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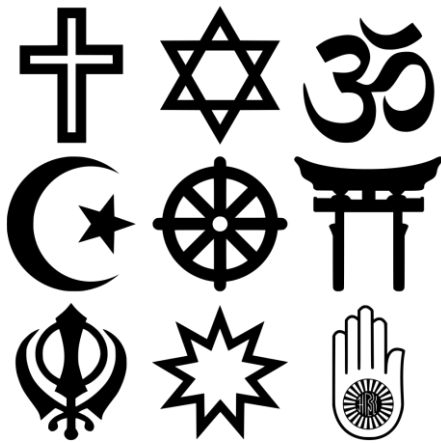
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Revelation Intro 4: Understanding Symbols in Apocalyptic Literature

This is one of five units introducing the book of Revelation. You are free to pass this PDF on to others, but please don't change any of its content when you do.

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Create a Learning Site (<https://www.wilrens.org>) is a monthly training letter and blog in the field of biblical studies and teaching.



## SYMBOL

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How do we understand symbols in apocalyptic literature? Well, by first of all asking, what is a symbol? You see a small sample here of religious symbols. No doubt a number of them you recognize. Probably, one or more of them you don't recognize; they are foreign to you. Each of them stands for a religion. Some of them also stand for a belief that is central to that religion. That illustrates what a symbol is: it is something that stands for something else. Usually, it takes the form of an object or a sign, and it stands for and represents something else.

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6c/Religious\\_syms.svg/1024px-Religious\\_syms.svg.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6c/Religious_syms.svg/1024px-Religious_syms.svg.png), CC0

## International Morse Code

1. The length of a dot is one unit.
2. A dash is three units.
3. The space between parts of the same letter is one unit.
4. The space between letters is three units.
5. The space between words is seven units.

|   |               |   |                                 |
|---|---------------|---|---------------------------------|
| A | • —           | U | • • —                           |
| B | • • • —       | V | • • • —                         |
| C | • — • •       | W | • — • —                         |
| D | • — • —       | X | • — • • —                       |
| E | •             | Y | • — • — •                       |
| F | • • • —       | Z | • — • — • •                     |
| G | • — • —       |   |                                 |
| H | • • • •       |   |                                 |
| I | • •           |   |                                 |
| J | • — • — • —   |   |                                 |
| K | • — • • —     | 1 | • — • — • — • —                 |
| L | • — • • •     | 2 | • • — • — • — • —               |
| M | • — • —       | 3 | • • • — • — • — • —             |
| N | • — • —       | 4 | • • • • — • — • — • —           |
| O | • — • — • —   | 5 | • • • • • — • — • — • —         |
| P | • — • — • •   | 6 | • • • • • • — • — • — • —       |
| Q | • — • — • — • | 7 | • • • • • • • — • — • — • —     |
| R | • — • — • •   | 8 | • • • • • • • • — • — • — • —   |
| S | • • • —       | 9 | • • • • • • • • • — • — • — • — |
| T | • —           | 0 | • — • — • — • — • —             |

CODE

[Sound: three rapid knocks, three slower knocks, three rapid knocks.] What was that? Well, it was Morse code. In this case, the symbols are sound patterns, representing letters, and in order to understand what is being communicated, you need the key to decode. You actually see it here: the international Morse code alphabet. See if you can get the message now. [Sound repeated.] SOS. It is a call for help.

