God. The cataclysmic events in response to the unbridled will of man are God’s ultimate reminder of man’s innate inability and deficiency apart from God, which the earth-dwellers refuse to acknowledge to the bitter end. Among the enemies of God marked by the number six: we find Goliath, whose height was *six* cubits, having *six* pieces of armor and a spear’s head weighing *six* hundred shekels of iron (1S. 17:4-7); Nebuchadnezzar, whose “image” was *sixty* cubits high and *six* cubits wide (Dan. 3:1); and [Antichrist](#), whose number is *six* hundred and *sixty-six* (Rev. 13:18⁺). Even Solomon at the height of his earthly glory received a *mere six* hundred and *sixty-six* talents of gold (1K. 10:14) each year and sat on a throne of *only six* steps (1K. 10:19). Solomon, in his advanced human wisdom,

great power and influence, but eventual drift from God, illustrates characteristics shared by the Antichrist of the end. Throughout history, the best that man can produce by every available means and effort of rebellious will is “666” which falls short of God’s triune completeness (“777”).

2.7.5.3.6 - Seven: Perfection, Completeness

The number seven is the most frequently encountered number in the book of Revelation:

Even the most careless reader of the Apocalypse must be struck by the manner in which almost every thing there is ordered by sevens. Thus, besides the seven Churches, and their seven Angels, we have already in this first chapter the seven Spirits (Rev. 1:4⁺), the seven candlesticks (Rev. 1:12⁺), the seven stars (Rev. 1:16⁺); and further on, the seven lamps of fire (Rev. 4:4⁺), seven seals (Rev. 5:1⁺), seven horns and seven eyes of the Lamb (Rev. 5:6⁺), seven heavenly Angels with their seven trumpets (Rev. 8:2⁺), seven thunders (Rev. 10:3⁺), seven heads of the dragon, and seven crowns upon these heads (Rev. 12:13⁺), the same of the beast rising out of the sea (Rev. 13:1⁺), seven last plagues (Rev. 15:1⁺); seven vials (Rev. 15:7⁺), seven mountains (Rev. 17:9⁺), seven kings (Rev. 17:10⁺); not to speak of other recurrences, not so obvious, of this number seven as the signature of the Book; as for instance, the distribution of the entire Book into seven visions, the sevenfold ascription of glory to the Lamb (Rev. 5:12⁺), and to God (Rev. 7:12⁺).⁹⁰

Hindson lists the following ‘sevens’ in the book: churches (Rev. 1:4-20⁺; 2-3⁺); spirits (Rev. 1:4⁺; 3:1⁺; 4:5⁺; 5:6⁺); lampstands (Rev. 1:12-20⁺; 2:1⁺); stars (Rev. 1:16-20⁺; 2:1⁺; 3:1⁺); lamps of fire (Rev. 4:5⁺); seals (Rev. 5:1-5⁺); horns (Rev. 5:6⁺); eyes (Rev. 5:6⁺); angels (Rev. 8:2-6⁺); trumpets (Rev. 8:2-6⁺); peals of thunder (Rev. 10:3-4⁺); seven thousand people (Rev. 11:13⁺); heads (Rev. 12:3⁺; 13:1⁺; 17:3-9⁺); diadems (Rev. 12:3⁺); angels (Rev. 15:1-8⁺; 21:9⁺); plagues (Rev. 15:1-8⁺; 21:9⁺); bowls (Rev. 15:7⁺; 17:1⁺; 21:9⁺); mountains (17:9⁺); kings (17:10-11⁺); beatitudes (Rev. 1:3⁺; 14:13⁺; 16:15⁺; 19:9⁺; 20:6⁺; 22:7⁺, 14⁺); “I ams” of Christ (Rev. 1:8⁺, 17⁺, 18⁺; 2:23⁺; 21:6⁺; 22:13⁺, 16⁺).⁹¹ Tenney notes seven beatitudes (Rev. 1:3⁺; 14:13⁺; 16:15⁺; 19:9⁺; 20:6⁺; 22:7⁺; 22:14⁺).⁹² Hindson notes: “David Hocking observes that the concept of our Lord’s soon return is emphasized seven times in the Revelation by the words ‘shortly’ or ‘quickly’ [Rev. 1:1⁺; 2:16⁺; 3:11⁺; 11:14⁺; 22:7⁺; 22:12⁺; 22:20⁺].”⁹³ Morris mentions seven “I ams” of Christ (Rev. 1:8⁺, 11⁺, 17⁺, 18⁺; 21:6⁺; 22:13⁺, 16⁺) and seven doxologies in heaven (Rev. 4:9-11⁺; 5:8-13⁺; 7:9-12⁺; 11:16-18⁺; 14:2-3⁺; 15:2-4⁺; 19:1-6⁺).⁹⁴ As mentioned in our discussion of six, the number seven is understood to denote ‘perfection’ in the sense of completion. God created in six days and *rested* on the seventh.⁹⁵ This is the main symbolism of the number seven in the book of Revelation. The *seven* churches are representative of *all* churches. The *seven* Spirits represent the perfect omniscience of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁶ The seven seals, trumpets, and bowls denote the completeness of God’s worldwide judgment.⁹⁷ The prevalence of seven throughout the book of Revelation has also been recognized as signifying this book as the final revelation of God to complete the [canon](#) of Scripture.⁹⁸

