

The Importance and Implications of a Biblically Derived Interpretive Method as Modeled Through Symbols Within the Book of Revelation

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ABSTRACT

A Biblically derived interpretive method¹ is founded upon the authority of God as revealed in the Scriptures and is foundational for a Biblical worldview². The outcome of this approach is Traditional Dispensationalism as a framework³. The significance of the Biblically derived interpretive method may be most apparent whenever viewing the landscape of eschatological study. Within history, the church's view of end-times has driven their mission as an organization ranging from world domination⁴ to complacency⁵. The interpretations are vast and subcategories within eschatology are numerable. However, the method of interpreting symbols is an excellent case study for the importance of a biblically derived interpretive method.⁶ By identifying and interpreting the symbols found within the book of Revelation, one can understand the outcomes, implications, and significance of utilizing a Biblical hermeneutic model and is the aim of this study.

¹ For clarification – the interpretive method itself is drawn from the Scriptures and modeled within.

² Note: the interpretive method is not outside of the worldview, leading to a Biblical worldview but is a foundational aspect of a Biblical worldview.

³ Traditional Dispensationalism may have variations, as other systems of theology. I use this term in a general sense understanding there are differences of opinion within the system itself. It is also worth noting, this system of theology can be wholly found within the study of metaphysics and leads to a particular ethic, both individually and communally.

⁴ Dominion Theology is particularly in view here.

⁵ 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11

⁶ This study also shows the importance of the sufficiency of Scripture and may reveal the state of the church in their practice (or lack thereof) of this doctrine.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Dispensationalism⁷ is the outcome of an interpretive method known as the literal grammatical historical hermeneutic⁸ which is consistently applied throughout the whole of Scripture⁹. This interpretive method is grounded upon the authority of God¹⁰ as He has provided this method within the Biblical text.¹¹ To deviate from a Biblically supplied methodology without exegetical reason to do so strips the authority from God (in one's worldview) and gives it to someone or something else.

It is not the purpose of this paper to explore the importance of traditional dispensationalism as a theological system, but instead the importance of the foundation which traditional dispensationalism rests upon and the implications where those foundations lead, if applied consistently.¹² Traditional dispensationalism should be understood as the metaphysical result of a Biblical interpretive method founded upon the authority of the Biblical God. This metaphysical framework then leads to a particular ethic, both individually and communally. This process can arguably be seen most clearly whenever looking at the book of Revelation due to the history of genre's assigned, supernatural nature of the events recorded within it and the figures of speech

⁷ Traditional Dispensationalism may have variations from person to person, as is seen in other frameworks of theology. However, I use this term in a general sense understanding there are differences of opinion within the system itself. While I would conclude that there is one metaphysical reality as presented in Scripture and unity in accurate understanding amongst brothers and sisters is certainly attainable, there is also always room for growth in one's understanding of the truth. Where one has room for growth, one may find differences amongst other Traditional Dispensationalists.

⁸ Some variations are understood in the naming of the method. Some may prefer normative grammatical historical.

⁹ Louis Berkhof would seem to agree with this sentiment whenever critiquing dispensational premillennialism in his work, *Systematic Theology*, yet concludes that taking this approach in prophecy is "entirely untenable."

¹⁰ The literal grammatical historical hermeneutic is founded within a Biblical epistemology. This epistemology presents the Biblical God as the source of authority and the Biblical text as His source of special revelation in this dispensation. God has communicated through general revelation, but is limited in what is communicated and interpretable (Rom. 1:18-20). God has also communicated through personal revelation (John 3:19), however, Jesus is no longer physically present. Therefore, the mode of communication which carries God's authority is the Biblical text. The focus of this paper certainly is not to discuss the validity of cessationism, but it should be understood this is the position this writer holds to be true.

¹¹ Christopher Cone, among others, has striven to show this through various projects. Cf. Cone, Christopher, *The Precedent for Literal Grammatical Historical Hermeneutics in Genesis*, drcone.com, <https://drcone.com/2017/08/26/precedent-literal-grammatical-historical-hermeneutics-genesis/>. Likewise, I have presented argument from the book of Revelation, modeling Cone's research method, and concluded that God intends to be understood in a normative, common-sense way. Abner Chou's work, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret the Scriptures from the Prophets and the Apostles* is also a great work striving towards a similar goal.

