

The book of Revelation tells much of its story in symbols, or figures. Chapters 8 and 9 in particular seem to be written in symbols. It seems unlikely, for example, that the flaming mountain of 8:8 is a literal mountain that turns the sea to literal blood. It is generally understood to represent some person, government, or system that is overthrown from heaven.

Symbols are well known in literature as similes and metaphors. They are not the same as a *type*, defined as a **real** persons or object which foreshadows something to come later and share some of its characteristics. The Old Testament is full of types of Christ. Two examples are King David and the bronze serpent in the wilderness.

A symbol may not have an obvious interpretation. So why would the Holy Spirit use symbols instead of plain language which anyone can immediately understand? Some possible answers are:

1. As any poet can tell you, symbolic language has power. It speaks to something within us instead of merely our intellect. A counter example to poetic or symbolic writing is a legal contract – a document which is very precise and has only one possible meaning. No one is ever moved or inspired by a legal contract.
2. A symbol may be necessary to communicate with a reader at his current level of understanding. One example is description of the sun standing still in Joshua 10. We know, of course, that the sun's apparent movement is caused by the rotation of the earth so it is inaccurate to say it could stand still. But to earlier peoples without astronomic instruments it would seem quite obvious that the sun is moving across the sky. Thus, symbolically, the sun is said to stop in its course.

Revelation may contain many instances of symbols simplified for the audience. Odd composites of animals, such as locusts with scorpion features,

might picture sophisticated military hardware unimaginable to John's contemporaries (but easier for us in the twenty-first century to imagine, sad to say).

3. God may choose to conceal the full meaning of a symbol until His proper time. The myriad Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah could not have been completely understood when they were written but gave a sufficient picture for the Lord to be recognized when He came. Unfortunately, many of the Jews prematurely assigned mistaken interpretations to those prophecies. Jesus did not fit their preconceptions so was rejected.
4. In Matthew 13, the Lord explains why he speaks in parables. Like a radio that transmits only to receivers tuned to the right frequency, the parables reveal their message to chosen listeners and cloak it for others. Symbols may act in a similar way. *“And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual”* (2 Cor. 2:13).
5. Scripture uncovers much of its truth slowly and with effort, like peeling an onion. It gives lifelong reward to those who invest the time to understand it. Which person is more fascinating: One who tells you everything about himself at the first meeting, or one who delights you with new and beautiful details at every encounter?

It is important to take the Bible literally wherever possible and not invent symbols where they do not exist. There is no good reason, for instance, to view the 144,000 Jews of Chapter 7 as anything other than literal ethnic Jews.

And neither symbols or types should be used to develop new doctrines but rather to enrich our understanding of the clearer teachings of Scripture.

## Notes on Chapters 9

**9:1-2** The fallen star is Satan, who fell in 8:10. The key to the pit is a symbol of his authority (although there is no scriptural indication that Satan will have eternal authority over hell but will suffer its torments like any miserable sinner).

**9:2** The smoke rising from the pit and spreading over the earth symbolizes spiritual error that is spread by Satan.

**9:3** The invading creatures have the voracity of locusts, which can destroy crops in mile wide swaths, with the painful stings of scorpions. Unlike natural locusts, they are commanded to spare vegetation and attack humans who do not bear the seal described in Chapter 7.

**9:5** Ordinary scorpion stings are painful but rarely fatal. The stings described in these verses sting last for five months. God places bounds on the locusts and does not allow their stings to harm anyone to the point of death, even though the victims long for release.

**9:7-11** Like the smoke that rises from the same pit, the locusts symbolize the ravages of false teaching and religious cults. They bear an appearance of authority (crowns), attractiveness (women's hair), and power (armor breastplates) but have hidden dangers (lion's teeth) and leave misery behind them (scorpion tails). Even their king disguises his true nature with assumed names.

**9:12** There are two woes to come but only one in this chapter. There is a pause between the sixth and seventh trumpets, just as we saw with the seals. The third woe (seventh trumpet) does not appear until Chapter 11.

**9:15** God is never random. As chaotic as the events of the tribulation may appear, they have been planned to the day and hour.

**9:16-18** This passage appears more figurative than most. John qualifies his description of the attackers by saying, "This is how I saw ..." rather than more definite language. Could it be his interpretation of some type of modern military hardware? It seems probable that those present at the fulfillment of the prophecy will recognize the

figures.

**9:20-21** None of these calamities bring repentance. Like the rich man's brothers in the story of Lazarus (Luke 19), once these sinners have rejected the testimony of scripture, not even the most profound acts of God can soften their rebellious hearts.