Almost certainly one of the primary reasons [for the preponderance of sevens] is to emphasize that this *is* the last book of the Bible! In fact, the book closes with a grave warning against anyone who would pretend to add anything further to God’s inspired Word (Revelation 22:18⁺).⁹⁹

It seems likely that John has written his book carefully to signify the perfect plan of God and the completeness of his work.¹⁰⁰

With the final acts recorded in the book of Revelation, God *completes* His mighty act of redemption and renewal thus restoring His creation to the condition it had prior to the entrance of sin.¹⁰¹

2.7.5.3.7 - Twelve: Jewish Tribes, Completeness

The number twelve appears in the book of Revelation as the twelve thousand Jews from each of the twelve tribes (Rev. 7:5-8⁺, 14:1⁺), the woman’s garland of twelve stars (Rev. 12:1⁺), the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem named after the twelve tribes and attended by twelve angels (Rev. 21:12⁺), the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem named after the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:14⁺), the length, breadth, and height of the city being twelve thousand furlongs (Rev. 21:16⁺), the twelve pearls at the twelve gates (Rev. 21:21⁺), and the twelve fruits of the tree of life, yielding its fruit each month (Rev. 22:2⁺). The primary symbolism denoted by the number twelve is its dominant association with the sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 35:22; 49:28). Since Israel is God’s elect ¹⁰² and Jesus chose twelve apostles,¹⁰³ it may be that God’s sovereign choice is also reflected in this value. But even in Jesus’ selection of twelve apostles, a direct relationship to the twelve tribes of Israel is intended (Mat. 19:28; Luke 22:30). In the book of Revelation, nearly all occurrences of twelve, with the exception of the fruit of the tree of life (Rev. 22:2⁺), are related to the tribes of Israel and reflect the intense “Jewishness” of the book.¹⁰⁴ As we shall see in our discussion of [related passages and themes](#), the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning the nation Israel is a key to understanding much of what takes place in the book of Revelation. Hence, the preponderance of twelve. Some have seen twelve as denoting ‘unity in diversity’ in that individuals (the tribes, the apostles) are considered as a unified people of God.¹⁰⁵ Still others have found in the number the idea of

completeness with the twelve tribes representing *all Israel* and twelve months representing a *complete year*.¹⁰⁶

2.7.5.4 - Searching for Meaning in all the Wrong Places

Among commentators of the last book of the Bible, a stark dividing line can be seen in regard to where they go looking for an understanding of the symbols which they encounter in the text. The three main sources which are appealed to are *pagan mythology*, *Jewish apocryphal writings*, and *the Old Testament*. Depending upon which of these three sources one emphasizes, a quite different picture of John's communication emerges. The decision of where to go looking for meaning is perhaps second only to [the art and science of interpretation](#) in its effect upon the resulting understanding. It is our belief that those who utilize pagan mythology and uninspired Jewish apocrypha in order to understand the book of Revelation have a deficient view of the perspicuity and *sufficiency* of the [inspired](#) Scriptures (Ps. 19:1-14; John 8:31; 1Cor. 4:6; 2Ti. 3:15-17; Heb. 4:12-13; 2Pe. 1:3, 19-21; Jude 1:3). Some commentators assume a near equivalence among these three sources in the pursuit of meaning.

The sources for interpreting them [symbols] come from the OT, intertestamental literature, and the Greco-Roman world—in other words, in the common world of the original readers in the province of Asia.¹⁰⁷

Though the OT, Judaism, NT, and immediate context of the Apocalypse provide the primary background for its imagery, much work remains to be done on surveying the various sources of the Greco-Roman world to broaden the multiple ideas associated with many of the images in the Apocalypse.¹⁰⁸

Others go so far as to assert that the meaning of the book of Revelation *cannot* be found within the confines of inspired Scripture because certain symbols are not treated therein: "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.**" [emphasis added]¹⁰⁹ Is it really true that God delivered inspired Scripture to John for our understanding, but expects us to search extra-biblical sources for the necessary keys? And what of those who only have the inspired Word of God at their disposal, but lack the historical and cultural materials which some commentators assert are necessary? It is one thing to recognize that access to historical and cultural writings may *enhance* our understanding of biblical material. It is quite another to say that it is a *requisite* for our understanding. The latter view effectively denies the sufficiency of Scripture and elevates extra-biblical material on a par with inspired Scripture in making the latter dependent upon the former. In contrast to these views, Thomas observes: "An attempt has been made to elevate extra-biblical material referred to by John to the level of the OT among his sources. Yet no conclusive evidence proves that he used sources, written or oral, outside the OT."¹¹⁰ Those who assert John's dependence upon outside sources are unable to provide clear-cut examples and often are simply reflecting the [anti-supernaturalism](#) so prevalent in academic circles today. Beale wisely cautions:

In recognizing the presence of allusions to sources other than the OT, whether Jewish or Greco-Roman . . . One must be circumspect in the search for dependence on such other literary sources and resist the temptation to find parallels where there are none.¹¹¹

2.7.5.4.1 - Searching Pagan Mythology

Perhaps the most perplexing view is that the meaning for symbols in the book of Revelation is to be found within the pagan mythology of the reader's day. This is akin to saying we are to find the jewels of God laying in the bottom of a secular trash can!

