

The Purpose of Symbolism in the Book of Revelation

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Is Revelation to be Understood Primarily as Literal or Symbolic?

The Greek word *σημαίνω* is used in Revelation 1:1 to indicate the manner of God's revelation to John: "the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated [*ἐσήμανεν*] it by His angel to His bond-servant John." Various English translations render this Greek word as "communicated" (NASB), "made known" (RSV, NIV, JB, ESV, NEB), "signified" (KJV, ASV, Douay),¹ and "made clear" (NETB).

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

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

¹ NASB has a marginal reading of "signified."

² E.g., cf. Dan. 2:28 (LXX) reads, "he showed . . . what things must take place in the latter days" with Rev. 1:1, "to show . . . what things must take place quickly." For further discussion of the allusion, see G. K. Beale, *Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 152-60. See also Beale, *Revelation, passim*, for fuller discussion of all subsequent passages from Revelation mentioned in this address.

In Daniel 2:45 of the old Greek Old Testament, this word is used to describe the symbolic vision that King Nebuchadnezzar had: “the Great God has *symbolized*³ to the king what will come to pass in the latter days.” This refers to a dream vision that the king had. He saw a huge statue composed of four sections of different metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron. The image is smashed by a rock that grows and fills the earth. Daniel tells the king that this vision was symbolic: the statue that was divided into four metallic sections symbolized four kingdoms (Babylon, MedoPersia, Greece, and Rome).⁴ The stone that smashed the statue represented God’s kingdom that would defeat the evil kingdoms of the world and dominate the world.

The symbolic use of σημαίνω in Daniel 2 defines the use in Revelation 1:1 as referring to symbolic communication and not mere general conveyance of information. Therefore, John’s choice of σημαίνω over γνωρίζω (“make known”) is not haphazard but intentional. This conclusion is based on the supposition that John uses Old Testament references with significant degrees of awareness of Old Testament context.⁵

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

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

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

³ This is a rendering of the Aramaic ܘܕܐ (y^eda’), which has the default meaning “know” and in the causative form “make known.”

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

⁵ For repeated examples of such contextual awareness on John’s part, see Beale, *Revelation*, *passim*.

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

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

All of the numbers are symbolic and are understood against their Old Testament background: seven equals the number of completeness (seven days of creation, seven days of the week, complete judgment [Lev. 26:18, 21, 24, 28], fullness of wisdom [Prov. 9:1]). So, for example, the completeness of judgments in Revelation is designated by seven seals, trumpets, and plagues. In addition, the fullness of the Holy Spirit is referred to as the seven Spirits who are before his throne. Some of the symbols are also explained through understanding early Jewish interpretative tradition, Greco-Roman customs, history, and so forth.

*Thus, the main mode of communication in Revelation is that of symbolism.*⁶ Therefore, we should interpret Revelation primarily in a symbolic fashion and not primarily in a literal fashion, especially when we are interpreting the images in the visionary portion of the book (chaps. 4-22).

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

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

⁶ For an expansion of Revelation's hermeneutics of symbolism in this section, see Beale, *Revelation*, 50-69.

Symbolism Used Predominantly for One Situation.

When did the prophets primarily use symbolism? The prophets living toward the end of Israel's history had the primary role of warning Israel to repent, or they soon would be judged (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Daniel). Indeed, by the time of their ministries, their message was that judgment was coming, but you could be delivered from it if you repented. At first, they delivered their warnings in a very rational and sermonic manner, convicting their audience of sin and self-serving moral permissiveness, and recalling for them lessons from their own history. However, the prophets had little positive effect because of their audience's spiritual anesthesia. They had become anesthetized because of their habitual avoidance toward changing their comfortable, sinful lifestyle. Their hearts had become hardened to rational, historical, and sermonic warning methods (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 17). Therefore, the prophets took up forms of warning that might gain them a better hearing or better attention—they used symbolic action, parables, and words (Isa. 7:3; 8:1, 3-4; Ezek. 12:3-16, 22-23; 15:1-8; 17:1-24).⁷ Such a change in their form of warning was effective only with the faithful remnant. With those who "have ears to hear and hear not" (Isa. 6:9-10) and have become hard hearted, symbolic language and parables cause them to misunderstand further. When the prophets used symbolic parables, it was a sign that judgment was in the process of coming upon Israel (i.e., the Babylonian exile). Therefore, for hardened unbelievers (Israel), the literary form of symbolic parable (*mashal*) appears whenever ordinary warnings are no longer heeded, and no warning will ever be heeded by those so far disobeying,⁸ but the believing remnant can be shocked, by the unusual parables, back into the reality of their faith. This is the point of Isaiah 6:9-10, where the prophet is commissioned to tell Israel to "*keep on listening but do not perceive . . . render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull . . . lest they . . . hear with their ears . . . and repent and be healed.*"