¹² Many works have been published on the importance of Biblical hermeneutics and a Biblical epistemology. I hope to present the material in a unique way, taking a truly biblical approach, presenting a methodology that is presented in the Scriptures.

the author utilizes as he attempts to explain these spiritual realities, and the forward-looking nature of the book. Even further, the landscape of interpretations revolving around symbolism in the book provide more clarity to the relationship of interpretive methodology and ethical/socio-political implications.

WHAT'S AT STAKE AND WHERE DOES HERMENEUTICS CONTRIBUTE TO THE DISCUSSION?

At the root of the discussion, authority of one's worldview is in focus and truth is at stake—not in the sense that one is correctly representing reality and one is not (although this is true), but more broadly, constructing a worldview based upon the wrong authority leads to falsehood in every category resulting in a wrongful understanding of reality and wrongful action¹³. Solomonic Literature presents this concept throughout as it focuses on wisdom and knowledge.¹⁴ Solomon begins the book of Proverbs by giving the prerequisite for proper knowledge and understanding—the fear¹⁵ of the Lord.¹⁶ He later reinforces this concept when discussing the acquisition of wisdom.¹⁷ It would seem, based on the context of Proverbs and the use of the term in other passages such as Deuteronomy 2:25, the fear would rightly result from a proper perspective of God. Solomon then continues in His writing to discuss proper living based on proper knowledge and understanding.

The concept of “fear of the Lord” is modelled clearly in Isaiah 6:1–7 as Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting on a throne.”¹⁸ His immediate response was woefulness as he recognized Who he was in the presence of and the condition in which he found himself. Isaiah's proper view of God led to a proper fear.¹⁹ This fear of God also places the authority in the hands of God as the giver of wisdom and understanding—particularly sourced from the mouth of God.²⁰ Notice Isaiah's fear of the Lord led to a particular action—his epistemology (and presumably his metaphysic) resulted in a particular

¹³ This can be seen clearly in passages revolving around the Jewish sect known as the Pharisees. Cf. John 5:37–40.

¹⁴ Particularly, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

¹⁵ Fear, or פּוֹחַד , is not simply a reverence for something or someone. It refers to a terror or trembling of someone or something. For example, the same term is used in Deuteronomy as Moses is recounting the words which God had spoken to him. God tells Moses that He is going to put a dread, פּוֹחַד , and fear of His people upon everyone under the heavens which would result in their trembling. Another example of this fear of God can be seen in Isaiah's encounter of God in Isaiah 6.

¹⁶ Prov 1:7

¹⁷ Prov 9:10

¹⁸ Isaiah 6:1, NASB. All Scriptural quotes will come from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

¹⁹ Like Isaiah was forgiven, the believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ is cleansed. The body of Christ can now approach the throne of grace with confidence.

²⁰ Prov 2:5-6

ethic.²¹ Also note, after Isaiah was given a position of right standing before God, his action changed from trembling to a confident desire to serve the Lord.²² This principle is echoed in Romans 12:1-2 as Paul concludes that, because of the reality presented in the previous chapters—namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ—every Christian should present themselves as a living sacrifice,²³ for it is only logical to do so. The foundations of one’s worldview predictively and consistently *should* lead to particular action as it defines one’s understanding of reality.

The Relationship Between “Is” and “Ought” Modelled in Eschatological Studies

This concept can also be seen amongst modern theologians as various interpretations of the book of Revelation and their ethical implications are presented. By simply examining any of the three major schools of thought about the millennial kingdom, one can identify the relationship. At risk of over-simplifying, it seems beneficial to explore post-millennialism as an example.