Fiorenza says the symbols have a special communicative function in addressing the social world of the original readers, thus opening up a new symbolic world for them. It is our task to uncover that symbolic world.¹¹²

A major breakthrough in the scholarly study of Revelation was the recognition of the source and character of its images and narrative patterns. These were not composed freely by the author to comment on the current situation; in other words, they are not primarily allegories invented to comment on current affairs. Further, these images and narrative patterns were not simply borrowed from the "Old Testament" and cannot be understood fully in terms of such borrowing. They can be understood appropriately and in depth only in the context of [Ancient Near East] and Greco-Roman myth.¹¹³

What is all the more amazing is the tendency of some to understand the symbols of the book in light of pagan myth *despite* clear parallels to [OT](#) passages.¹¹⁴ Not only are we urged to look to secular sources for important meaning, but secular sources for which today we only have fragmentary evidence as to their original contents at the time of John's writing. If we are dependent upon cultural writings which are mostly lost to history for a complete understanding of Scripture, than what can be said of the self-claims of Scripture as being sufficient? As has been recognized by some, this supposed dependence upon pagan mythology is largely an *a priori* assumption and has not been clearly demonstrated. Commenting on the unlikelihood of crowns representing a victor (rather than a royal ruler) in the Apocalypse, Trench observes: "nowhere else in the Apocalypse is there found a single image drawn from

the range of heathen antiquity. The Book moves exclusively in the circle of Jewish imagery."¹¹⁵ In regard to the various and ingenious explanations for the "white stone" of Rev. 2:17⁺, Trench observes:

All these explanations, and others which it would be tedious to enumerate, even if they were more satisfactory, and they appear to me most unsatisfactory, are affected with the same fatal weakness, namely, that they are borrowed from *heathen* antiquity, while this Book moves exclusively within the circle of sacred, that is, of Jewish, imagery and symbols, nor is the explanation of its symbols in any case to be sought beyond this circle.¹¹⁶

Even some who have devoted immense effort and time in an attempt to understand the dependence of material within the book of Revelation upon the social setting of the day candidly admit the tentative nature of their case.¹¹⁷ We concur with Unger: "The importation of mythological identifications with pagan deities or astrological lore . . . is not only futile but sacrilegious."¹¹⁸

2.7.5.4.2 - Searching Jewish Apocryphal Writings

Another frequently cited source of symbolism within the book of Revelation is the various uninspired Jewish [apocryphal](#) writings:

Symbols and other suggestions are derived very frequently from the Old Testament, sometimes from common Hebrew folk-lore, and in some instances apparently from apocalyptic sources not preserved to us. There are passages in which critics are probably right in finding traces of the influence of some unknown apocalyptic writing.¹¹⁹

[The assumption of the two witnesses] into heaven (Rev. 11:12⁺) accords with that of Elijah (2K. 2:11), and with that of Moses as stated in *The Assumption of Moses*, mentioned by Clement of Alexandria and Origen. In this instance the Revelation seemingly assumes the familiarity of its readers with apocryphal literature.¹²⁰

Beckwith says that John incorporates common Hebrew folk-lore (non-truths) and bases meaning upon material which is unknown and in any case is not available to us. From the similarity of the ministry of one of the two witnesses with that of Moses, Tenney infers one *must be* Moses and therefore the reader is assumed to be in need of information from *The Assumption of Moses* to understand this fact. These are claims which are quite out of proportion with the hard evidence. Most often, our inability to understand some symbol in the book is not based upon the unavailability of an unknown apocalyptic writing, but our [ignorance of the Old Testament](#). Further, familiarity with *The Assumption of Moses* is not required in order for one of the two witnesses to be Moses. Not to mention that there are reasons for supposing that neither of the two witnesses is Moses himself, but other Jews yet to be born. Swete observes:

There is no evidence that any one of [the noncanonical apocalypses] has served him as a 'source'; coincidences between the work of John and the extant Jewish books are nearly limited to minor points connected with the imagery and diction. Under the circumstances it is more than precarious to postulate sources of which nothing is known.¹²¹

What many mistake as the *dependence* of John upon noncanonical apocalyptic writings is their common allusion to events from the Old Testament:

The general nature of the Revelation has been described as both *apocalyptic* and *prophetic*. Jewish apocalyptic literature can be seen in Isaiah 24-27, Ezekiel 38-39, Daniel 7-12, and Zechariah 9-14. Similar elements appear in the apocryphal books of Enoch, Baruch, Fourth Ezra, the Ascension of Isaiah, and the Apocalypse of Zephaniah. **But none of these are quoted in the Revelation, which draws most of its symbolic imagery from the canonical Old Testament books.** [emphasis added]¹²²

2.7.5.5 - The Importance of the Old Testament

The main reason we have a tendency to look outside of Scripture for insights in our attempt at understanding the symbols within the book of Revelation is our ignorance of the Old Testament. Like [Swete's assertion](#) that the woman with child (Rev. 12:1-2⁺) has no parallel in the Old Testament, our lack of insight into [OT](#) themes can cause us to prematurely go looking in extra-biblical material for answers.