Isaiah's preaching is intended as a judgment to blind and deafen the majority in Israel and to have a positive effect only on the remnant (cf. chaps. 7ff.). His message in chaps. 1-5 is predominantly a nonparabolic warning of judgment and promise of blessing conditioned on repentance. Then the parabolic message comes in 7:3 and 8:1-4, which has already been anticipated by the vineyard parable in 5:1-7. Isaiah 7 says that one of Isaiah the prophet's children was named "a remnant shall return," so that whenever little "remnant will return" was late for dinner, his mother would call out "come home 'remnant will return.'" The child and his name became a symbolic reminder to Israel. Whenever Israelites saw the child leave or go anyplace, they would be reminded that if they did not change their sinful ways, God would punish them by mak-

⁷ David L. Jeffrey's "Literature In An Apocalyptic Age: Closure and Consolation" (unpublished paper, 1977) first attracted my attention to this transition in the prophets.

⁸ Ibid.

ing them leave their land and go into the captivity of another country from which only a small remnant would return as a result of God's calling them home again. The parabolic aspect of the prophet's message is then closely linked to the hardening commission of Isaiah 6:9-10 and, therefore, may be considered one of the means by which the people are to be blinded and deafened (which is viewed as beginning fulfillment, e.g., in Isaiah 42:20 ["your ears are open but none hears"] and 43:8).⁹ For the same reason, Isaiah acts out a parable for over a three year period by walking around naked and barefoot before the eyes of Israelite onlookers in order to be a symbolic precursor that Egypt and Ethiopia, in whom Israel had trusted for security, would walk barefoot and naked into exile because of their sin in order that Israel would be shamed (Isa. 20:2-6; this perhaps implied Israel's own walking in nakedness into exile herself as v. 6 suggests).

Likewise, Ezekiel digs through part of the wall of Jerusalem and packs up all his belongings and puts them on his shoulder and crawls through the hole he dug before the eyes of the Israelite onlookers in order to symbolize that this was going to happen to them if they did not change their sinful ways. Not coincidentally, this episode is introduced by the following words: Ezekiel "you live in the midst of the rebellious house, *who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear*" (Ezek. 12:2).

Consequently, the prophets' parables have a shock effect for genuine believers who have become anesthetized because of living among other unspiritual people. The parables are also intended to have a jolting effect on the remnant who have become complacent among the compromising majority. Israel did not want to hear the truth, and when it was presented straightforwardly to convict them of sin, they would not accept the fact of their sin. The parables, however, functioned to awake those among the true, righteous remnant from their sinful sleep. The same pattern found in Isaiah is apparent in Ezekiel, where the Isaianic hearing language occurs in Ezekiel 3:27 ("he who hears, let him hear"), followed directly by the prophet's first parable, and in 12:2 ("they have ears to hear, but they do not hear"), followed immediately in verses 3-16 by the prophet's first parabolic act before onlooking Israel (for similar wording to Ezekiel's hearing formulae cf. Jer. 5:21; 17:23). Ezekiel's usage is a development of that already found in Isaiah.

Thus, the parables of the prophets served to judge intractably unrepentant people but shock the faithful remnant out of their spiritually numb and lethargic condition.

