

**Interpreting the Symbols in Revelation  
in Light of the Macro and Micro Contexts<sup>1</sup>  
(Some Reflections and Questions)**

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May 2007

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When interpreting any symbol in Revelation, we must evaluate the images in light of layers of context: (a) The symbol may be a part of a cluster of symbols when taken together the sum is greater than the parts<sup>2</sup>; (b) The symbol, perhaps as part of a cluster of symbols, must be interpreted in light of the larger unit(s) in which it appears; and (c) The symbol's contribution to the overall context of Revelation must be discerned (For example, often a symbol in one passage surfaces again in a later passage, perhaps more fully developed.). The purpose of this essay is not to provide answers, but I want to elaborate on a methodology for studying symbols by using the images found in Rev. 7:1ff. as a case study.

*(a) A cluster of symbols . . .*

The images of completeness or totality in Rev. 6--7 can be used to illustrate the above (completeness or anticipation of completeness is expressed in a variety of ways: (a) in the phrase in 6:11, "until the number of their fellow servants and brothers . . . was completed"; (b) the use of seven to emphasize completeness in 6:12-14 {seven categories of the creation} and 6:15-17 {seven categories of humanity}; (c) the use of 12 and its multiples in Rev. 7; (d) the phrase "from every national, tribe, people, and language," in 7:9; (e) and possibly the phrase "they who have come out of the great tribulation" in 7:14.

*(b) The symbols placed in the context of the immediate unit . . .*

How do the symbols in Rev. 7 relate to the first four seals? For example, I have concluded that the four horsemen create insecurity and fear

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 99ff. and 199ff. in *Revelation's Rhapsody*.

<sup>2</sup> When you study one symbol, you will soon discover that more often than not, the study of the one spins off into the study of another symbol. For example, take the phrase "four winds" in Rev. 7:1). You need to do a study of "four," and that will lead to a study of "winds," and then to a study of where the two words are brought together. Another example concerns colors. It is not enough to study a color, let's say "red," and divorce it from other colors. You will need to explore the relationship between the various colors (e.g., The colors of the horses in Rev. 6:1-10 is a good case study.

because of their devastating effects on humanity. I believe that the purpose of the interlude found in Rev. 7 is to remind followers of Jesus of their ultimate security in Christ. They have been sealed--they belong to God and will receive ultimate protection from him.

How do the symbols in Rev. 7 relate to the fifth seal, a seal which indicates the completeness of the number of saints who will experience tribulation has not yet occurred? Hence, does the phrase "until the number . . . is completed" in 6:11 anticipate or foreshadow the scenes in Rev. 7:1ff. and 7:9ff.? The fifth seal suggests that John is especially concerned about the effects of the four horsemen on believers.

How do the symbols in Rev. 7:1-8 and 7:9-17 relate to each other?

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*(c) The symbols placed in the larger unit(s) . . .*

The symbols in 7 must be placed in the context of this chapter being an interlude, one of several found in Revelation. For example, between the sixth and seventh seals, trumpets, and bowls, there are interludes of varying lengths. In interpreting the symbols in these interludes, there is the need to answer the question: What is the purpose (or function) of these interludes and how do the symbols contribute to the purpose (or function)? I believe that the interlude between the sixth and seventh seal stresses security and ultimate victory (7:1-17); the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet stresses the responsibility of God's people to witness despite opposition (10:1-11:14); and the interlude between the sixth and seventh bowl stresses vigilance and faithfulness (16:15).

How do the symbols in Rev. 7 anticipate later sections? (For example, many of the images in 7:9ff. are developed in Rev. 21:1ff.)

**The bottom line is this: Interpret the symbols not only in light of the Old Testament context but also in light of the immediate and various layers of context in Revelation.**

**Always keep the contexts and big picture in view.**