[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).¹²³

The text itself gives clear indication where we need to look for greater understanding:

But in the days of the sounding of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, the mystery of God would be finished, **as He declared to His servants the prophets.** (Rev. 10:7⁺ cf. Dan. 12:9; Amos 3:7) [emphasis added]

Thus, the analogy of Scripture (Scripture interprets Scripture) is an important key to unlocking the meaning of passages which we find puzzling.¹²⁴ Commentators disagree as to the exact number of allusions to the Old Testament, but agree to their prevalence throughout.¹²⁵

No book of the New Testament is so thoroughly steeped in the thought and imagery of the Hebrew Scriptures.¹²⁶

[The Apocalypse's] relationship with the Old Testament can scarcely be overemphasized. . . . it is remarkable how the Old Testament is never explicitly quoted, but continually echoed and reapplied.¹²⁷

The range of OT usage includes the Pentateuch, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Job, and the major and the minor prophets. Roughly more than half the references are from the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and in proportion to its length Daniel yields the most. . . . Among the allusions to Daniel, the greatest number are from Daniel 7.¹²⁸

According to Swete . . . there are 46 references to Isaiah, 31 to Daniel, 29 to Ezekiel, 27 to the Psalms, and then Genesis, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Joel, and Zechariah.¹²⁹

There are hundreds of places where John alludes in one way or another to the OT Scriptures. Swete mentions that of the 404 verses of the Apocalypse, 278 contain references to the Jewish Scriptures (p. cxxxv). UBS's Green NT (2d ed.) cites over five hundred OT passages in connection with the book (pp. 897-920).¹³⁰

There are over five hundred references to the Old Testament in the book of Revelation. The following is a list of such references, but it makes no claim to being exhaustive or complete. . . .¹³¹

The importance of our familiarity with the Old Testament in order to understand the book of Revelation cannot be overstated! As we attempt to demonstrate in our discussion of [Related Passages and Themes](#), the vantage point of the Old Testament is required because the book of Revelation extends and concludes various themes, problems, and promises which find their basis in the Old Testament. Without a knowledge of the Old Testament, we are like math students looking at the answers in the back of the textbook, but without any knowledge of the questions they were intended to answer! We will inevitably find ourselves 'guessing' as to the true meaning intended by God. It was this recognized dependence of the book of Revelation upon the Jewish Old Testament which led to its authority being challenged by those with an anti-Semitic bent.¹³² Entering the book of Revelation with an anti-Jewish or overt allegorical slant to one's interpretation of the Old Testament is a sure recipe for disaster. When we come to find an OT explanation for the symbols in the book of Revelation, we may safely assume we have arrived. There is no reason to go beyond the text of Scripture in search of what is often simply speculation. "If the text is sufficiently explained in . . . terms [of the Old Testament], why look further? May not the local allusions be in essence gratuitous and unnecessary speculations?"¹³³

2.7.5.6 - Is It Really So Difficult?

In the end, understanding the book of Revelation is not nearly as mysterious and difficult as many would have us believe. True, it contains some of the more difficult passages of Scripture and we have yet to meet any individual who can claim to have mastered all its depths. Still, the basic framework and intended meaning of the book *must* be understandable by those who are born-again and search it with zeal, prayer, and a sincere heart. For it to be otherwise would be a denial of God's ability to communicate to His saints. Perhaps we may not understand every issue, but the parts which are important for us to grasp are imminently within our reach. Jesus Himself said as much (Mat. 11:25; Luke 10:21; Luke 24:25; cf. 2Pe. 1:19; Rev. 1:3⁺).

If God is the originator of language and if the chief purpose of originating it was to convey His message to humanity, then it must follow that He, being all-wise and all-loving, originated sufficient language to convey all that was in His heart to tell mankind. Furthermore, it must also follow that He would use language and expect people to understand it in its literal, normal, and plain sense.¹³⁴

There is little that is really new in the Revelation. Its varied contents are largely an amplification of what is to be found in the preceding scriptures. Each of its figures and symbols are explained if not on its own pages, then somewhere within the compass of the written Word.¹³⁵

There are symbols, but the Bible itself will explain what these symbols mean either by direct statement or through a comparison of the usage of the symbol elsewhere in the Scriptures. The meaning of the symbols will not be determined by speculation.¹³⁶

2.7.5.7 - The Importance of Right Relationship

As necessary as familiarity with the Old Testament is to an understanding of the book of Revelation, it is not sufficient. We must add

to it a right relationship with the ultimate Author of the book lest we fall prey to the condition of Israel in Isaiah's day:

Pause and wonder! Blind yourselves and be blind! They are drunk, but not with wine; they stagger, but not with intoxicating drink. For the LORD has poured out on you the spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes, namely, the prophets; and He has covered your heads, *namely*, the seers. The whole vision has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed, which *men* deliver to one who is literate, saying, "Read this, please." And he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed." Then the book is delivered to one who is illiterate, saying, "Read this, please." And he says, "I am not literate." Therefore the Lord said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men, therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work among this people, a marvelous work and a wonder; for the wisdom of their wise *men* shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent *men* shall be hidden." (Isa. 29:9-14)

We must recognize that our wisdom depends upon God and He will not share intimacy of understanding with those who feign a devotion or whose motivations are impure. Ultimately, it is not *knowledge* we desire, but *God Himself*.