Post-millennialism is an eschatological belief that Christ will return after the millennial kingdom, which some understand to be a literal thousand years²⁴, and some take a more allegorical approach²⁵. Either way, before Christ returns, the commission given in Matthew 28 will be successful, the nations will turn to Christ in belief establishing a Christianized world and golden age of righteousness, and then He will return. The Savoy Declaration of 1658 presents it this way:

²¹ This relationship between the “is” and “ought” of worldview is a particularly interesting discussion. David Hume popularized the idea that the correlation between the “is” and the “ought” is much more difficult and the gap between the two is much more difficult to cross than one may think. Modern philosopher, Jordan Peterson, posits the idea, in his Maps of Meaning course from the University of Toronto, that our actions are inherently linked to our value system, effectively linking axiology and ethics. However, Peterson then discusses the concept of subconscious values which lead to action. For instance, if one desires to play a game, but believes that games are a waste of time and shouldn’t be played in length, why do they have the desire to play the game? It could be that they are subconsciously valuing the rest, the pleasure of the game, or something else but is unaware of such a value. These are all fascinating discussions, and worth exploring further, but it seems logically, at the very least, our metaphysic leads to a particular action (again, pointing to Romans 12:1-2).

²² Isa 6:8

²³ Paul continues throughout the remainder of the book to present a proper ethic (how one can present themselves) based on the truths presented beforehand.

²⁴ Many would divide the time between the first advent of Christ and the second advent of Christ into two sections where in the first, the church is not triumphant, but are triumphant in the second period.

²⁵ In Sam Waldron’s respond to James White’s conversion from Amillennialism to Post-millennialism, he presents differences between the two systems but often makes statements such as, “It is this future golden age before Christ returns and in which we do not already live that distinguishes Postmillennialism from Amillennialism. Subtract this idea from Postmillennialism and you might as well call all of us optimistic Amillennialists postmillennial.” Amillennialists, practically by definition, take the thousand years as a symbolic amount of time which we currently find ourselves in today.

As the Lord in his care and love towards his Church, hath in his infinite wise providence exercised it with great variety in all ages, for the good of them that love him, and his own glory; so according to his promise, we expect that in the latter days, antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of the kingdom of his dear Son broken, *the churches of Christ being enlarged, and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed.*²⁶ [emphasis mine]

Sam Waldron, the President of Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary, a self-proclaimed amillennialist, writes in response to a recent conversion of a colleague from amillennialism to postmillennialism:

...Amillennialists are postmillennial with regard to the denotation of millennium, but they are not postmillennial with regard to the connotation of millennium. That is, we amils believe that Christ is coming back after the thousand years. We do not, however, believe that this thousand years is what the millenarians conceive it to be. *It is not a great golden age of happiness, peace, prosperity, and righteousness in which such blessedness is the dominant tone of the world and in which evil is subdued under these things.*²⁷ [emphasis mine]

Waldron distinguishes postmillennialism and amillennialism by focusing on the success of the church and the golden age of the kingdom. Amillennialism, in Waldron's estimation, does not see the kingdom as a golden age (or a thousand years in its normative form) while postmillennialists do.

Likewise, Boettner, an advocate for postmillennialism, states it this way, "But it does mean that evil in all its many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions, that Christian principles will be the rule, not the exception, and that Christ will return to a truly Christianized world..."²⁸ It is the responsibility of the Church, in this view, to proclaim the gospel message which will grow more and more successful throughout time, impacting various aspects of culture, society, politics, etc. This view, taken to the extreme, leads to things such as Christian Reconstructionism where it is the responsibility of the church to infiltrate government, establish mosaic law, and reconstruct the world, establishing this period of prosperity.²⁹ In this more

²⁶ The Savoy Declaration, 1658, Ch. 26 para. 5. <https://www.creeds.net/congregational/savoy/>

²⁷ Waldron, Sam, *#datpostmil? A Friendly (and Reluctant) Response to James White (and All My Postmillennial Friends)*, cbtseminary.org, March 22, 2021, <https://cbtseminary.org/datpostmil-a-friendly-and-reluctant-response-to-james-white-and-all-my-postmillennial-friends/>

²⁸ Boettner, Loraine, *The Millennium*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ), 1991, p. 14.

²⁹ See R.J. Rushdoony's work, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, as well as Greg Bahnsen's, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*.

radical view, the church is not simply responsible for ushering in this time of prosperity through the successful spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but much more.