⁹ Elsewhere I contend that the sensory organ malfunction language of Isa. 6:9-10, and elsewhere in the Old Testament, refers to a retributive judgment on Israel whereby they are punished by means of their own sin; the primary sin in view is that of idolatry, so that they are being judged by being made as spiritually lifeless as the idols to which they had intractably committed themselves (see Beale, "Isaiah VI 9-13: A Retributive Taunt Against Idolatry," *Vetus Testamentum* XLI [1991], 257-78). Thus, positively, the parables also have the secondary aim of jolting those among the remnant out from under the spiritual spell of idol worship.

This is the primary reason that Jesus used symbolic parables, as illustrated by Matthew 13:

⁹“He who has ears, let him hear.”

¹⁰And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?”

¹¹Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.

¹²“For whoever has, to him *more* shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.

¹³“Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

¹⁴“In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘you will keep on hearing, but will not understand; you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;

¹⁵For the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes, otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.

¹⁶“But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

¹⁷“For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*.

¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower.

Just as after Isaiah 6, so likewise, Jesus speaks more parables after quoting Isaiah 6, and toward the end he punctuates again with the standard Isaianic phrase “he who has ears, let him ear” (13:43; cf. also 11:15). Jesus affirms in Matthew 13 that the purpose of his parables was to blind spiritually and deafen the majority of hearers but to reveal truth to the small faithful circle within the nation.

Jesus sometimes delivered his warnings in a rational and sermonic manner, convicting his audience of sin and self-serving moral permissiveness and recalling to them lessons from their own history. However, as was the case with the prophets before him, this straightforward way of communicating had little effect because of his audience’s spiritual deadness. Israel, again, had become anesthetized because of their habitual avoidance to change their comfortable, sinful lifestyle. Their hearts had become hardened to propositional, historical, and sermonic warning methods.

Therefore, like the prophets, Jesus took up symbolic forms of warning in addition to using symbolic action, parables, and words. This change in “warning form” is effective only with the faithful remnant, which in Matthew 13 is represented by Jesus’ disciples. Symbolic warnings shock true believers out of their spiritual laziness in going along with the sinful status quo of the unbelieving majority. It is striking in this respect that in Mark 8 Jesus applies the Isaiah 6 language to his own disciples, the representatives of the faithful remnant of Israel, which he only elsewhere applies to the hardened majority:

¹⁶They *began* to discuss with one another *the fact* that they had no bread.

¹⁷And Jesus, aware of this, *said to them, “Why do you discuss *the fact* that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart?”

¹⁸“Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember,

¹⁹when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?” They *said to Him, “Twelve.”

²⁰“When *I broke* the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?” And they *said to Him, “Seven.”

²¹And He was saying to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

They had begun to come under the influence of the spiritually numbed and hardened lump of the majority of the nation, and Jesus thinks better of his small group of followers. Therefore, Jesus’ questions addressed to them (vv. 18, 21) amount to rhetorical exhortations to “see,” “hear,” and “understand.”

With those who “have ears to hear and hear not” (Isaiah 6) and have become irretrievably hardhearted, however, symbolic language and parables cause them to misunderstand further. Jesus’ symbolic parables sometimes caused, among hardened unbelievers, cognitive misunderstanding as well as an inability to apply the truth of the parables spiritually (for an example of the latter, see Mark 12:1-12, where the religious leaders do have cognitive understanding but are unable to apply the parable positively to themselves in terms of repentance).

Above all, as with the prophets of old, Jesus’ parables were a sign that judgment had come upon the majority in Israel: Israel was being rejected as God’s people. Therefore, symbolic parable enlightens the believer through shock, but hardens the unbeliever. It is significant to observe that the hearing formulas in the Old Testament and in Matthew 13 typically precede the parables to indicate that God’s people had reached a hardening among the majority, with only a small faithful group understanding and obeying.

Therefore, by the time Revelation is written, John stands at the end of Israel’s very existence. As a nation, they have rejected Christ and his warnings of judgment, but how does this help us understand Revelation’s use of symbols?