And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. (Jer. 29:13)

Notes

¹Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, [*The Footsteps of Messiah*](#), rev ed (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 11.

²Gregory K. Beale, **BORROW** [*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 65.

³Henry Morris, **BORROW** [*The Revelation Record*](#), (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1983), 20.

⁴Paul D. Feinberg, "[*Hermeneutics of Discontinuity*](#)," in John S. Feinberg, ed., [*Continuity And Discontinuity*](#) (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 112.

⁵Bernard Ramm, **BORROW** [*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*](#), 3rd rev. ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 11.

⁶Kay Arthur, **BORROW** [*How To Study Your Bible*](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1994), 9-10.

⁷J. Dwight Pentecost, **BORROW** [*Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 44.

⁸One of the best examples is the apparent contradiction between the genealogies of Christ given by Matthew 1 and Luke 3. The solution to this dilemma reveals the masterful genius of God in His curse of Jeconiah (Jer. 22:30; 36:30). Indeed, "the *Divine* is in the details!"

⁹Steve Gregg, **BORROW** [*Revelation Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 11.

¹⁰Mal Couch, **BORROW** [*Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications), 36-37.

¹¹Beale, **BORROW** [*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#), 54.

¹²Morris, **BORROW** [*The Revelation Record*](#), 13.

¹³This leads to a general rule of thumb. Although there are notable exceptions, *the more weighty the commentary, the more likely it will mislead the reader in his understanding of the book of Revelation*.

¹⁴Mal Couch, "[*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*](#)," in Mal Couch, ed., [*A Bible Handbook to Revelation*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 49.

¹⁵David Chilton, [*The Days of Vengeance*](#) (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 28.

¹⁶Ramm, **BORROW** [*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*](#), 121.

¹⁷Charles Feinberg, [*Premillennialism or Amillennialism*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1936), 50.

¹⁸Alva J. McClain, [*The Greatness Of The Kingdom*](#) (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), 144.

¹⁹Arthur Walkington Pink, **ONLINE** [*The Antichrist*](#) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1999, 1923), s.v. "Antichrist and Babylon."

²⁰Couch, **BORROW** [Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics](#), 11.

²¹John MacArthur, [Revelation 12-22 : The MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2000), Rev. 20:1.

²²"Literal is not opposed to spiritual but to figurative; spiritual is an antithesis on the one hand to material, and on the other to carnal (in a bad sense). The Literalist is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly literal being regarded as literal, and that which is manifestly figuratively being so regarded. The position of the Spiritualist is not that which is properly indicated by the term. He is one who holds that certain portions are to be normally interpreted, other portions are to be regarded as having a mystical sense. The terms properly expressive of the schools are normal and mystical." John Peter Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scripture: Revelation*, p. 98.

²³Roy B. Zuck, **BORROW** [Basic Bible Interpretation](#) (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 1991), 29.

²⁴Richard Chenevix Trench, **BORROW** [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1861), 185.

²⁵"In the history of allegorical interpretation of Scripture it is not denied that there is a literal, historical, or grammatical sense to Scripture, but it is depreciated. It is the 'fleshly' or the 'superficial' understanding of Scripture."—Ramm, **BORROW** [Protestant Biblical Interpretation](#), 124.

²⁶"Among non-literal prophetic interpreters, a state of virtual interpretive chaos exists. It is rare, for instance, to see a well-ordered or definitive work by an amillennial interpreter setting forth positively and consistently his prophetic interpretations. On the contrary, the amillennial writings usually concentrate on attacking and ridiculing the premillennial position. This approach is probably one of necessity, for amillennialists seldom agree with each other in specific interpretations of prophecy except to be against the earthly millennium."—Paul Lee Tan, [The Interpretation of Prophecy](#) (Dallas, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1993), 73.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 37-38.

²⁸George H. N. Peters, **ONLINE** [The Theocratic Kingdom](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1978, 1884), 50.

²⁹Zuck, [Basic Bible Interpretation](#), 30-31.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 35.

³¹Couch, [Interpreting the Book of Revelation](#), 58-59.

³²Isbon T. Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 323.

³³"Augustine proposed seven rules of interpretation by which he sought to give a rational basis for allegorization."—Zuck, [Basic Bible Interpretation](#), 39.

³⁴Tan, [The Interpretation of Prophecy](#), 53.

³⁵Rodney Petersen, "Continuity and Discontinuity: The Debate throughout Church History," in John S. Feinberg, ed., [Continuity And Discontinuity](#) (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 26.