C. Peter Wagner, the leader of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), states this in one of his presentations after proposing that the Church *is* currently under a mandate to have dominion over the whole earth, “Dominion has to do with control, dominion has to do with rulership, dominion has to do with authority and subduing and it relates to society...dominion means ruling as kings...*now the dominion mandate is another phrase for the Great Commission...it’s talking about transforming society [emphasis mine].*”³⁰ It is the purpose of the church, in Wagner’s view, to transform societies and nations into Christian nations, establishing theonomies throughout the world. The position of Wagner involves much more than just postmillennialism, as can be seen in the above quote, but postmillennialism is also a keystone doctrine of this position. Shawn Nelson in a paper regarding the NAR states it this way:

The New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) can be characterized as a postmillennial restorationist movement which seeks to restore the so-called lost office of apostle and prophet with the goal of establishing the kingdom of God upon the earth. Six broad values and beliefs of the movement are evaluated in the following order: postmillennialism, restorationism, manufactured continuationism, reconstructionism, experientialism and pragmatism. It is argued [in Nelson’s paper] that postmillennialism is a weak biblical position and that NAR’s brand (“dominionism”) *wrongly places the responsibility of the kingdom on Christians rather than God.*³¹ [emphasis mine]

It is the belief that the Church is responsible for establishing the kingdom on earth *before* Christ returns, and an understanding of a particular method the Church is to utilize in doing this which leads to restorationist and reconstructionist action or ethic/sociopraxy.³²

While one of many, embedded deep within this discussion is a more precise mechanism utilized to establish such an understanding of the millennial kingdom and the ethics/sociopraxy associated with that understanding; namely, the interpretation of symbolism. A symbol is an object which is utilized to represent a shared characteristic of the thing in discussion. For example, the sentence, “Satan is a roaring lion” does not

³⁰ C. Peter Wagner, *On Dominionism, a Key Doctrine of the New Apostolic Reformation*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WboWrp-Cwo>

³¹ Nelson, Shawn, *Six Big Problems With the New Apostolic Reformation*, isca-apologetics.org, <https://www.isca-apologetics.org/sites/default/files/papers/suntereo/Nelson%20-%20New%20Apostolic%20Reformation.pdf>

³² It is worth noting: it is not my intention to show error in post-millennialism but instead use it as a case study displaying the relationship between theology/metaphysics and action/ethics/sociopraxy.

intend to communicate that Satan is an actual lion, but the lion is the object which shares a common characteristic with Satan. Perhaps the shared characteristic is they are both fierce, looking to devour.

Because of the nature of symbols, simply based on definition, they can be difficult to interpret. However, not only is it the *interpretation* of symbolism that proves difficult, but simply the *identification* of symbolism. Before one can interpret a symbol, that figure of speech has to be present in the text. To misidentify something as a symbol leads to a wrong understanding of the passage. This can be seen clearly, again returning to our various views of the millennial kingdom, in Revelation 20:1-7. This passage explains a period of time where, after Jesus returns and conquers the nations³³, Satan shall be bound³⁴ and a group of people will be resurrected and reign with Christ³⁵. This period of time, from the binding of Satan to the end when he will be released, is described as a thousand years.³⁶ As Waldron comments in the above quote, all three camps, premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists, recognize and agree with the concept of a thousand years—to disagree with this would require one to eliminate Revelation 20 altogether. However, amillennialists and many postmillennialists see the thousand years as representative or symbolic to a large amount of time. While the premillennialist, and some postmillennialists, would interpret these passages in Revelation 20 as describing a time period of a literal thousand years, the amillennialist and the other postmillennialists would interpret this passage symbolically. The disagreement is founded upon different interpretive methods, but more specifically, the identification of something being a symbol.

The Time for Interpreting Symbolically

All those advocating for premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism take some scripture literal (in the strictest form of the word) and some symbolic. In fact, it has been a great endeavor in recent history for the “literalist” to define what is meant by literal. Those who hold to the LGH understand figures of speech exist, such as symbols, and therefore understand those symbols as symbolic. Those who hold to the loosest allegorical or symbolic interpretive methods understand some Scripture in a literal sense. Henry Virkler puts it this way, “Thus the differences between literalists and symbolists are relative rather than absolute, involving questions of ‘how much’ and ‘which parts’ of prophecy should be interpreted symbolically rather than literally.”³⁷ This use of literal is why it seems better to refer to

³³ Rev 19:11-21

³⁴ Rev 20:2

³⁵ Rev 20:4

³⁶ Rev 20:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; I break these verses up individually as the term is used in each verse. Over the course of six verses, “thousand years” is utilized six times.