The phrase at the end of each of the seven letters and in Revelation 13, “he who has an ear, let him hear,” is an allusion to Matthew 13 (from Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 43) possibly together with Isaiah 6:10 and Ezekiel 3:27. It is a kind of summary of Jesus’ use of Isaiah 6 to explain that the way Jesus used symbolic language is the way it is being used in Revelation (so also Ezek. 12:2; Jer. 5:21). Just as Jesus began speaking in symbolic language to Israel on earth, he continues to do so through John to the seven churches.¹⁰ As in the Old Testament and Jesus’ parables, the hearing formula of the letters (chaps. 2-3) precedes the main body of visions (chaps. 4-22), so that the following parabolic visions in the

¹⁰ For the view that the Isa. 6:9-10 hearing formula also is addressed to idolaters in some of the churches in Revelation, see G. K. Beale, “The Hearing Formula and the Visions of John in Revelation,” in *A Vision for the Church*, FS for J. P. M. Sweet, ed. M. Bockmuehl and M. B. Thompson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 178-79.

latter section function as symbolic shock treatment for the churches who have begun to hear the message in chapters 1-3. Thus, the repeated hearing formulas in Revelation 2-3 prepare for the symbols of the following chapters, the latter of which also interpret the former (though note the formula also in Rev. 13:9, which is directly attached to a parabolic vision).

In Jesus and John's day, Israel becomes like Pharaoh, who repeatedly received God's warning signs, but repeatedly rejected them because of his hardened heart. Now, the church, the continuation of the true eschatological Israel, had already become spiritually like Israel of old and were in the same danger. In fact, both in the gospel of John and in Revelation the plague signs of the Exodus are repeatedly alluded to in order to show that both Israel and then later many in the church were spiritually destitute and were beginning to undergo judgment. *The reason that the prophets, Jesus, and John used symbols is so that Israel and we should perceive spiritual reality and not merely listen to abstractions about it.* Therefore, we may make the following deduction, which forms the next major section.

Revelation's Symbols Sedate or Shock

This is the main point of the repeated phrase in Revelation "he who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Indeed, one of the essential meanings of *parable* (*mashal*) in Hebrew and Aramaic is "comparison," "application." People are to look at the picture and then apply it to their lives. This can cause us to look at the truth and at reality in a different way so that we can be shocked back into the reality of our faith.

God's people too often do not want to hear the truth, and if it is presented straightforwardly to us to convict us of sin, we will not accept the fact of our sin. We will rationalize it away.

This is what happened when David sinned by committing adultery with Bathsheba and killing her husband, Uriah. The shock effect of the parables on the believing yet sinfully complacent king is a phenomenon observable in this episode of David's life. David was not ready to hear an outright, direct accusation. He had become anesthetized to his spiritual and moral decline. Therefore, Nathan the prophet uses the approach of symbolic language (cf. 2 Sam. 12:1-9, 13-15). The symbolic story catches David off guard. It causes him to focus objectively on the meaning of the story because he does not think it is related to him personally. Only after he had fully understood the pictorial story and felt its emotive impact, does Nathan then apply it to David. Nathan says, "you are the man." Then David is pierced to the heart and is able to accept the accusation of his sin and repent. What are some areas of life to which we are spiritually insensitive? Extreme poverty and suffering exists in parts of our country like that in some third world countries. Because many Christians do not actually witness such poverty for themselves, they do not think about it that much, and, therefore, do not register as much concern. As in Hitler's Germany, many knew about the concentration camps, but they did not register open

objection because they did not personally witness them and, of course, they were afraid of persecution. Perhaps more Germans would have stood up if they had seen actual pictures. So today, some sectors of the American church need to make themselves more aware of these poverty-stricken areas and be shocked into the reality of their existence. Then perhaps more churches and Christians would take action to contribute help to these areas.

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

Will we be spiritually sedated or shocked into repentance?

An example of the jarring role of the heavenly parables for the original hearers occurs in Revelation 2 and 17. In Revelation 2, Christ addresses a sinful situation in which Christians have become spiritually lazy. The Christians in Thyatira may have thought it was wrong for "Jezebel" to teach a more lax morality and that it was religiously allowable to worship idols together with Jesus (Rev. 2:20): "but I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit *acts of immorality* and eat things sacrificed to idols." The idols she was teaching about were economic idols, like Baal was for the Israelites. Israel did not deny Yahweh, but they worshipped Baal for prosperity of the economy. Jezebel was teaching something similar.

