

THE LAMB, THE DRAGON, THE BEASTS, AND THE KING

The Cast of Characters in the Divine Drama of Revelation¹

Guidelines for Interpreting Symbolism

Glossary of Descriptive Terms

Abyss A term used seven times in Revelation to refer to the abode/prison for the demonic locusts and their king Apollyon, the beast, and Satan himself during the millennium (9:1).

Armageddon The epic eschatological battle between God and the forces of evil (16:12-16). This battle is anticlimactic since Christ conquers merely by his appearance and his word of judgment.

Babylon the Great A phrase used six times in Revelation to symbolize any great center of pagan power (14:8). The early Christians referred to Rome as Babylon (1 Pet. 5:13).

Balaam A group of false teachers that encouraged Christians to use their freedom to participate in pagan worship activities, including the worship of the Roman emperor (2:15).

beast from the earth A figure representing pagan religious power in service of the wicked political/military/economic power structures and their evil leaders (13:11-12). This figure is also called the “false prophet” in Revelation, pointing to its religious role in promoting the worship of the first beast (e.g., the priesthood of the imperial cult, a religious system promoting the worship of the emperor and other pagan deities).

¹ Revelation, Teach the Text Commentary, Scott Duvall, Baker, 2014, pp. 357ff.



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beast from the sea A figure representing political, military, and economic power used in the service of Satan (13:1-2). Often such pagan power is personified in a single wicked leader (e.g., Nero or Domitian in first-century Rome and Hitler in Nazi Germany). The final eschatological leader has traditionally been identified with this beast and called the antichrist, although that term is never used in Revelation.

book of life / Lamb's book of life The register of all true believers, those who have been granted heavenly citizenship (3:5).

bride/wife of the Lamb A symbol for God's holy people, the church (19:7-8). The marriage metaphor reveals the depth and fullness of God's covenant love for his people and his plan to live forever with them in the new creation.

death and Hades The term "Hades" refers to the realm of the dead (1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14), not to the place of final punishment or "hell" (20:14-15). Death is the last enemy and, along with Hades, will one day be thrown into the lake of fire, symbolizing the final and total destruction of death.

every tribe, language, people and nation An expression that occurs seven times in Revelation to indicate universality. When referring to the faithful, it emphasizes the multicultural people of God (5:9).

fiery lake of burning sulfur Whereas Hades refers to the grave or realm of the dead, the lake of fire is equivalent to Gehenna, or what is traditionally understood as "hell." This place of final punishment is the second (or eternal) death (20:14-15) for all of God's enemies.

four living creatures An exalted order of angels resembling the cherubim of Ezekiel 1 and 10 as well as the seraphim of Isaiah 6. They represent God's creation, stand closest to God's presence, play some role in executing judgment, and lead the heavenly court in worship (4:6-8).

great city (Sodom, Egypt, Jerusalem) A symbol for any center of worldly power allied against God and his people (11:7-8). Rome was likely in view in the first century. This wicked city is a place of moral depravity, of oppression, and of opposition to Christ.

great multitude The church triumphant that has come through the great tribulation and now celebrates God's victory in heaven (7:9). This multicultural people of God is the heavenly counterpart to the 144,000 engaged in battle on earth.



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great prostitute / woman sitting on the beast A great center of pagan power (i.e., Babylon), undoubtedly referring to Rome in the first century. She leads others to join her in idolatry and immorality and stands in contrast to the bride of Christ depicted in Revelation 19-22.

great supper of God The final judgment of the wicked where the birds of prey consume the dead bodies of God's enemies (19:17-18). This eschatological feast stands in contrast to the wedding supper of the Lamb for the righteous. Here the wicked actually become the feast or the supper. **great white throne** The site of final judgment when those who have not been given resurrection bodies (i.e., all unbelievers) will stand before God to face eternal punishment (20:11-15).

holy city / new Jerusalem The new creation (new heaven and new earth) where God will live forever among his people (21:9-21). The old Jerusalem with its temple gives way to the heavenly city where the entire city will be a temple or dwelling place of God.

inhabitants of the earth An expression that is used consistently to depict unbelievers who rebel against God and suffer his judgment (3:10).

Jezebel A prophetess in Thyatira who promoted idolatry and immorality, likely by teaching that Christians could join the trade guilds and participate in the pagan worship feasts without compromising their faith (2:20). Throughout the history of God's people, Jezebel has become an enduring symbol of idolatry and wickedness.

a kingdom and priests A description of the church that fulfills the promise first made to Israel in Exodus 19:5-6. God's people are kingdom citizens who will reign with Christ, as well as priests with all the privileges and responsibilities of serving him (5:10).

kings from the East / kings of the whole world Most often pagan political powers who commit adultery with the great prostitute and are allied with the beast (16:12-16). The likely background is Ezekiel 38-39, where Gog and Magog depict human enemies who war against God's people. As an exception, 21:24 highlights redeemed nations and kings.

Lamb An image that combines the background of the Passover lamb of Exodus 11-12 with the Suffering Servant lamb of Isaiah 52-53 to represent Jesus Christ (5:6).