³⁷ Virkler, Henry A., *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 1981, p 196.

the interpretive method as normative, taking into account figures of speech. However, the question then is this: “when should one interpret passages in a symbolic fashion?” The answer must be whenever a symbol is present—beyond that, you interpret the symbol symbolically, not the entire passage. To interpret symbolically in the absence of a symbol places the reader as the definer of meaning, not the discoverer of meaning. Interpreting something as symbolic even in the absence of a symbol is what makes an interpretive method a symbolic methodology—non-normative.

The next logical question seems to be, “How do you identify whether something is symbolic or not?” Is there a marker in the text which identifies things to be symbolic? Is there a general rule of thumb, so to speak, which is modeled in the Biblical text? These questions must be answered before you can rightfully muster the effort to interpret the symbol.

The Extent of Understanding God’s Communication

The last question that seems necessary before diving into the world of symbols in Revelation is, “Is every aspect of God’s communication purposed for understanding by the receiver of said communication?” As one approaches symbols, is it possible that the details of a symbol are meant to be obscure, lacking clarity?

This question is not to undermine the understandability of the text. God has certainly communicated with mankind³⁸, provided clarity and understanding through the text³⁹, and holds humanity responsible for rightly understanding the text⁴⁰. Paul, among other Biblical writers⁴¹, certainly seems to teach that truths presented by the Scriptures are to be understood and applied.⁴² However, are there any examples where God communicates with an alternative purpose to clarity and understanding?

In Daniel 12:8-9, Daniel is being informed about the events which will take place in the end times. After revelation about how long the “wonders” will last, Daniel records, “As for me, I heard but could not understand; so I said, “My lord, what will be the outcome of these events?”⁴³ Daniel, being eager to understand what the Lord had previously revealed, asks a clarifying question. The answer Daniel was given was, “Go your way, Daniel, for these words are concealed and sealed up until the end time.”⁴⁴ As Thomas Constable states, “The Lord reminded Daniel that much of what he had received would remain obscure until the end time (cf. v. 4).”⁴⁵ While clarity and

³⁸ 2 Tim 3:16-17

³⁹ 2 Pet 1:3; John 5:39

⁴⁰ 2 Tim 2:15

⁴¹ David in Psa 1; Jesus in Rev 1:3; Luke in Luke 1:4; etc.

⁴² 1 Tim 4:3; Col 2:8; Eph 6:14

⁴³ Dan 12:8

⁴⁴ Dan 12:9

⁴⁵ Constable, Thomas, *Notes on Daniel*, Soniclight.com, 2022, <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/ot/daniel/daniel.htm>

increasing understanding would be achieved, it would not be until the end times. Some of the details of the communication given to Daniel would remain uncertain and obscure.

Another example of this is Jesus' parables. After Jesus' rejection as messiah in Matthew 12, Jesus begins to speak in parables. As the disciples are following Jesus, they recognize this shift in communication style. Naturally, they ask, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"⁴⁶ Jesus responds by stating, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted."⁴⁷ Jesus then continues to explain the parable to the disciples as they had been granted access to understanding. The purpose of parables was not to add clarity but obscurity.

This is not meant to be an argument obscuring confidence in the Scriptures, but it does seem that God purposes communication, at times, for obscurity and not clarity. These passages are certainly still useful, and humanity is held responsible for wrestling with them. It should, however, act as a warning to providing meaning to symbols which is not presented in the Scriptures. At the very least, those things which are not apparent in the context should be held as opinion, not certainty. A. Berkeley Mickleson recognizes this limitation when he states, "Where symbols are not explained or are explained only briefly, ambiguity may result. The interpreter is forced to be subjective. Even when an explanation accompanies the symbol, he may read more into the symbol than the explanation warrants."⁴⁸

DOES THE BIBLE PROVIDE A MODEL FOR IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLS?