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/b5/International\\_Morse\\_Code.svg/794px-International\\_Morse\\_Code.svg.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/b5/International_Morse_Code.svg/794px-International_Morse_Code.svg.png), CC0



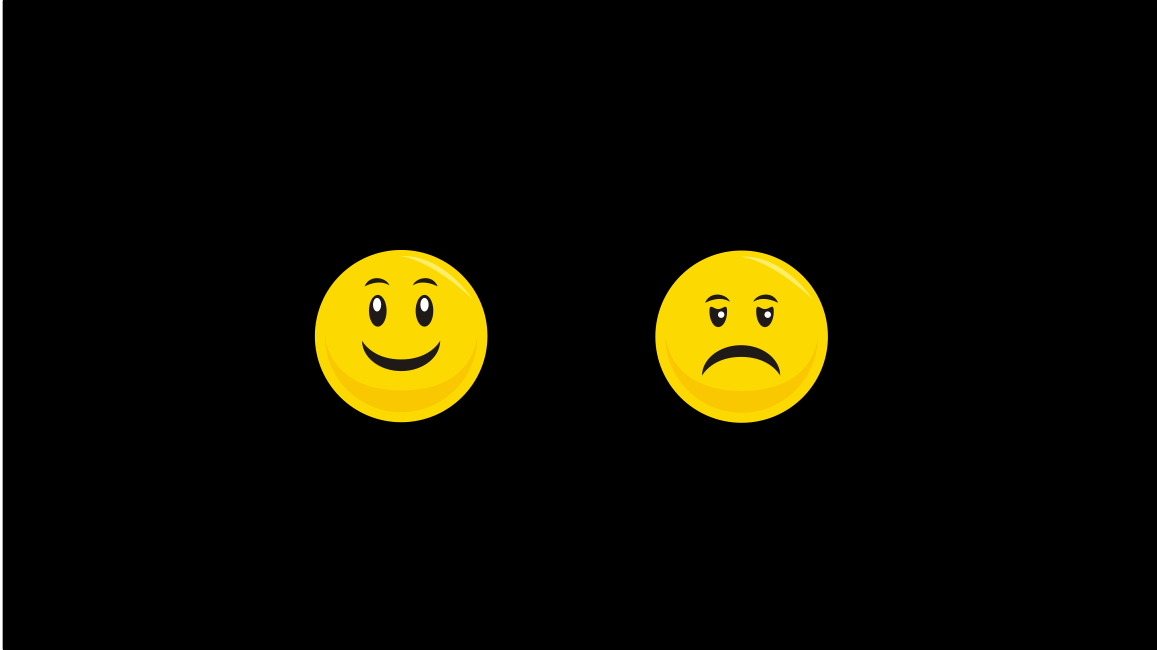
## DECODE

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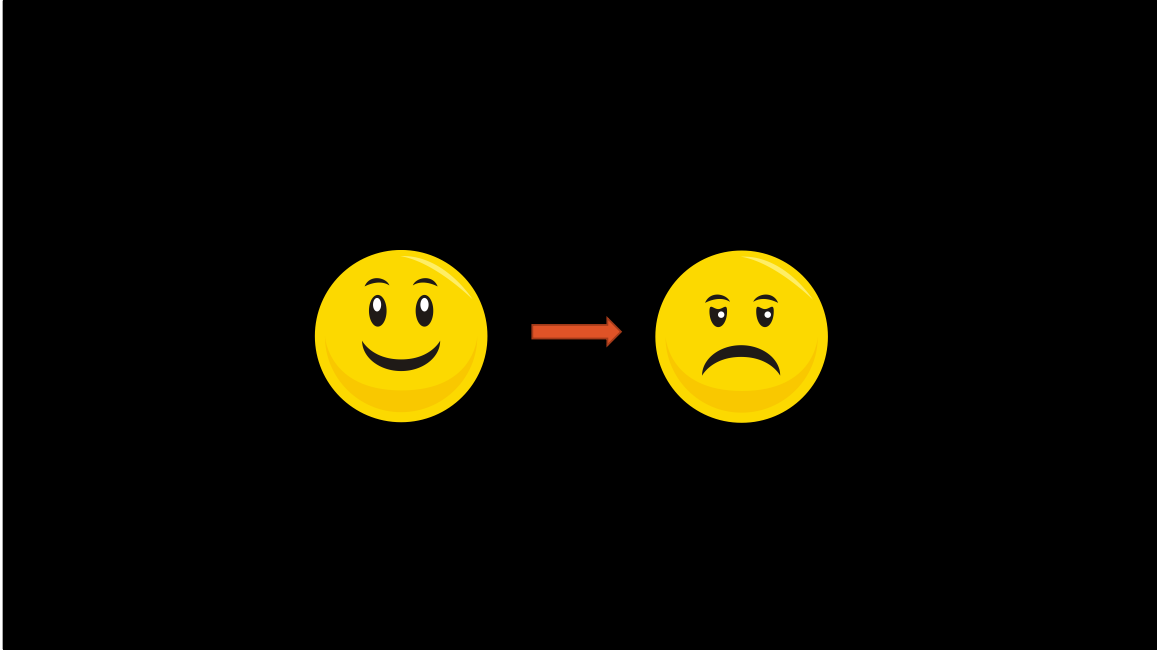
The symbols in apocalyptic writing also make up a code. In order to understand what is being communicated, we have to decode the symbolic language, the symbolic code, and to do that we need the key. So one of the aims of this unit is to think about the key to apocalyptic symbolism.