³⁶Larry V. Crutchfield, "Revelation in the New Testament," in Mal Couch, ed., [A Bible Handbook to Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 32.

³⁷"Though the Reformers had come out of the interpretive darkness into the light of literal and historical hermeneutics, they still clung to allegorical details in their attempt to understand the book of Revelation."—Mal Couch, "How Has Revelation Been Viewed Interpretively?," in Mal Couch, ed., [A Bible Handbook to Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 40.

³⁸Morris, **BORROW** [The Revelation Record](#), 25.

³⁹Ramm, **BORROW** [Protestant Biblical Interpretation](#), 111.

⁴⁰Crutchfield, [Revelation in the New Testament](#), 25.

⁴¹Robert L. Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 20.

⁴²“The question is if these allegorizing commentators are not as much in the dark in relation to the **second coming and the glory that should follow**, as the Jews were in relation to His **First Advent and His atoning suffering and death**.” [emphasis added]—Arnold Fruchtenbaum, [“The Little Apocalypse of Zechariah,”](#) in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., [The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 270.

⁴³J. A. Seiss, [The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), Rev. 11:3.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, Rev. 12:7-12.

⁴⁵Beale, **BORROW** [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 51.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁷“Revelation is a symbolic book, but that does not mean the symbols do not depict literal events.”—Grant R. Osborne, [Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 16.

⁴⁸Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#), 35.

⁴⁹“It must be noted, however, that not every object seen in a vision is symbolic. Neither is it true that because some objects in a vision are symbolic, everything else in that vision must be symbolic.”—Couch, **BORROW** [Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics](#), 71.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁵¹“In which one thing explicitly (by using *like* or *as*) resembles another.”—Zuck, [Basic Bible Interpretation](#), 148.

⁵²Couch, **BORROW** [Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics](#), 258-259.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁵⁴Tan, [The Interpretation of Prophecy](#), 137-138.

⁵⁵Matthew Waymeyer, [Revelation 20 and the Millennial Debate](#) (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2001, 2004), 99-100.

⁵⁶Merrill C. Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1957), 142-143.

⁵⁷Osborne, [Revelation](#), 16.

⁵⁸“The interpretation of such figures is not left up to the reader’s imagination or ingenuity. They must be defined and explained, unambiguously, either in the immediate context or in the broader context of the historical and prophetic Scriptures which John could assume his readers should already have mastered.”—Morris, **BORROW** [The Revelation Record](#), 24.

⁵⁹Trench, [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia](#), 42-43.

⁶⁰The study of how numbers are used within the Bible.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁶²No more so than in the case of typology wherein truths concerning God can be ascertained, but never in a way suitable for teaching as doctrine.

⁶³Beale, **BORROW** [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 23.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁵“It is not to be supposed that a specific meaning attaches invariably to a given numerical symbol, so that we could substitute this as a paraphrase in all cases; in view of the vagueness characterizing the style of visions we may presume that the writer himself did not always have a precise intention in mind.”—Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#), 251.

⁶⁶Osborne, [Revelation](#), 17-18.

⁶⁷Years based on factors related to Dan. 9:24-27.

⁶⁸Ibid., 17.

⁶⁹The forward to Osborne's work, a volume within the *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* states: "the contributors share a belief in the trustworthiness and essential unity of Scripture" yet when the distinctions between inspired and uninspired writings are minimized or ignored, the unity of Scripture is denied and the trustworthiness of Scripture is denigrated to the level of uninspired works. Here the author seems to place Scripture on a par with "ancient apocalypses."

⁷⁰Robert L. Thomas, [*Revelation 8-22*](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 408.

⁷¹John F. Walvoord, [*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), 28.

⁷²"Looking at the Scriptures from a normative standpoint gives the Jews and Christians the same interpretation. Raphael Patai, quoting from the rabbinical writings, says, 'Things will come to such a head that people will despair of Redemption. This will last seven years. And then, unexpectedly, the Messiah will come. . . . At the end of the seventh [year] the son of David will come.' "—Couch, [*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*](#), 64.

⁷³Significantly, "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1) which thereafter were available to serve as "witnesses" of all that would follow.

⁷⁴Satan, the Beast, the False Prophet.

⁷⁵Inanimate life such as grass and trees was created on the third day. The animated "living creatures" ([שְׂרָפָה וְנֶפֶשׁ](#) [šereṣ nepeš]) were not created until days five and six.