The Thyatiran Christians, however, tolerated her teaching. Though they may have disagreed with her views, the church leaders did not think it was destructive enough to disallow her from teaching any more within the church.

John wants to shock the sluggish Christians so that they will discern the gravity of the situation. Therefore, later in Revelation 17, John paints Jezebel in her "true colors." For example, the phrase "they will eat her flesh" in Revelation 17:16 is reminiscent of Jezebel's destiny in 2(4) Kings 9:36: "they . . . will eat the flesh of Jezebel." Jezebel's destruction likewise happened according to the "word of the Lord" (4 Kings 9:36), as is true of Babylon in Revelation 17:17.¹¹

¹¹ P. Mauro, *The Patmos Visions: A Study of the Apocalypse* (Boston: Hamilton, 1925), 490; D. C. Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, Tex.: Dominion Press, 1987), 439, and J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16.17-19.10* (European University Studies, Series XXIII, Vol. 376 (New York, Paris: Peter Lang, 1989), 367, see a connection between the 4 Kings text and Rev. 17:16. See Beale, *Revelation*, in discussion of Revelation 17, where eleven additional parallels are drawn between the Harlot Babylon and Jezebel in 1 and 2 Kings.

Though past commentators have tended to identify Babylon either only with ungodly Roman culture or only with the apostate church or only with apostate Israel, it is better to see these identifications as not mutually exclusive (most interpreters have preferred an identification with the sinful Roman society). Nevertheless, the wicked religious-economic culture of the evil Roman world system is the focus in Revelation 17, and the apostate church and unbelieving Israel are included with it, inasmuch as they have become a part of the sinful world system. In this light, the link between Babylon and Jezebel in Revelation 2 suggests that Jezebel more precisely represents the apostate sector of the church through which the religious-economic system of the ungodly Greco-Roman (Babylonian) society makes its incursions into the church and establishes a fifth-columnist movement.

John wants to shock the sluggish Christians so that they will discern the severity of the situation. Therefore, in Revelation 17:1-6, John presents Jezebel in her true colors. Revelation 17:6-7 explicitly underscores the shock effect of the apocalyptic parables by narrating John's own reaction of alarm at the vision: "And I was astonished with great astonishment while beholding it [the vision]. And the angel said to me, 'Why are you astonished?'"

The angel's question, why have you become astonished? is not merely a question about why the seer was amazed at the unusual vision. Rather, several ideas are evoked by the question. The same language of amazement in Daniel 4:17a and 19a (LXX) also expressed a fearful and troubled spirit about a vision of the judgment of the Babylonian king.¹² The Aramaic expresses the idea of being "appalled" (cf. *shēmam* in Dan. 4:16, MT).¹³ In response to the horrific vision of Daniel 4, "Daniel . . . was appalled . . . and his thoughts troubled him." In Daniel the idea of "appalled" should be understood in the sense of "shock and fear." Likewise, John expresses fear about the nightmarish vision he has just seen concerning the horrible nature of the beast and the woman and their persecution. Perhaps, part of what contributed to his troubled spirit was shock and fear over the blasphemous claims of the beast and the severe persecution envisioned.

Also, contributory to the seer's shock may have been the parabolic portrayal of Babylon in the guise of a religiously faithful figure. She was attired in 17:4 almost identically to the bride-city of Christ in Revelation 21, who was adorned in precious stone (21:19), pearls and gold (21:18-21), as well as having been clothed in linen (cf. 18:16 and 19:8). The fact that the linen is defined as the "righteous deeds of the saints" in 19:8 may have momentarily led John to think that the Babylonian woman was not all bad but had some attractive spiritual features. Enhancing such an impression may have been the fact that the high

¹² Cf. *ethaumasā . . . thauma mega* ("I marvelled greatly") of Rev. 17:6 with Dan. 4:17a, *sphodra ethaumasā* ("I marvelled exceedingly"), and 4:19a, *megalōes de ethaumasēn* ("he marvelled greatly").

