

## QUESTION 6

# Should We Understand John's Visions Literally or Symbolically?

Interpreters of John's Apocalypse have struggled since earliest times with the language that he uses to describe the visions that the risen Jesus Christ granted him. How much of the detail of the three series of judgments, and of the later visions, does John want to be taken literally? How much is symbolic? Some of John's descriptions are easy to recognize as symbolic (or metaphorical). For example, when the risen Jesus promises to the Christians in Philadelphia, "If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God" (Rev. 3:12), even interpreters who want to explain the contents of the book of Revelation as literally as possible state that "this is of course a figure of speech."<sup>1</sup> Since the Reformation, the importance of a literal interpretation has been recognized and emphasized by evangelical interpreters of Scripture. However, the expression "literal interpretation" or, with the Latin phrase the Reformers used, finding the *sensus literalis* of Scripture, must be carefully defined. Not every word or expression in the Bible is to be understood "literally" in terms of the normal usage of the word or expression. When Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep" (John 10:7), neither the word "gate" nor the word "sheep" is meant to be understood in the normal usage of the words. In this context, the two words are used with a symbolic, metaphorical, or figurative meaning. If John, who relates Jesus' words, wanted his readers to understand the words "gate" and "sheep" as *symbols* for the significance of Jesus who provides access to God's presence and God's salvation ("gate") for God's people

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1. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 88. Robert L. Thomas concurs: "The language is clearly metaphorical" (*Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 292).

(“sheep”),<sup>2</sup> such a symbolic reading is the intended reading. A “literal” or, rather, “literalist” reading leads in this case to nonsense, in other cases to misinterpretation. The main question is not how many of the words and expressions of the Bible we can interpret literally, but whether the author’s intended meaning is literal or symbolic (or figurative).

### The Symbolism of the Three Series of Judgments

An entirely symbolic interpretation of the book of Revelation is certainly not how John wanted his readers to understand the content of what he wrote. A consistently symbolic interpretation would reduce God’s judgment over sinners at the end to a mere symbol. Since the descriptions of judgment serve as warnings to Jesus’ followers to be unswerving and consistent in their loyalty to Jesus, even if this means suffering and martyrdom, the judgments that are depicted must have some form of historical reality. Mere symbols neither destroy nor hurt. If there is no “bite” of historical reality, rhetoric that is intended to warn is empty and quickly will be dismissed as irrelevant.

On the other hand, since many individual judgments of the three series would end civilization as John’s readers knew it, in particular the bowl judgments,<sup>3</sup> John describes the content of the visions that he received with a certain amount of symbolism and hyperbole. He uses both Old Testament language and allusions to contemporary political, social, and military realities in the first century. And we need to remember that John wrote a prophecy (Rev. 1:3) that he was asked not to seal (22:10). Rather, it was to be sent as letter (see 1:4–6) that was to be read and understood by Christian readers in the first century.

We should note that a symbolic description of events does not mean that nothing ever happens. While John’s language may be at times symbolic, he still may describe real events.

### The Symbolism and Reality of the Seal, Trumpet, and Bowl Judgments

There is no space here to provide an interpretation of all seven elements of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments, twenty-one announcements of judgments in all.<sup>4</sup> We will limit ourselves to a discussion of the first element in the three series of judgments, demonstrating the main options for interpretation.

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2. See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 801, 810–11.

3. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 580. For example, the destruction of the sea in the second bowl judgment is tantamount to the destruction of Mediterranean society whose trade depended on maritime commerce, and the pollution of the rivers and springs makes human life impossible.

4. For details, see Osborne, *Revelation*, 272–300 (seals 1–6), 336–38 (seal 7), 349–89 (trumpets 1–6), 438–50 (trumpet 7), and 559–602 (bowls 1–7).

### The First Seal Judgment

The first seal judgment depicts a rider on a white horse who has a bow and a crown and who conquers (Rev. 6:1–2). It is impossible to imagine that a literal rider on a literal horse with a literal bow will come from God's heavenly throne to earth and conquer the world, all by himself.

Scholars who interpret biblical prophecy as much as possible in a literal manner see in the rider “the world ruler of the tribulation” who is then identified with the first beast of the sea of Revelation 13.<sup>5</sup> A more cautious literal interpretation—“literal” in the sense of seeing the fulfillment in historical figures—sees in the rider on the white horse “a personification of a growing movement or force” of which the beast out of the sea from Revelation 13 will be a part. He is “one of many impostors who constitute this anti-christian force” since he will come at “the beginning of the birth-pains,” threatening war but achieving a bloodless victory (the bow is without arrows).<sup>6</sup> Since neither the horse nor the bow can be taken literally (at least since the second- and third-century Parthians, who fought with bows, were no longer posing a threat), a symbolic interpretation is required.