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mark of the beast A phrase used seven times in Revelation to symbolize ownership, identification, and allegiance (13:17-18). This image provides a figurative portrayal of a person's commitments and loyalties reflected in their ethical choices and objects of worship. This mark is deliberately received by unbelievers and stands in direct contrast to the seal of the living God given to believers.

nations The people of the world who either follow Satan or who follow God (11:14-19). The term is used both negatively and positively in Revelation. Some among the nations oppose God and his people (equivalent in this sense to "inhabitants of the earth"), while others respond in faith. Christ has redeemed some from among the nations, but only those who follow Christ will become citizens of the new Jerusalem.

new heaven and new earth The expression depicting the eternal state of the new creation, where God will live forever among his people (21:1-8). This completely transformed physical universe is also described as the holy city (or new Jerusalem), a temple city, and a garden city.

new song A celebration by God's people of the mighty and marvelous things God has done in conquering his enemies and providing salvation in Christ (5:9). Only the redeemed are allowed to sing this new song, implying that they have endured as faithful followers of Jesus. Those who overcome will enjoy the victory celebration.

Nicolaitans A group of false teachers closely connected to the cults of Balaam (2:14) and Jezebel (2:20-23). They are attempting to redefine the faith to allow Christians to fit in with (and perhaps profit from) the surrounding culture with its idolatry, immorality, deceit, and false worship (2:6).

144,000 A number that results from taking 12 (the number symbolizing completeness as well as the people of God), squaring it, and then multiplying the result by 1,000 (signifying a very large, complete number). The resulting number represents all followers of Jesus or the true Israel of God now sealed and engaged in spiritual battle (7:4).

red dragon Also called the ancient serpent, the accuser, the devil, or Satan (12:12). The red color alludes to his character of violence and bloodshed, and the dragon image draws on the Old Testament idea that serpents and sea monsters represent evil forces generally. Satan is God's archenemy, the accuser and tempter of God's people, and the deceiver of the world. He was defeated decisively at the cross and resurrection of Christ, and his future destruction is certain.



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scroll / little scroll The scroll (chap. 5) and the little scroll (chap. 10) probably both refer to God's plan for judging evil, redeeming his people, and transforming creation, a plan anchored in the death and resurrection of Christ and consummated at his return. seal of the living God In contrast to the mark of the beast, this stamp is given only to Christ's followers and indicates God's ownership and spiritual protection of his people (7:1-8). The seal does not exempt believers from persecution or suffering but from the demonic defeat and the wrath of God. John may have in mind the Holy Spirit as the seal (cf. 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13).

seven golden lampstands The seven churches of Asia Minor and the first intended recipients of the transforming vision that is the book of Revelation (1:12-16, 20).

seven spirits of God The sevenfold Holy Spirit (1:4; 3:1). The background is Zechariah 4:2-10, in which God's work is accomplished by his Spirit. seven stars The angels of the seven churches (1:20). Throughout Revelation the term "angel" refers to a heavenly being rather than a human being. These angels could serve as guardian angels or as personifications of the prevailing spirit or character of each church. They identify with, serve, and represent the churches before God.

666 The number of the beast's name (13:17-18). Most appeal to the Jewish practice of gematria to calculate the numerical value of the name of a Roman emperor (likely "Nero Caesar"). To identify the beast as Nero does not exclude the possibility of future beasts and a final eschatological beast. The number could also symbolize how the beast falls short of the trinity of perfection (777) or the "number" of Jesus (888). Both emphasize that the beast is a complete failure.

throne A symbol of God's absolute sovereignty and majesty (4:2). God's throne or sovereign rule is the central image in the book around which everything else revolves.

tree of Life A symbol of eternal life in the presence of God, full of never-ending provision (22:1-5).

twenty-four elders An exalted order of angels that serves as part of the heavenly council and in some sense represents the people of God (twelve tribes and twelve apostles). Their primary role is related to worship, since they are often portrayed as falling down (4:4).



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two witnesses / two olive trees / two lampstands Drawing on the background of Zechariah 4, these images represent the witnessing church and its role in reflecting God's presence in a hostile world (11:3-4). The number "two" probably comes from the need for two witnesses to constitute a valid legal testimony and the connection with the two olive trees (kingship and priesthood).

wedding supper of the Lamb The future fellowship/celebration of God with his people in the new creation (19:6-10). As the divine husband, God promised his bride a lavish banquet celebrating his defeat of their enemies and his abundant provision. Overall, the image of a wedding supper conveys the personal, intimate, joyous time of fellowship that God is preparing for his people.

woman clothed with the sun A symbol representing the community of faith that gives birth to the Messiah—the faithful remnant within Israel (12:1-2).

Upcoming Dates for Digging Deeper in Revelation

- **Monday, June 6** - The 7 Churches of Revelation featuring guest speaker Dr. Kenneth Cuffey, President of Urbana Theological Seminary
- **Monday, June 20** - Topic TBD

Valley Church Statement of Faith

9. We believe in the personal, bodily, and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

10. We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.