If one desires to approach the Scriptures with a Biblical methodology regarding symbolism, the question has to be asked, does the Bible provide a methodology for understanding symbols? E.W. Bullinger posits, "The assertion as to anything being a symbol of another rests entirely on human authority, and depends for its accuracy on its agreement with the teaching of Scripture."⁴⁹ Bullinger is arguing that there are not any markers within the Biblical text that identifies something as symbolic, leaving the identification of the symbol to rest completely on man's thinking and authority. However, the interpretation of said symbol must agree with the canon of Scripture. Is the identification of symbols reliant completely on the authority of man, or do the Scriptures provide aid in this arena? Where might one gather principles for interpreting symbols?

⁴⁶ Matt 13:10

⁴⁷ Matt 13:11

⁴⁸ Mickleson, A. Berkeley, *Interpreting the Bible*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI), 1987, p 265.

⁴⁹ Bullinger, p. 769.

A CASE STUDY: REVELATION 1:9-20

Revelation 1:9-20 describes John's first visionary experience in the book of Revelation. As John hears Jesus commanding him to "write what you see and send it to the seven churches,"⁵⁰ John turns around and sees Jesus speaking to him. John then proceeds to explain, and presumably write, what he sees. John explains the appearance of Jesus, using mostly similes⁵¹. There are two symbols present within this description—the lampstands which Jesus is standing among and the stars which are present in Jesus' right hand. The "sharp two-edged sword" coming from His mouth⁵² is often described as a symbol, but as will be seen later, it seems to be describing an actual sword lacking representative characteristics in this context. Both symbols are describing what John is seeing, but representative of something else.⁵³ This is an important aspect of symbolism. While John is seeing lampstands, stars, and a sword, at least two of the three are representative of some other object(s). In Revelation 1:20, Jesus provides the objects which these symbols are representing. By Jesus providing this information, one can identify basic principles for identifying and interpreting symbols.

Within this case study, there are three principles that can be identified from the Biblical text. Each are modeled within the passage. These principles can be consistently utilized throughout the Biblical text regarding symbolism. While Biblical models do not necessarily result in prescription, it would seem viable to assert interpretive models found within Scripture should be followed whenever God is communicating Biblical truth⁵⁴. For example, Jesus is interpreting the symbols which are present, providing a model from God Himself.

⁵⁰ Rev 1:11

⁵¹ Similes are a figure of speech comparing two things utilizing the modifier like or as. Both similes and symbols carry a representative and comparative purpose but differ slightly in grammatical function.

⁵² With every other aspect of Jesus being described utilizing a simile, it is interesting that this aspect is not. There are not any significant variants within this section of the passage.

⁵³ Note the difference between simile and symbol here – John is utilizing simile to try and represent what he is seeing in an understandable fashion to his audience. The symbols are easily described but representative and established by the author of the vision, not John himself.

⁵⁴ There are certainly descriptive sections of Scripture which would not lead to beneficial prescriptions. For instance, it would be poor for one to follow the interpretive model provided by the Pharisee's due to the consistent indictment of misunderstanding given by Jesus.

Principle #1: Symbols Can Be “Mysteries”

Through a line of reasoning and historical attestation, E.W. Bullinger equates the term “symbol,” or symbolon in the Greek, with “mystery,” or mysteerion in the Greek⁵⁵. Mysteerion identifies something unknown previous to special revelation. Bullinger submits that, “Μυστήριον (mysteerion) means secret; and later it came to mean a secret sign or symbol... Thus it will be seen that symbol is practically synonymous with the latter use of mystery as meaning a secret sign.”⁵⁶ While this may be true, it seems that in the Biblical text, symbol is a broader term than simply a mystery. There are seemingly many examples where a symbol, as defined as an object representing another, is not a secret, or something not revealed at an earlier time. In fact, as Bullinger later explains how a symbol is established, he states, “The stages by which a symbol is reached, therefore, are: (1) either by Metonymy or Metaphor, one thing is used to represent another; then (2) the one is used to imply the other; and finally (3) it becomes permanently substituted for it as a symbol of it.”⁵⁷ It would seem this process would *require* a symbol to be previously understood throughout establishing the representation as a symbol. It would seem then, that symbolon is a broader term than mysteerion.