A consistently symbolic interpretation sees the first rider as representing the forces of Satan that were unleashed on the world as a result of Christ's victorious suffering (see the context in Rev. 5:1–14). These forces attempt “to defeat and oppress believers spiritually through deception, persecution, or both.”<sup>7</sup> Since this theme of cosmic conflict can be found already in the Old Testament, in Jesus' teaching, in Paul's proclamation, and, most importantly, in many other passages in the Apocalypse, this interpretation is possible.

Some combine a literal (historical) and a symbolic interpretation. The description of the rider reminded readers in the first century of Parthian warriors (who fought on horses with bows). These warriors were not controlled by Rome (hence the crown of the rider) and were even feared by Rome (they defeated a Roman army in 55 B.C. and in A.D. 62). However, John hardly describes a particular Parthian campaign against the Roman Empire. The rider on the white horse with a bow who is given a crown “represents humankind setting themselves up in the place of God,” and the entire vision of the first seal describes “the general propensity of sinful humans for conquest.”<sup>8</sup> This means that seal 1 (wars of conquest) corresponds to sign 2 in Jesus' prophecy of the end (wars, rumors of war, international unrest). The first seal can then be interpreted as predicting armed conflicts, which have continued to

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5. See Walvoord, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 126–27.

6. Thomas, *Revelation*, 422–23.

7. Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 377 (also see 371, 375–78).

8. Osborne, *Revelation*, 277.

characterize human history after the first century when John wrote. At the same time, linguistic and thematic connections with Revelation 12:12–17 and 13:7 indicate that the first seal introduces the great cosmic war between Satan and the people of God.<sup>9</sup> On account of the allusions to first-century realities and the presence of the theme of cosmic conflict in the biblical tradition and in other parts of John's Apocalypse, this interpretation is plausible.

### The First Trumpet Judgment

The first trumpet judgment speaks of “hail and fire, mixed with blood” that are hurled to the earth, with the result that “a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up” (Rev. 8:7). Interpreters who insist on a literal interpretation expect that in the last phase of human history an “unfathomable deluge” of hail and fire mixed with blood will be hurled by God onto the earth, with the result that one-third of the vegetation is destroyed.<sup>10</sup> While such an event is possible (e.g., in connection with nuclear war), it would be impossible to say that it is the precise (and only) fulfillment of this text. If one such event can occur, subsequent events of a similar nature could take place as well. In other words, a literal interpretation does not allow us to specify the point at which we have arrived in God's timetable.

A symbolic interpretation takes the first trumpet as depicting God's punishment of unbelievers: “The trumpets portray judgment on unbelievers because of their hardened attitude, thus demonstrating God's incomparable sovereignty and glory. These judgments are not intended to evoke repentance but to punish because of the permanently hardened, unrepentant stance of the unbelievers toward God and his people.”<sup>11</sup>

An interpretation that combines symbolic meanings with literal events in history sees both the theme of divine judgment that brings about the fulfillment of the judgment prophesied in Joel 2:30–31 (where blood and fire are mentioned together) and the reality of picturing one-third of all the great forests of the world burned down.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Osborne sees “a description of the extent to which war is the ultimate depravity of humanity” (ibid.).
10. Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1995], 15–17. The literal interpretation of the assertion that “all green grass was burned up” creates a problem with the content of the fifth trumpet, where grass still exists (Rev. 9:4). Thomas solves this by assuming a time lapse between the first and fifth trumpets, and by pointing out that in most regions grass is not green year round. He accuses scholars who accept symbolic interpretations as getting into “a hopeless quagmire of contradictions” (ibid., 16–17) but does not see that his interpretation leads to contradictions as well, which need to be solved.
11. Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 472.
12. Osborne, *Revelation*, 350–51.

## The First Bowl Judgment

The first bowl judgment announces that “a foul and painful sore came on those who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped its image” (Rev. 16:2). A literal interpretation reckons with an outbreak of agonizing ulcers that refuse to go away which will afflict the unbelievers.<sup>13</sup> A symbolic interpretation understands the effect of the bowl that produces a bad and evil sore in a figurative sense: the people who accept the idolatrous mark of the beast will be punished by being given “a penal mark” that presumably entails spiritual and psychological torment (as in Rev. 9:4–6, 10).<sup>14</sup> Interpreters who combine symbolic and literal interpretations understand the first bowl as emphasizing that the people who have accepted the mark of the beast deserve judgment from God, while pointing out that “the thought of such a plague in a literal sense is fearsome indeed. Medical supplies would be exhausted in a few days with such a universal disaster.”<sup>15</sup>

## Numerical Symbolism

The presence of symbolism in John's series of seven judgments needs to be taken seriously, even if it undermines the efforts of end-time “specialists.” Such “specialists” often use the progression from one to seven in the three series of seven judgments (or other numbers in the Apocalypse) to more precisely calculate the nearness of the end.