But first, let's look at a few more familiar symbols. Here is one that everyone knows. It is part of a worldwide language. It stands for an emotion, or for my attitude toward something: I like it. By the way, this illustrates the advantage of symbols; once we've become acquainted with the code, with the key to the code, it opens a powerful channel of communication.



Here is another symbol in the same style, signifying the opposite emotion. Now, if I add one more symbol, I turn this into a story, a very simple story, but a story nevertheless.



That symbol is an arrow, which stands for something like sequence or result, and this is the story. I was happy. Then something happened – that is why it is a story; I have no idea what; the story doesn't tell us. And then, I ended up being unhappy. That is the story, very simple, but a story nevertheless, and completely told using symbols. Now, on a more complex level, that is what the book of Revelation does: telling a story by means of symbols.

## National Symbols



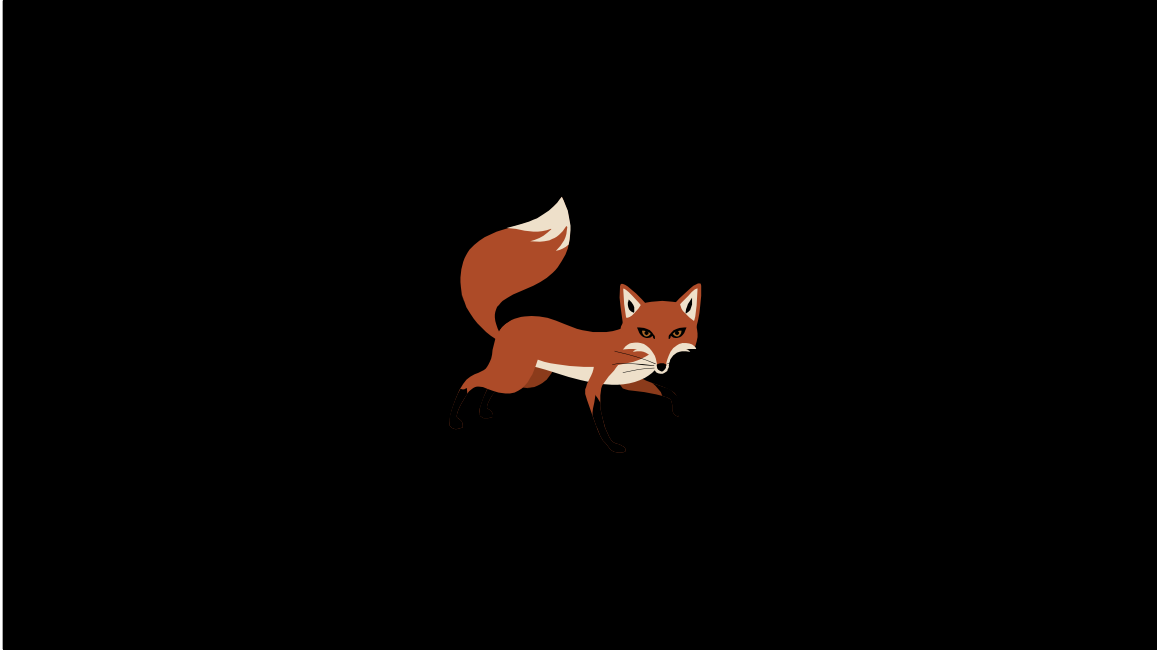
Of course, there are all sorts of other symbols that we are familiar with. This one is a national symbol in the form of a flag; it represents Canada.



