

Power in Symbolism

After he receives the messages for the seven churches, the vision moves to heaven with John being shown the power and sovereignty of God. Confirming the prophetic visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, John's vision teaches that the Holy God who may seem distant, is always present and active.

God's power is conveyed through the use of symbols (many of which are shared with Ezekiel 1 and 10, Isaiah 6, and Exodus 19), which include the following:

Crowns—Symbols of authority. In Revelation the crowns do not equate to power, but authority and they are connected to the death of martyrs. These are cast down (4:10), showing that real authority only belongs to the one on the throne.

Elders—The 24 elders are those who have been given authority by God and likely connect to the twelve tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. They reign, but they reign in faithfulness unto death as both the crown and white robes testify. Their authority derives from their giving all authority to God. It is only when he is Lord of all that the elders have any authority.

Eyes—The seven eyes of the lamb reveal a perfection of insight or perception (see *seven* and *lamb* below). In 5:6, the seven eyes are identified with the seven spirits of God. The perception of the lamb is based on a fullness of the Holy Spirit, which is the unifying factor. The four creatures are covered in eyes, even under their wings. While not the fullness of perception of the seven-eyed lamb, it does show the creatures will not miss seeing anything.

Four Creatures—The four creatures here are both similar to and not identical with the four creatures of Ezekiel 1. The creatures represent the fullness of creation on the earth (herd animals, wild animals, humans and birds). Jewish tradition (found in the Mishnah) stated "Man is exalted among creatures, the eagle among birds, the ox among domestic animals, the lion among wild beasts; all of them have received dominion." These leaders among the creation also show God's authority through their worship of God. As some who oppose the Gospel are the Gnostics who

deny the holiness of the creation, this inclusion of other created beings is significant. The whole earth praises its creator. This we see in their song. Just as a the song of the Greek chorus conveys the meaning, so to does the song of the creatures which proclaims God to be the creator of all things in whom the whole creation has its being.

Horns—A horn is a symbol of power. Just as a ram or goat with a large set of horns would be seen as powerful, reference to a horn is a reference to power, with seven horns representing a fullness or completeness of power.



Incense—Moses' law specified the use of incense in the Jewish Temple. Rising smoke of incense signified the prayers of the faithful rising up to God. This image is shared with Isaiah 6, which is not surprising as both visions take place within the context of worship in which incense would have been used.

Gems and rainbow—Language falls short in describing the divine. Like Daniel before him, John uses imagery from bright light reflected from gems and minerals to describe the indescribable one who sits on the throne. Like Ezekiel 1:28 the image of a rainbow is also invoked and brings with it the promise that the creation will be brought to fulfillment in safety.

Lamps—The seven lamps in Revelation 1 were associated with the seven churches of Asia Minor. Now we are told that the seven lamps represent the seven spirits of God. This shows that symbols may convey multiple ideas, though the unifying factor here is God's spirit in the seven churches with the lamps still representing God's spirit. Yet, it does show that one must sit lightly with symbols rather than forcing exact meaning on them and therefore limiting the symbol's power.

Sea of Glass—This image will be more important later in Revelation. It is important to understand that the creation myths of the surrounding cultures dealt with a chaos monster (Tiamat or Leviathan) defeated in an epic struggle. The sea, even in to Jesus' time was seen as a place of chaos. Revelation will present the final chapter in an ongoing struggle of good over evil and this is pictured sometimes using the imagery of the sea—a perfectly calm sea of glass rather than a raging sea.

Scroll—Last will and testaments were sealed with seven seals. This "will" is executed by opening the seals. These seals would bear the mark of the sealer, like a signature. The one who seals the document places himself or herself on the line that the contents are true. With a text written on both sides, this scroll is reminiscent of Ezekiel 2:10.

Seven—The number seven refers to completeness or wholeness.

Throne—The idea of God's throne was already an important one within Jewish mysticism. Here in Revelation, the throne of God and the throne of the lamb are one and the same, signifying the oneness of the father and the son. Ezekiel's vision of the throne of God (Ezekiel 1) is also certainly in view here.

Thunder—God was present on Mount Sinai in thunder and lightning (Exodus 19:16) and the thunder of Revelation connects this vision from God to God's self-revelation to Moses and the people of Israel. Thunder also figures in Job 36:30-32, Psalm 77:17-18, Ezekiel 1 and elsewhere signifying the presence and power of God.

Trumpet—The blast of the trumpet refers to a *shofar*, the instrument made from a ram or ibex horn and used in Jewish worship. The trumpet is connected to the idea of the end of time, which is announced by the blast of the horn. Trumpets form a link with both Exodus 19:6 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16. Trumpet blasts become increasingly important in Revelation.

Agnus Dei

The Lamb of God

The hearer is told to expect the Lion of Judah (5:5) and instead it is a lamb on the throne. Lambs were among the animals offered as a sacrifice for sins in the Temple in Jerusalem. The lamb which looks as if it has been slaughtered is a symbol for the resurrected Christ. Jesus was referred to as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" by John the Baptist in John 1:29. Revelation reaffirms the importance of the symbol as a way of understanding Jesus' death and resurrection.



One linguistic point to note is that John uses the diminutive form of lamb—the English equivalent would be "little lamb" or "lambkins"—emphasizing the vulnerability of the lamb.

Note the surprising mix of symbols as the lamb who was slain is an image of suffering and powerlessness. Yet, it is this powerless lamb who is at the center of the throne of heaven. The "lambkins" is *the* one with fullness of power (seven horns) and fullness of perception (seven eyes). This use of images places a paradoxical understanding of power quite literally at the center of the universe in terms of place of honor. The innocent victim is

vindicated as Jesus is shown not to have been a passive victim, but a faithful witness (the word witness in New Testament Greek is *martyr*). Jesus' witness shakes the foundations of the world and turns the old order upside down, with the innocent lamb who was slain as the one with true power.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this image to the vision of Revelation. Prior to all the violent imagery to follow, we find the innocent victim, a willing sacrifice and faithful martyr at the center of the throne of Heaven. All that follows in Revelation is to be read from the perspective of a love that sacrifices itself for those who hate it. The lamb may be coated in blood, but it is the lamb's own blood.

Seen in this light, the violence to follow breaks through the usual us/them language of an oppressed community and shows that we Christians are also sinners and they unbelievers may also be saved. The seemingly powerless martyr—the lamb at the center of the throne—loves both us *and* them.