The most important numbers in the Apocalypse are three, four, seven, and twelve (or multiples of these numbers).<sup>16</sup> Most acknowledge the presence of symbolism in at least some of the passages in the Apocalypse. It is well known that there were more churches in the province of Asia at the end of the first century than the seven churches that John singles out (Rev. 1:4, 11; 2:1–3:22). For example, there were churches in Troas, Hierapolis, Colossae, Miletus, and Tralles. Whatever the particular reason for the selection of the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea may have been, they are intended to describe “typical assemblies with regard to their histories and spiritual states.”<sup>17</sup>

## Seven

Seven is the number of completeness. This means that a list of seven is

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13. Thomas, *Revelation*, 248–49. He adds, “Happenings on such a catastrophic scale stretch the capacity of human comprehension. No precedent in human history can measure up to the future supernatural intervention of God, but man's inability to grasp the magnitude of it is no reason to deny its literal meaning” (ibid., 249).

14. Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 814.

15. Osborne, *Revelation*, 580.

16. See Richard J. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 29–37.

17. Thomas, *Revelation*, 63–64; see Osborne, *Revelation*, 60.

representative of all: the seven churches of the province of Asia stand for all the churches; the seven bowl judgments stand for all divine judgments and for the seven trumpet judgments as well. It is probably not accidental that several titles of God occur seven times in the book: the full title “the Lord God Almighty” (Rev. 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22), “the one who sits on the throne” (4:2, 9, 10; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:15; 19:4; 20:11; 21:5). There are also seven “beatitudes” sprinkled throughout the book of Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). The Greek term *makarios* translated “blessed” is also used in the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 5:3–12).

#### Four

Four is the number of the world. The earth has four corners (Rev. 7:1; 20:8) and four winds (7:1). The created order of the world can be described in terms of four divisions. Every creature “in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea” offers to God and the Lamb a fourfold doxology of “praise and honor and glory and power” (5:13 NIV).<sup>18</sup> The created order consists of earth, sea, (rivers and) springs, and heaven (8:7–12; 14:7; 16:2–9)—four parts of creation that are the targets of the first four trumpet judgments and the first four bowl judgments. This pattern explains why all three series of seven judgments have a 4 + 3 pattern: in each case the first four judgments are judgments on the earth or the world. This pattern also explains why there were originally four series of judgments, if the seven thunders are included (10:3–7). John was granted visions in which he saw the complete judgment (series of seven) on the entire world (four series). It is perhaps not accidental that the list of cargoes that Babylon imports from “the merchants of the earth” (18:11–13) consists of 28, that is, 4 x 7 items.<sup>19</sup> It is probably also not accidental that the title for Jesus Christ “the Lamb” occurs 28 (i.e., 4 x 7) times, indicating the worldwide scope of his victory. The fourfold phrase that describes the nations of the world—“peoples and tribes and languages and nations”—occurs seven times (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15; the phrase varies each time it occurs; instead of “tribes” sometimes “kings” [10:11] or “multitudes” [17:15] is used). It may also not be accidental that the title of the sovereign God who created the world—“the one who lives forever and ever”—occurs four times in the book (4:9, 10; 10:6; 15:7). There are four references to “the seven spirits” (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6), as they represent the fullness of God’s power “sent out into all the earth” (5:6). The four references to the seven churches (1:4, 11, 20) suggest that they represent all the churches of the world.

18. The other doxologies are either sevenfold (Rev. 5:12; 7:12) or threefold (Rev. 4:9, 11; 19:1b).

19. Note that the items in the list of cargoes are not numbered, nor does John give the figure 28.

### Three

Three does not have a consistent meaning. The number three occurs in the book of Revelation in connection with the designations of God: the title with its three elements—the one “who is and who was and who is to come”—occurs three times (Rev. 1:4, 8; 4:8); God is worshipped with the acclamation “holy, holy, holy” (4:8), linked with the threefold doxology of “glory and honor and thanks” (4:9, 11; see 19:1; the third element is “power” in 4:11, and the elements in 19:1 are “salvation and glory and power”).

### Twelve

Twelve is the number of the people of God. This symbolic significance derives from the twelve tribes of the people of Israel in Old Testament times. The number twelve is squared for completeness (144) and multiplied by a thousand (the 144,000 of Rev. 7:4–8; 14:1; see question 9). The description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:9–22:5 contains twelve references to the number twelve.

