

1. The Son of Man vision and the messages to the **7 Churches of Asia** (ch.1-3)
2. The vision of the throne of God (with 24 elders and 4 living creatures (Lion, Bull, Man and Eagle), the Lamb and the opening of the **Scroll with 7 seals** (ch.4-8:1) - revealing, in turn, the 4 Horsemen, the altar of the persecuted, the day of retribution, and silence in Heaven, symbolic of a coming great event
3. The sounding of the **7 trumpets** (ch.8-11) - heralding the end by fire of 1/3 of the earth; the flaming mountain destroying 1/3 of sea life; the star Wormwood crashing to earth destroying 1/3 of all river water; the loss of 1/3 of light from the sun and sky; the opening of the abyss and release of locusts (demons) to torture those without God's seal; the release of the armies of the 4 chained 'angels' (demons) to destroy 1/3 of the population by fire, smoke and sulphur; and, finally, the announcement that the time of God's retribution has come
4. The **7 'Dragon and Beast' Visions** (ch.12/13)- the pregnant woman with sun, moon and 12 stars; the Red Dragon with 7 heads (with crowns on each) and 10 horns, based on the 4th Beast of Daniel ch.7 but here identified with Satan; the Dragon's war with Michael; the Dragon's pursuit of the woman; a Beast with 7 heads and 10 horns, with one of the heads bearing the marks of a fatal wound that had, however healed - this Beast has crowns on the horns not the heads, signifying delegated power from Satan; a second Beast, but with 2 horns, who seeks to establish the worship of the first Beast, and acts like a prophet (also Rv.20); the number of the (first) Beast as **666**, which is the numeric value of the Hebrew letters of the name Caesar Nero, although it may also be symbolic of complete imperfection i.e. absolute evil.
5. The **7 Visions of the Son of Man** (ch.14) - the Lamb and the 144,000 marked with the seal of God; the song of the faithful in Heaven before the throne; the visions of 3 angels announcing, in turn, judgement, the fall of Babylon/Rome and retribution on the followers of the Beast; a vision of the Son of Man reaping the harvest of the wicked; and a vision of an angel calling, on behalf of those martyred, to the destroying angel for justice against their persecutors.
6. The **7 Bowls of the Wrath of God** (ch.15- 16) - **5 bowls** against the followers of the Beast - sores over the earth; blood over the sea, then over the rivers, over the sun causing scorching heat; over the throne of the Beast causing darkness and pain; and the final **2 bowls**, over the Euphrates calling armies to battle (Armageddon), and over the air, leading to God's retribution.
7. The **7 Visions of the Fall of Babylon (Rome)** (ch.17- 19:10) - the Great Prostitute, her symbolism and her crimes; her destruction by the Beast; the angel proclaiming her Fall; the prophecy of her Fall; the mourning of her followers; the joy of the Heavenly throng; and the joy of all the faithful.
8. The **7 Visions of Fulfilment** (19:11- ch.22) - the Heavenly army; the army of the Beast and its defeat, the imprisonment of Satan for 1000 years; the 1000 years of Christ's rule; the release of Satan and the final battle; the Last Judgement; the new Heaven and Earth and the new Jerusalem

5. The Book of Revelation to John

Part 1

The Nature of Apocalyptic Writing and The Symbolism and Structure of the Book of Revelation



Questions For Reflection

1. How likely is it that the later emphasis on visions within prophecy had been influenced by Babylonian culture during the period of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews?
2. Why do you think there is so much emphasis on symbolism in the apocalyptic writing?
3. Why does the number 7 play such a prominent role in the Book of Revelation?

The Nature of Apocalyptic Writing

From the time of the Babylonian conquest of Judah (587BC), the exile of the Jews and their return to Judah (539BC), there was a shift in the nature of Jewish Prophecy. From acting as God's intermediary to the people to emphasise their Covenant transgressions and threaten them with future destruction, the prophet now appears more as a visionary or seer. This can especially be seen in the visions of the Books of Ezekiel (ch.1-3, 8-11, 37, 40-48), Zechariah and Daniel.