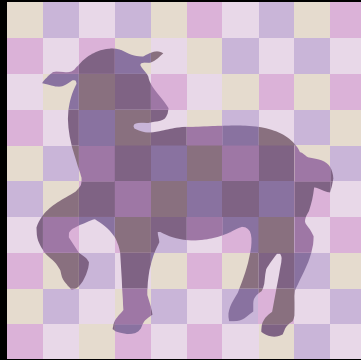
## Animals



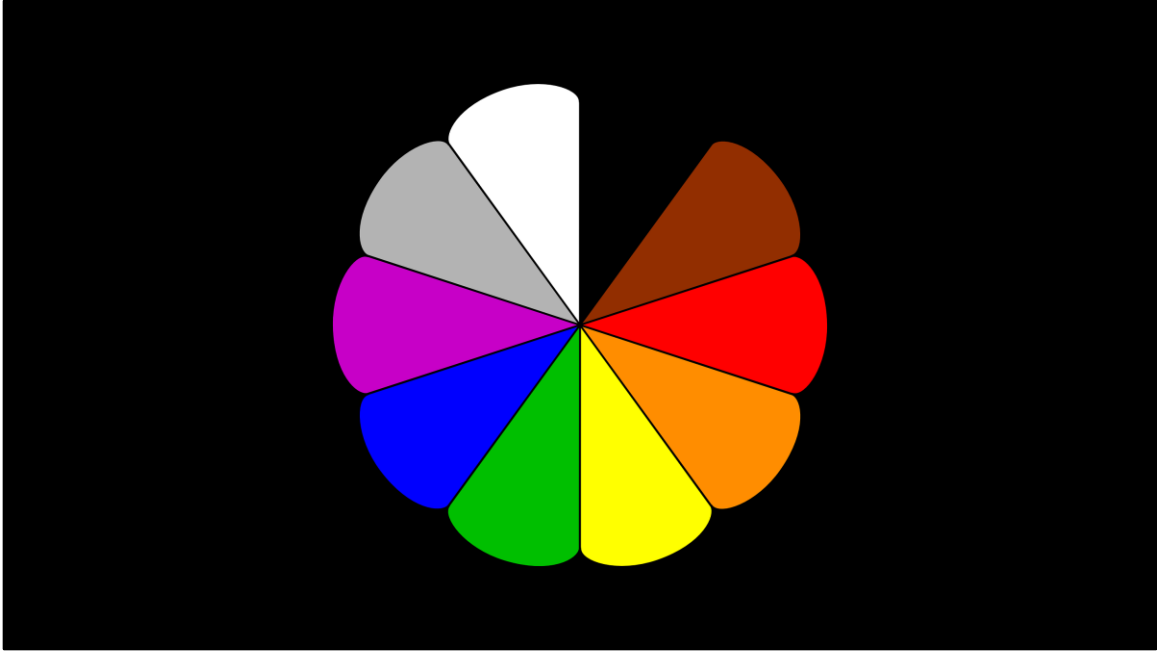
Animals can be used symbolically. This one is the bald eagle, and you may immediately connect it with the United States, even though many countries have an eagle as their symbol; it often is either an eagle or a lion.



The fox, in my culture at least, stands for slyness; it is a very shrewd, tricky animal. That may be different in your culture, and you may not even have foxes where you come from, so that's a more difficult symbol to use.