### Specific Symbolic Numbers

This numerical symbolism suggests that unless there is a clear indication to a literal interpretation, the numbers in John's Apocalypse should be understood to have a symbolic meaning. This clearly also applies to the number 666, which John insists can be understood if readers apply wisdom and insight to the number and if they can do calculations (Rev. 13:18; for details see question 21). Some of John's numbers can be interpreted in the context of Pythagorean mathematics, which conceived of numbers as corresponding to geometrical figures.<sup>20</sup> John uses square numbers for the people of God (144, the twelfth square number, i.e., the square of 12): the figure of God's people is 12 times 1,000 from each of the twelve tribes, that is, 144,000, a figure that can be represented as the square of twelve ( $12 \times 12 = 144$ ; note that 144 is in fact the twelfth square number), multiplied by a thousand. John states that the New Jerusalem is square (Rev. 21:16), and he uses the number twelve exactly twelve times in the description of the New Jerusalem: there are twelve gates,

20. Two-dimensional figures represent plane numbers: figures with equal sides and figures with unequal sides. The most important figures with equal sides were triangular and square numbers; the most important figures with unequal sides were rectangular numbers, which can all be depicted as pebbles arranged in patterns. For example: six is a triangular number (the sum of consecutive numbers that add up to six, that is,  $1 + 2 + 3 = 6$ ) and can be depicted as a triangle of  $1 + 2 + 3$  pebbles; sixteen is a square number (the sum of the successive odd numbers, that is,  $1 + 3 + 5 + 7 = 16$ ) and can be depicted as a square of  $4 + 4 + 4 + 4$  pebbles; twelve is a rectangular number (the sum of successive even numbers, that is,  $2 + 4 + 6 = 12$ ) and can be depicted as a rectangle of  $4 + 4 + 4$  pebbles. For this discussion, including the following comments in the text, see Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 390–407.

twelve angels, the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, twelve foundations, the twelve names of the twelve apostles, the length and the width is twelve thousand stadia, the twelve gates are twelve pearls, and there are twelve kinds of fruit (Rev. 21:9–22:5).

John also uses rectangular numbers: the apocalyptic period of the end times lasts 42 months or 1,260 days (Rev. 11:2, 3; 12:6; 13:5). The number 42 is the sixth rectangular number (6 x 7), and 1,260 is the thirty-fifth rectangular number (35 x 36). The fact that 42 months is three and a half years indicates that this period is borrowed from Daniel, who uses the phrase “a time, times, and half a time” (Dan. 7:25; 12:7), a phrase that John explicitly uses in Revelation 12:14. What is at first sight surprising is the fact that John ignores Daniel’s specifications of this phrase, given as 1,290 days and as 1,335 days, respectively (Dan. 12:11, 12). John’s figures of 42 months or 1,260 days require the artificial assumption of 12 months of only 30 days each. It seems that John deliberately chose rectangular numbers to describe the period during which the beast reigns (triangular number) persecuting the people of God (square number), using rectangular numbers “to designate this ambiguous period in which the beast and the saints oppose each other.”<sup>21</sup>

In sum, the symbolism of these numbers suggest that all, if not most, numbers in John’s Apocalypse should be interpreted symbolically, not literally.

### Summary

The details of the first four judgments of the seal series indicate that John is not describing new developments: wars of conquest (seal 1) took place in the late first, second, and third centuries, and ever since. The same holds true for international unrest (seal 2), famine and hunger (seal 3), and the effects of warfare (sword), famine, and plagues, all of which kill people (seal 4).

Literal events that resemble the judgments depicted in the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments are not impossible to imagine—not only because of God’s sovereign power, but also because of humankind’s seemingly endless capacity for devising, producing, and deploying technologies and weapons that affect or have the potential to affect large parts of the globe.

At the same time, John’s concern is not to provide his readers in the first century with a detailed timetable of future events that allows them to establish how close the end is. Even taken literally, many of the judgments described in the three series have been a reality since the first century (and before—for example, during Israel’s exodus from Egypt), in varying degrees and in different regions of the earth. The symbolism of most if not all of the numbers in the Apocalypse suggest that John’s focus is not on historical events for their own sake but on the meaning of God’s judgment both for the world (as a call to

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21. Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 401.



repentance) and for the church (as a call to faithful perseverance and courageous witness).

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are the dangers of a purely literal interpretation? What difference do literal interpretations make regarding the time of Jesus' return?
2. Can literal events have symbolic meanings?
3. How can symbolic meanings be established?
4. What are the dangers of a purely symbolic interpretation?
5. What is the meaning of the numbers four and twelve in John's visions?