While it seems symbolon is certainly a broader term than mysteerion, Revelation 1:20 shows that symbols can certainly be used whenever previously unknown by the audience. However, such a symbol requires interpretation for the audience to understand it. As Jesus utilizes both stars and lampstands to represent the messengers of the churches and the churches themselves respectively, He identifies and defines them as the audience would not have understood the vision otherwise.

Principle #2: Immediate Context May Identify and Define Symbols

Within any exegetical endeavor, it is the primary role of the immediate literary⁵⁸ context to define meaning within the passage being examined. The immediate context in any situation defines words, provides insightful information for the passage being examined, and identifies many different grammatical and syntactical structures in the passage under examination. Jesus’ explanation in Revelation 1:20 shows this to be true regarding symbolism as well. This concept is also seen very clearly in Revelation 17 as the “mystery” is given in verses 3–6 and the explanation provided in verses 8–18.

⁵⁵ Bullinger, p 769.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p 770.

⁵⁸ Literary context here is pointing to the immediate context within the text itself as opposed to the historical context.

Principle #3: Far Off Context May Identify and Define Symbols

There are certainly symbols within the book of Revelation which are not defined immediately surrounding the use of the symbol. An example of this is the use of Babylon the Great in Revelation 14, 16–18.⁵⁹ If Babylon the Great is to be understood symbolically, it doesn't seem there is an apparent interpretation of that symbol in the immediate context. However, Babylon the Great does share a common description of “great city” with the city of Jerusalem.⁶⁰ One could argue that the context in Revelation 11 would give reason to identify Babylon the Great as symbolic for the city of Jerusalem.

Another example of this can be seen in Revelation 1. The sharp two-edged sword can be identified as non-symbolic. Of course, this, among those things which are symbolic, represents what John is seeing in these visions. However, later context helps to understand that the sword should be understood as representing just that – a sword. Revelation 19 records the second advent of Christ as He returns in judgement of the world. In verse 5, John records, “From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations...”⁶¹ The sword is the instrument Christ will be using for judgement and war. It would seem fitting that John sees Jesus with the sword in Revelation 1. While the far-off context does not identify the sword in Revelation 1 as symbolic, it does seem to identify the sword as non-symbolic.

CASE STUDY: REVELATION 5:6

In Revelation 5, John is in the throne room of God⁶² and has previously witnessed an incredible scene with God sitting on His throne being worshipped by four creatures and twenty-four elders.⁶³ After this, John “saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals.”⁶⁴ Only one was found worthy to open the book and break the seals, “...a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.”⁶⁵ Much like the previous case study, there is an identification and interpretation of some symbols in the immediate context—the seven horns and

⁵⁹ There have been those who believe Babylon is a symbol as well as those who would disagree with this position. Andy Woods presents, in his book *Babylon: The Bookends of Prophetic History*, an argument that Babylon the Great should not be understood symbolically, but understood in a normative fashion, representing a literal Babylon which will be rebuilt. This would certainly give reason for absence of an explanation.

⁶⁰ Cf. Rev 11:8, Rev 16:19, 17:18, 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21.

⁶¹ This is also seen in Rev 19:21.

⁶² Rev 4:2

⁶³ Rev 4:3–11

⁶⁴ Rev 5:1

⁶⁵ Rev 5:6

seven eyes. However, it seems that there is a symbol in this passage which is not defined in the immediate context—the Lamb as if slain.

Principle #4: Previously Established Symbols Can Be Utilized Without Explanation

The first symbol—the seven horns and seven eyes—are defined in the immediate context but are not identified as being a mystery. The symbolism of the lamb is not defined or identified in the immediate context. However, through distant context, one can quickly conclude the Person whom the “lamb” object is representing. In John 1:29, John the Baptist announces the arrival of Jesus proclaiming, “Behold, The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” In Revelation 5:9, it can be seen that this Lamb is one Who has “purchased for God with your blood from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” The connection between the descriptors of the Lamb seem to provide reason for identifying the symbol of a lamb as representative of the Person of Jesus Christ. This is not to say that the symbol represents the same thing in every context, but other contexts can give clues and helpful insights as to the nature of the symbol in the context being studied.