⁷⁶ "That [the] two expressions [after three days and on the third day] were understood to mean the same thing seems clear from Mat. 27:63-64 which says: 'We remember that impostor said, while He was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day.' "—Graham W. Scroggie, [*A Guide to the Gospels*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1995, 1948), 569-570. "Jesus predicted that He would die and be raised on the third day (Mat. 16:21; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22). . . . Jesus' body was laid in the tomb on the evening of the day of preparation (Friday), the day before the Sabbath (Mat. 27:62; 28:1; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54, 56; John 19:31, 42). The women returned home and rested on the Sabbath (Saturday, Luke 23:56). Early on the first day of the week (Sunday), they went to the tomb (Mat. 28:1; Mark 16:1-2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1) which was empty. Furthermore, on the same day He arose from the grave, Jesus walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13), and they told Him that their Master was crucified and 'now it is the third day since this occurred' (Luke 24:21). . . . The most frequent reference to Jesus' resurrection is that it occurred on the third day (not the fourth day) (Mat. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:64; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46; Acts 10:40; 1Cor. 15:4). . . . There are four passages (Mat. 27:63; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34) which speak of Christ's resurrection as occurring 'after three days,' but this is speaking of the same time period as on 'the third day'. . . The three Markan passages are paralleled by one or two of the other Synoptic Gospels, and in each case the other Synoptic does not use 'after three days' as Mark does but 'on the third day' (Mark 8:31 = Mat. 16:21 / Luke 9:22; Mark 9:31 = Mat 17:23; Mark 10:34 = Mat. 20:19 / Luke 18:33)."—Harold Hoehner, [*Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), 71-72.

⁷⁷"The threes of the Bible represent triads of completeness."—Walter L. Wilson, [*A Dictionary of Bible Types*](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 419.

⁷⁸"Three denotes divine perfection; Seven denotes spiritual perfection; Ten denotes ordinal perfection; and Twelve denotes governmental perfection."—E. W. Bullinger, [*Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1967), 107.

⁷⁹"In the cry of the four living creatures ('Holy, holy, holy,' Rev. 4:8+) Hindson sees an indication of the Trinity (59) rather than an emphatic Semitic triplet. What kind of threefold existence would he find in triplets like 'a ruin, a ruin, a ruin' (Eze. 21:27) or 'land, land, land' (Jer. 22:29)?"—William D. Barrick, ["Review of 'The Book of Revelation' by Hindson."](#) in Richard L. Mayhue, ed., [*The Master's Seminary Journal*](#), vol. 13 no. 2 (Sun Valley, CA: The Master's Seminary, Fall 2002), 284.

⁸⁰Not every individual, but individuals from every nation, tongue, tribe, and region.

⁸¹"This number denotes God's government of men and affairs upon the earth."—Wilson, [*A Dictionary of Bible Types*](#), 180.

⁸² [Trench, [*Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*](#), 63-64]. An exception to Trench's comments regarding the

four seasons may be found in the mention of “seedtime” (spring), “harvest” (fall), “winter and summer” in Gen. 8:22.

⁸³The word *cherubim* is the Hebrew equivalent to *cherubs*. The *-im* ending being the equivalent of our plural ending *-s*.

⁸⁴Contrary to the assertions of [preterists](#) who attempt to localize the global events of the book of Revelation to the Roman Empire.

⁸⁵David probably selected one stone for Goliath and four more for each of Goliath's brothers. The four brothers of Goliath (2S. 21:22) included *Ishi-Benob* (2S. 21:16), *Saph* or *Sippai* (2S. 21:18; 1Chr. 20:4), *Lahmi* (2S. 21:19; 2Chr. 20:5) and an unnamed brother (2S. 21:20-21; 1Chr. 20:6-7). Along with Goliath, who was killed by David (1S. 17:4, 49-50), there were five brothers (1S. 17:40) of the same father, a giant from Gath (2S. 21:22; 1Chr. 20:8).

⁸⁶Each of Isaiah's seraphim also had six wings (Isa. 6:2), two of which were used to cover the face, two to cover the feet, leaving two to fly.

⁸⁷Edward Hindson, [Revelation: Unlocking the Future](#) (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 6.

⁸⁸“The great giant had six fingers on each hand, and six toes on each foot, for he represented the perfect example of that race of giants.”—Wilson, [A Dictionary of Bible Types](#), 374.

⁸⁹Bullinger, [Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance](#), 150.

⁹⁰Trench, [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia](#), 57-58.

⁹¹Hindson, [Revelation: Unlocking the Future](#), 7.

⁹²Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 180.

⁹³Hindson, [Revelation: Unlocking the Future](#), 8.

⁹⁴Morris, **BORROW** [The Revelation Record](#), 30.

⁹⁵“Seven as a number of completeness is also apparent from the seven days of creation in Genesis 1, which is the complete period of God's work of creating.”—Beale, **BORROW** [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 58.

⁹⁶“The seven ‘eyes’ describe the perfect omniscience of the Holy Spirit (Zechariah 3:9).”—Wilson, [A Dictionary of Bible Types](#), 363.

⁹⁷“Other examples of completeness are the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls, which are so numbered in order to underscore the completeness of God's worldwide judgment and salvation.”—Beale, **BORROW** [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 59.

⁹⁸Although some restrict this warning to the book of Revelation only, it seems significant that no other NT book closes with a warning even remotely similar.

⁹⁹Morris, **BORROW** [The Revelation Record](#), 30-31.

¹⁰⁰Osborne, [Revelation](#), 17.

¹⁰¹“God completed His mighty work of creating, constructing, and energizing the entire cosmos and all its creatures in the very first seven-day period of history. Because of sin and the curse, He has since been accomplishing His mighty work of redeeming and saving the creation. One day this work also will be completed.”—Morris, **BORROW** [The Revelation Record](#), 31.

