

Symbolism in Revelation 4-5

The symbolism of Revelation comes from The Hebrew Scriptures, what Christians today call the Old Testament. Most of the symbolism is found in the writings of the prophets: especially Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah—but also from the books of Genesis and Exodus. Revelation is not allegory—meaning, not every symbol *stands for* something else. Revelation is more *allusional*—meaning that certain symbols and images are supposed to remind us of something that’s happened before.

The Throne Scene: John is deliberately parodying the Roman court. The image of a throne with concentric circles around it is meant to suggest that God, and not the Roman Emperor, is really on the throne.

Throne: is just what you think it is—a symbol of power and authority.

Jasper, Carnelian & Emerald: We don’t know what John saw. He uses the words he knows to describe, as best as he can, what he saw. Jasper, carnelian and emerald are all precious stones that reflect an extraordinary amount of light. The heavenly vision John saw must have radiated with light and color. The vividness is meant to capture God’s infinite splendor, beauty, majesty and glory.

Twenty Four Thrones, Twenty Four Elders (dressed in white and crowned): Again, this parodies the Roman court. Twelve seems to be the number of divine government. The 24 thrones and elders are traditionally interpreted as the 12 tribes/sons of Jacob and the twelve Apostles. Together, they are representative of God’s People throughout the ages. The fact that they are dressed in white and crowned suggests that they have been purified and glorified by the resurrection, and that they have received the crown of life for persevering in faith.

Flashes of Lightning, Rumbles and Peels of Thunder. These images are associated with *theophany*—a manifestation of God that is visible to the senses. The most famous *theophany* in the Old Testament was at Mount Sinai when God gave His Law to His People. That occasion was punctuated with flashes of lightning and rumbles and peels of thunder. The author of Hebrews picks up on this and calls God a “consuming fire.” The image is meant to evoke awe and fear.

Sea of Glass. There are many, differing interpretations, including but not limited to: the top side of the firmament (in other words—the other side of the sky), the source of the river of life and thirdly, the redeemed body of believers. What is significant is that it is not a sea of water. In the Hebrew mind, the sea was synonymous with chaos and death. Later in Revelation John observes of heaven, “There was no more sea.” This would have been interpreted as good news by his readers.

Four Living Creatures (covered with eyes). The Four Living Creatures are representative of all living things (humans, birds, wild animals and domesticated animals). God is glorified by all living things. “Covered with eyes” connotes infinite wisdom and perception.

Scroll / Seven Seals. In Roman culture, important legal documents were sealed with seven seals in the presence of seven witnesses. No one was allowed to break the seals except for the addressee. Here, the scroll refers to God’s plan of redemption. John weeps because if no one can open the scroll, then the universe will never be redeemed in full.

Seven horns / Seven Eyes. The Lamb that was slain has seven horns (symbols of authority and power) and seven eyes (symbols of wisdom and perception) to show that the Lamb who was slain is the wisdom and power of God (see 1 Corinthians 1).

10,000 times 10,000. 10,000 was the highest number conceived of by the Greco-Roman world. 10,000 times 10,000 conveys an innumerable multitude of angels. This would have encouraged John’s readers who felt outnumbered and insignificant.