This is a lamb, and that is of course a symbol that appears in the book of Revelation. There, it represents Jesus, which doesn't mean that Jesus looks like a lamb, and he is not a lamb in any literal sense of the word, but he is like a lamb in some way. In what way? Think OT: the lamb is linked with the idea of sacrifice and with the Passover and the Passover lamb, the lamb that was killed on the day of Passover and its blood was put on the door, in Egypt, to keep the angel of death out, protecting those inside of the house. That is how Jesus is our sacrifice and our Passover lamb.



Colours can also be used in symbolic ways. White is the colour of purity, or of victory; red is the colour of blood; black is the colour of death.

## Names

Jerusalem

Babylon

Sodom

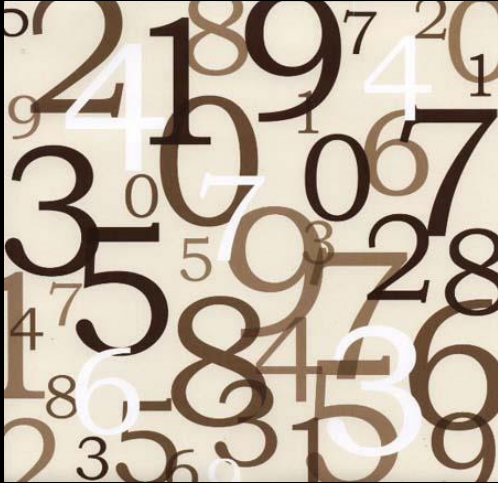
Egypt

Jezebel

Armageddon

Names can also be used symbolically, as they are in the book of Revelation. Geographical names like Jerusalem, Babylon, Sodom, Egypt likely do not refer to that particular location but carry a symbolic meaning, as does the name Jezebel and most likely also Armageddon, as will see when we get there.

## Numbers



14

And then there are numbers. Now, we don't normally use numbers in symbolic ways, the book of Revelation does. You may have noticed that a few numbers appear often; most numbers don't appear at all. And then there are some special numbers that don't appear often in the book but really make you wonder: what do they mean? 144,000, 1260, 666. We will come back to numbers because we will need a separate key to decode the symbolic meaning of numbers in Revelation.

## Main players: Trinity of evil



Beast 1 الوحش

Beast 2 الوحش



Before I say more about numbers, let's first talk about the story, the plot of the book of Revelation. We have here the story of a battle between light and darkness, between good and evil. And on the side of evil, there is sort of a Trinity involved, a Trinity of evil: there is the dragon, there is the beast from the sea, that looks a lot like the dragon, and there is a second beast, the beast from the land, which looks like a lamb, but it talks like a dragon, giving away its true nature. Now, these three are major players on the side of evil.



## A TALE OF TWO WOMEN

In addition, there are two women involved; one is a prostitute; the other one is a bride.





## A TALE OF TWO CITIES

They two are also two cities. One is Babylon, associated with the side of evil, and the other is Jerusalem, associated with the side of light and good.

## Introduced, then destroyed (in reversed order)

- Ch. 12 Dragon 
- Ch. 13 Two Beasts
- Ch. 17-18 Babylon 
- Ch. 19 Two Beasts
- Ch. 20 Dragon 

In the book, they are introduced to us in a particular order, and then we hear about their destruction in the opposite order. So in Revelation 12, we are first introduced to the dragon. In Revelation 13, we get to see the two beasts and it is only in chapter 17 that Babylon the great, the city, the harlot or prostitute is introduced to us and this is immediately followed by Babylon's destruction. Then, in chapter 19, the two beasts are destroyed, and in chapter 20, we read about the end and destruction of the dragon. That, in a nutshell, is the story of the second half of the book of Revelation. It is not really complicated, is it?