¹³ Cf. S. Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax*, SNTSM 52 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 12.

priest in the Old Testament is described also as adorned with “gold, purple, scarlet, linen, and [precious] stones,” which are likewise applied to the bridal city in 21:18-21.

On the other hand, the beast is “full of blasphemous names” (17:3), the cup in the woman’s hand is “full of abominations and the unclean things of her immorality” (17:4), she is called “the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth” (17:5), and the woman he saw was “drunk from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (17:6).

Consequently, John, like the leaders in Thyatira with regard to Jezebel, may have been temporarily captivated by what appeared, in part, to be a spiritually attractive figure and was blinded to the full, truly ungodly nature of the harlot. In fact, as noted already, part of the depiction of the Babylonian woman is taken from the Old Testament portrayal of Jezebel (see 17:16). Because Jezebel was the leader of or stood for the model of a party of false teachers in Revelation 2:20, the point in Revelation 17:6-7 would be that even John is shocked to discover that the Jezebel party, which is passing itself off as a group of Christian teachers, is none other than pseudo-Christian; indeed, Jezebel is none other than Babylon itself in the midst of the church, who eventually will be judged along with persecutors from outside the church. Therefore, at least part of the prophet’s shock was the result of theological dissonance produced by the combination in one parabolic figure of sinful and apparently righteous features.¹⁴

Therefore, the point in Revelation 2:20 and following is this: as long as the church of Thyatira allows Jezebel to teach such things within the confines of the church, the church itself is beginning to have spiritual intercourse with the Devil’s whore and with the devilish beast himself, upon whose back she rides in chapter 17. She is the opposite of the pure woman of Revelation 12:1-2 who symbolizes the pure, true people of God. John is saying to the Christians in Thyatira: “Oh, you want to tolerate this teaching which you do not think is too bad? Well, if you do, you are dealing with the Devil himself, and you will be destroyed.” What they thought was insignificant compromise and sin, was really a crack in their spiritual dikes that could have let through a flood of spiritual evil, overwhelming them (cf. Rev. 12:15). They needed to be shocked, like John, to the true deceptive and evil reality of the false teachers in their midst, who in some ways could have seemed to be godly.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” John is saying to us that *Revelation’s symbols either sedate or shock us back into the real-*

¹⁴ If the notions of *fearful* and *perplexed* are preferable over *admired*, then the verb θαυμάζω probably conveys a different notion in 17:6-7 than in 17:8: John’s fearful and puzzled reaction in contrast to the ungodly world’s admiration for the beast in 17:8. The reason for the difference, despite close contextual ties between the uses, could lie in the former being an allusion to Daniel 4 and the latter not part of such an allusion. For further discussion of the thorny lexical issue see Beale, *Revelation* on Rev. 17.

ity of our relationship with God. Is there a sinful area in our lives that we do not think is really that bad? Will we be sedated or shocked into the reality of what our relationship with God demands us to do in this situation?

Sometimes on the way to church, I see people jogging or doing some other sporting activity. Probably, some of those I see do not go to church. They think everything is all right in their lives. They see no need to hear God's word or to be with God's people, but everything is not all right.

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

I remember some years ago, that I made an appointment with an oral hygienist to check and clean my teeth; I had not been for a checkup in a long time. While sitting in the dental chair during a two-minute break in the procedure, I glanced at some pictures on the wall directly opposite me. They pictured the progressive stages of gum disease, from healthy gums all the way to gums that appeared to be rotted. When the hygienist came back in to continue, I asked her where I was located in the series of pictures. She said that my gums were on the road heading toward the set of pictures that depicted the rotted gums. I said, "but my gums feel fine; how can they be diseased, since they do not hurt?" She responded, "that is the genius of gum disease: it does not hurt

badly until it is too late.” The pictures of the stages of gum disease together with her interpretative commentary shocked me into the reality of my condition. Since then, I have brushed my teeth typically two times a day and flossed every day. By so doing, I was able to halt the onset of imminent gum disease and have been able to maintain healthy gums. Sometimes sin is like gum disease: we may not feel the spiritual hurt until significant harm has happened. We need the parabolic pictures of Revelation to shock us into the reality of our sin and spark us back into a healthy relationship with God.

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

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

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

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

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