¹⁰²Ex. 3:7, 15, 18; 6:6; 19:5-6; Lev. 20:26; Deu. 4:34, 37; 7:6-8; 10:15; 14:2; 26:18-19; 2S. 7:23; 1K. 8:53; 1Chr. 16:13; 17:21; Ps. 105:6; 106:6-7; 135:4; Isa. 41:8; 43:1, 10; 44:1; 45:4; Jer. 10:16; Mat. 24:22; Rom. 9:4; Rom. 11:5.

¹⁰³Mat. 4:19; 9:9; Mark 1:17, 20; 2:14; Luke 5:27; 6:13; John 1:43; 6:70; 15:16; 17:6; Acts 1:2; Rom. 1:1, 6-7; Gal. 1:15.

¹⁰⁴Recognition of this very emphasis was a factor which led some to initially oppose acceptance of the book within the canon.

¹⁰⁵“Twelve . . . represents completeness as well as the accompanying idea of unity in diversity, as in the one nation Israel composed of twelve tribes. the twelve apostles mirror the same reality for the people of God in the NT period.”—Beale, **BORROW** [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 59.

¹⁰⁶“Twelve is the number of completeness. There are twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles of Christ, twenty-four elders (a double

twelve), tree of life has twelve types of fruit (Rev. 22:2⁺), New Jerusalem has twelve gates guarded by twelve angels (Rev. 21:12⁺), the city has twelve foundations (Rev. 21:14⁺). There are twelve precious stones adorning the foundation stones and twelve pearls (Rev. 21:19-21⁺). There are also multiples of twelve: Each of the twelve tribes contains 12,000 people, making a total of 144,000 (12,000 times 12); the wall measures 144 cubits (12 times 12).”—Hindson, [Revelation: Unlocking the Future](#), 6.

¹⁰⁷Osborne, [Revelation](#), 17.

¹⁰⁸Beale, **BORROW** [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 58.

¹⁰⁹Henry Barclay Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 1906), cxxviii.

¹¹⁰Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#), 41.

¹¹¹Beale, **BORROW** [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 79.

¹¹²Osborne, [Revelation](#), 15.

¹¹³Adela Yarbro Collins, “[Book of Revelation](#),” in David Noel Freeman, ed., [The Anchor Bible Dictionary](#) (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 5:704.

¹¹⁴“John painted verbal pictures in such a way as to ring bells in the minds of his readers, many of whom were former pagans and would have been familiar with some of these myths; he did so partly to put his readers’ mythological background into biblical perspective. John can utilize even legends in order to conduct polemics against the ungodly world that formulates the myths. For example, the ‘seven heads’ in Rev. 12:3⁺ appears to come not from the OT, but from cosmological traditions depicting the seven-headed sea monster Lotan.”—Beale, **BORROW** [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#) 18.

¹¹⁵Trench, [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia](#), 110.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 129-130.

¹¹⁷“The strength of the whole case is in the whole argument. Many parts are acknowledged to be tentative, if only because the fragmentary nature of the evidence precludes a false dogmatism. . . . The fragmentary state of the evidence in fact needs to be strongly emphasized.”—Colin J. Hemer, [The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 7. “The objection may be raised that the whole thesis of this book proceeds from the assumptions about the local applicability which may simply not be true. It may be said that a caution in the particular is here combined with an unjustified overconfidence about the legitimacy of the whole undertaking.”—*Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁸Merrill F. Unger, [Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament](#) (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), Dan. 8:10.

¹¹⁹Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#), viii.

¹²⁰Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 191.

¹²¹Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#) xlix.

¹²²Hindson, [Revelation: Unlocking the Future](#), 1.

¹²³Chilton, [The Days of Vengeance](#), 26.

¹²⁴“The Book of Revelation depends on the Old Testament much more than does any other New Testament book. This fact alone should warn us that we cannot begin to fathom its meaning apart from a solid grasp of the Bible as a whole.”—*Ibid.*, 30.

¹²⁵Also see Swete [Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#) cxxxv-cxlviii] for a list of references to Greek versions of the Old Testament made by the Apocalypse.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, xlix.

¹²⁷Hemer, [The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting](#), 13-14.

¹²⁸Beale, **BORROW** [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#) 77.

¹²⁹Osborne, [Revelation](#), 25.

¹³⁰Alan F. Johnson, [*Revelation: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 15.

¹³¹Fruchtenbaum, [*The Footsteps of Messiah*](#), 801-808.

¹³²“The first major figure to challenge the authoritative status of the book of Revelation was Marcion, presumably because of its strong ties to the Jewish Scriptures.”—Collins, [*Book of Revelation*](#), 5:695.

¹³³Hemer, [*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*](#), 26.

¹³⁴Charles C. Ryrie, [*Dispensationalism*](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 81.

¹³⁵Pink, [*The Antichrist*](#), s.v. “Antichrist in the Apocalypse.”

¹³⁶Fruchtenbaum, [*The Footsteps of Messiah*](#), 12.

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