# Decode Symbols

- Some explained by John
- Most: taken from OT
- Some: 1st century world
- Animals: empires and rulers



At this point, I've hardly said anything about what these symbols in the book of Revelation actually mean; that will have to wait until we get there in the text. But I do want to say something about where we find the key or rather the keys, since there is more than one, that we need to decode the symbols in this book. The first kind of key is given to us by John himself; he explains some of the symbols in his book, which is very helpful. For instance, the seven lampstands in chapter 1, he tells us, are the seven churches. And the seven stars in the right hand of Jesus are the seven angels of the churches. Now, what that means is less clear, but at least we know what those seven stars stand for. The dragon is explained to us quite extensively, both in chapter 12 and in chapter 20. So for some symbols John gives us the key in the book.

For others, will have to turn to the Old Testament. You may have noticed that there is a lot of material from the Old Testament somehow reused, in essence recycled, by John in Revelation. Easily two thirds of the book include something from the Old Testament. Or to be more precise, by one estimate, out of a good 400 verses, 278 include some allusion or reference to the Old Testament. John is truly recycling the Old Testament, redefining and reframing it around Christ – he doesn't just copy it; he gives things new or changed meanings. But in order to understand his meaning for his

symbols, we often have to turn to the Old Testament to find where it comes from and then to understand what John means with it or what the vision means with it. So the Old Testament is very important.

In some cases, the key comes from the first-century world. That is harder because we don't have access to it. We may not be aware of certain things, but the background is found in the Roman Empire, its culture, and circumstances back then. Perhaps one thing to add, an important key: whenever we read about animals or monsters, then we usually are to think of empires and rulers, and sometimes of spiritual powers, in the sense of the dragon as Satan and the lamb as Jesus. But in other cases, and that goes back to the book of Daniel, where there were four animals representing four kingdoms and their ruler, in apocalyptic literature animals and monsters generally stand for an empire or its ruler.

Numbers  $1000 = 10 \times 10 \times 10$

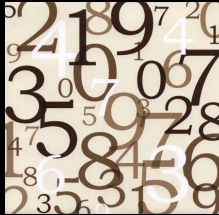
$144,000 = 12 \times 12 \times 1000$

666

$1260 = 42 = 3\frac{1}{2}$

$7000 = 7 \times 1000$

$1600 = 4 \times 4 \times 10 \times 10$



7

12

10

4

Before I finish, a word about numbers in the book of Revelation. Obviously, there are a lot of them. Some numbers don't appear often, but they intrigue us, like the 144,000, or the number 666, and then there is 1260 days, which happens to equal 42 months, which makes 3 ½ years. There are the numbers 1600 and 7000, and then there are a few numbers that appear a lot in the book. They include 7, 12, 10, and 4.

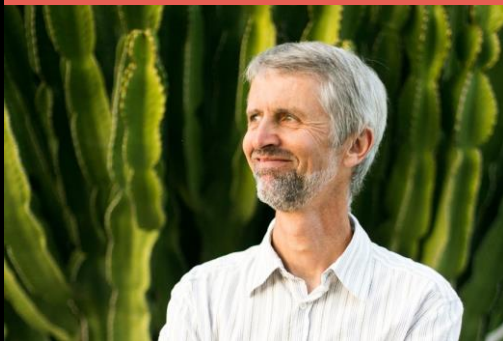
Now, these four numbers are perhaps not quite so difficult. 12 is the number of tribes in Israel and the number of the apostles. It is a number connected with God's people. 7: seven days of the week; it stands for fullness, completion, perfection. 10: we have 10 fingers, and it also stands for a certain completion, not necessarily perfection. 4: the four corners of the earth, this number stands for the earth, the physical world.

Now, some of the other numbers that I have written down here actually are composite numbers. One that I didn't write down is 1000, 1000 years, which is  $10 \times 10 \times 10$ ; it stands for a very long time period. 144,000 is  $12 \times 12 \times 1000$ . 7000 is  $7 \times 1000$ . This is  $4 \times 4 \times 10 \times 10$  – it should be 10, sorry. So that you can see that really there is only a few numbers used over and over again in the book; most numbers never appear.

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