CASE STUDY: REVELATION 7:1-8

The beginning verses of Revelation 7 present the sealing of 144,000 men from the tribes of Israel. These are presented as the bond servants of God from Israel, 12,000 from each tribe. These are later described in Revelation 14:1-5 as those who “have not been defiled with women, for they have kept themselves chaste. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These have been purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb.”⁶⁶ If understood non-symbolically, during the time of God’s wrath on the earth, angels will seal 144,000 Israelites, 12,000 from each tribe, for the service of the Lord and they will be those who are chaste.

Exegetically, the context does not seem to provide any reason for understanding such a passage as symbolic. In fact, this passage provides reason for the sealing, a detailed list of who will be sealed, and a purpose for the sealing. The later passage in Revelation 14 then provides further clarity as to the condition of those being sealed. There is nothing obscure or absurd that would lead one to believe such a passage is symbolic and there also is not any interpretations provided in the immediate or distant context.

⁶⁶ Rev 14:4

Some theologians, however, understand the passage as symbolic due to an external genre assigned to the book of Revelation; namely, the apocalyptic genre.⁶⁷ Within the apocalyptic genre, many argue the books are symbolic throughout and numbers are typically representative of something else. Therefore, the 144,000 should represent all of God's elect because, "It's not to be taken literally. It's 12 x 12 x 1,000: 12 being the number of completion for God's people (representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the Lamb) and 1,000 being a generic number suggesting a great multitude."⁶⁸ The assertion is based on a particular genre assigned to the book and a theological precommitment.⁶⁹ The implications are vast as the interpretation by DeYoung and others places all of God's elect on earth during the time of the tribulation (although DeYoung, as an amillennialist, would assert the tribulation is not a time period of seven years where God pours out His wrath on a churchless world, but a much longer period of time where the church is present). It is this same concept that drives many to symbolize the thousand-year reign of Christ found in Revelation 20, as has already been discussed. Likewise, in Revelation 20, there is not any exegetical reason to symbolize the time period given to Christ's reign on earth prior to the establishment of the new heaven and new earth as found in Revelation 21.

CASE STUDY: REVELATION 17-18

Revelation 17 begins by an angel carrying John into the wilderness to be given a vision regarding "...the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality."⁷⁰ After John is shown the vision in verses 3-6, John "wondered greatly."⁷¹ Seeing this, the angel asks John why he stares in wonder *at the mystery* and then offers an interpretation, in Revelation 17:7-18, of what has just been seen. A similar situation is found in Revelation 1 where a mystery is seen and then immediately explained.

⁶⁷ See Kevin DeYoung, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/theological-primer-the-144000/>; Leland Ryken, *Symbols and Reality: A Guided Study of Prophecy, Apocalypse, and Visionary Literature: Reading the Bible as Literature* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁶⁸ Kevin DeYoung, "Theological Primer: The 144,000" The Gospel Coalition, Accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/theological-primer-the-144000/>

⁶⁹ Both DeYoung and Moises Silva make a case for the theological hermeneutic which identifies one's theological system as a presupposition to any text being studied.

⁷⁰ Rev 17:1-2

⁷¹ Rev 1:6

Again, Principle #4: Previously Established Symbols Can Be Utilized Without Explanation

Immediately following this vision and interpretation of the symbolism within, the same symbols are utilized in Revelation 18 without further clarification. For example, Revelation 18:3, “For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the passion of her immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed acts of immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality.” There is not any need for explaining again the context in symbols found within the great harlot because they were just explained in the previous context.

CONCLUSION

Symbolism can be difficult to identify and interpret. The Bible, however, provides guidance for approaching the topic. While the four principles provided in this paper are far from comprehensive, they do provide a Biblical foundation for approaching symbolism throughout the Biblical text and hopefully provide a starting point for further research. Some further questions which should be further studied are: 1) Are there any exegetical markers which provide further clarity on the identification of symbols? 2) What are the symbols presented in the book of Revelation and what are their interpretations based on Biblical data alone? 3) Are there any symbols within Revelation which we are unable to understand before the end times?

It is the responsibility of the exegete to wrestle with the Biblical text utilizing a Biblical methodology. Symbolism is a difficult aspect of that interpretive practice. If symbolism, especially in the book of Revelation, is approached wrongfully, the consequences are dire. Let us endeavor to rightly divide the word of truth in all areas including symbolism.