But the major differences between traditional prophecy and apocalyptic writing are twofold:

1. Apocalyptic has a **transcendental element** that is central to its message, with the judgement of the wicked and reward of the righteous no longer seen in earthly terms but with a cosmic dimension e.g. a new Heaven and new Earth
2. It contains **the most vivid imagery** both for its earthly and cosmic aspects.

Using this definition, the Book of Daniel may certainly be termed apocalyptic, while there are strong apocalyptic elements in Isaiah ch.24-27 and 34-35, Zechariah 14, Joel 2 and 4 and several sections of Ezekiel.

Jewish apocalyptic literature flourished as a genre or type of writing between the 2nd. Century BC. and the 2nd. Century AD. and includes the Apocryphal Books of Enoch, 2 Esdras and the Sibylline Oracles. Overall, a general process or structure can be seen in Apocalypses:

1. A purported history of the future that is really a history of the relevant past up to the time of the author writing the apocalypse. This uses imagery that is relatively easy to decode and date
2. A prophecy of the immediate future that is meant to apply to the 'real time' of the intended audience
3. A prophecy of a cosmic catastrophe, heralding God's final judgement, the end of time and a new beginning.

The Importance of Symbolism

The author uses symbols to emphasise his message, and it is highly probable that much of the symbolism would have made more sense to his audience than to us today not acquainted with its use and importance.

There is an obvious **symbolism attached to numbers**:

- **12** is a sacred number associated with the tribes of Israel and, in parallel, the Christian Church, and so **24** represents both together (Rv.4)
- **7** is associated with perfection/ completeness and **6** imperfection (Rv.13)

- **4** means the four corners of the world, or the **4** domains of existence, namely Heavens, Earth, Waters, and Underworld (Rv.4)
- **1000** is used to mean an immense number, not literally 1000 (Rv.20)
- **144,000** is the sacred number **12** multiplied by itself representing absolute holiness, and **the thousand** emphasising an immense number (Rv.7 and 14)
- **One time, two times and half a time** (Rv.12) is taken from Daniel 7, where it represented the **3 1/2 years** of Jewish persecution by the Greek Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes from 167-164 BC. This length coincides with the period of drought experienced by Elijah (1 K.17-18) that is quoted in Luke 4 and James 5. Therefore, it can be seen to have particular symbolism for the readers of the Book of Revelation, and is used to represent the period of Roman persecution that the author of Revelation is so concerned to address. It is also described as **42 months** (Rv.11 and 13) or **1260 days** (Rv.11 and 12)

There is **symbolism attached to colours**:

- the four horsemen riding **white** (victory), **red** (blood and war), **black** (famine and drought) and **pale** (corpse colour of death) horses ((6:1-8)
- The great prostitute rides a **scarlet** beast with 7 heads and 10 horns, and is dressed in **purple and scarlet** robes (17:3-4)
- The bride of the Lamb is dressed in **white** linen (19:8) which refers to the good deeds of the saints, while the army of Heaven rides **white** horses led by the Word of God on a **white** horse, white here representing purity



There is **symbolism attached to the actual objects** described, and sometimes this is explained in the text by the author:

- The description of the Son of Man in the first vision (Rv.1:13-16) has him **clothed** in ways that reveal his attributes, while it is explained that the **7 stars** and **7 golden lamp-stands** in the hands of the Son of Man represent the angels of the 7 Churches and the Churches themselves, respectively (1:20)
- The vision of God on his throne (4:3-7) has **7 flaming lamps** in front of it, which are explained as the 7 Spirits (angels) who are constantly in God's presence (these are referred to in 8:2 as well)

The symbolism often **relates back to OT visions** (e.g. Ezekiel, Zechariah, Daniel).

The Structure of the Book of Revelation

There have been many proposals made about the structure of the Book of Revelation, but I think it is significant that the author appears to present a consistent pattern of events associated with the number 7, and so the structure given below is based on that observation: