The Lord was crucified in Sodom and Egypt.
Symbols in the Apocalypse of John

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ABSTRACT
This essay discusses the surprising lack of research on symbols in apocalypses in general and specifically in The Apocalypse of John. Because symbols are seminal to The Apocalypse of John (and to apocalypses) a proper methodology for an adequate understanding of symbols is discussed.

1 INTRODUCTION
It may come as a surprise that the symbolic language of apocalypses is seldom the object of research, although it may contribute decisively to the genre of these texts and is therefore of fundamental importance for the interpretation of apocalypses. Koch (1972:27) wrote:
There is not a single book in the Bible where the mythical overtones are not to be heard or in which symbolic images are not used. None the less, the picture language of the apocalypses is so noticeable and so curious that it stands clearly from the normal framework of the literature of the time and suggests a particular linguistic training, perhaps even a particular mentality (cf the similar remarks in Russell 1971:122).
Any reader of The Apocalypse of John will agree with Koch's assessment, because this book seems indeed to be a paramount example of affluent symbolism. But, even though the importance of apocalyptic symbolism can hardly be doubted, interest in it remained lacking. Koch (1983:437) remarked: "Die Besonderheit der apokalyptischen Sprache beachten Exegeten nur höchst selten". He could find only two later studies of Hanson and John Collins in which the subject was discussed. In the same year Rudolph (1983:787) remarked that even at the important colloquium on apocalypticism at Uppsala the symbolic language of apocalypses was only peripherally discussed.
There are, however, some dissenting points of view on the issue of the importance of apocalyptic symbols in general. In the case of The Apocalypse of John, Rowland (1982:61) found it necessary to warn that its symbolism may mislead one to think that symbolism and extravagant imagery is one of the hallmarks of apocalypses. Rowland seems to assess apocalypses differently than Koch does, because to his mind The Apocalypse of John is not typical of Jewish apocalypses, nor even of a Christian work like the Shepherd of Hermas. Rowland specifically refers to the less profound imagery in such contemporary apocalypses as 4 Ezra and Syriac Baruch with their extensive dialogues.

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I do not agree with the opposition Rowland creates between The Apocalypse of John and other apocalypses. Although The Apocalypse of John is affluentlly symbolic, the lengthy first three chapters with their seven communications to the seven churches display structural similarities with exactly those two books Rowland mentions as different from it. These first three chapters of The Apocalypse of John are rich in symbols - more so than is usually accepted when exegetes create a division between them and chapters 4-22. This becomes clear when the influence of the opening scene of the seven letters is considered, and of course when the number (seven!) and locations of the congregations are analysed.

It is therefore too readily assumed that other apocalypses are not as symbolic as The Apocalypse of John. The very general problem to identify characters and events of apocalypses and to relate them to historical referents or events, is an indication that authors of apocalypses, who make use of spatial and temporal characters and events, are deliberately avoiding an easy identification. The authors are often playfully at work in creating their texts. And this is already an indication of the symbolic nature of these texts. Apocalypses are therefore not less symbolic than The Apocalypse of John, though some of them may be less extravagant in their symbolic language. All this means that an investigation of symbols in The Apocalypse of John will be helpful in understanding symbols in apocalypses in general.

The importance of symbols in apocalypses is nowhere illustrated as aptly as in the general attitude toward apocalypses in earlier research. Scholars specifically lamented the inaccessibility of these texts because of their symbolic codes, and they consequently rejected these works as inferior and unintelligible. These symbols prevented an adequate understanding of the text.

There are definite historical reasons for this hiatus in apocalyptic research. It takes no wisdom to detect a vicious circle here: It is precisely because of their symbols that apocalypses became inaccessible and therefore unpopular. Early readers of these works recognised the prominent place of symbols in apocalypses, but were unable to understand them. Deep theological prejudices of many centuries against these "unintelligible" apocalypses in general and The Apocalypse of John specifically, in turn inhibited serious work on symbolism.

But there were also other problems in the interpretation of apocalyptic symbols. Christian scholars in the nineteenth century, for example, felt uncomfortable with the formal similarities (especially in symbols) between The Apocalypse of John and Jewish apocalypses and felt themselves compelled by these parallels either to deny the authenticity of The Apocalypse of John (rejecting it as a Jewish work) or to evaluate the similarities as superficial. One should, according to these scholars, then distinguish between their Jewish form and their (superior) Christian contents. The author of The
Apocalypse of John had consistently interpreted his Jewish material in a non-Jewish way (Schmidt 1976:86). Compare the following statements (quoted by Schmidt 1976:93) as an illustration of this point of view:

_Die Apokalypse setzt allerdings jene jüdischen Ideen und Erwartungen voraus (denn sie sind älter als sie) reinigt sie aber von allen Unwürdigkeiten und Schlacken, bedient sich ihrer im Geiste der erhabensten Dichter und Propheten, als grosser starker Bilder, und setzt aus ihnen ein Ganzes zusammen, welches mit jenen jüdischen Märchen einen merkwürdigen Kontrast macht, und denselben, wie es scheint, mit Absicht entgegengesetzt ist._ (Hartwig)

_In der Apokalypse ist unter einer Menge von Bildern vorzüglich die grosse Wahrheit anschaulich gemacht: dass das Gute und Wahre sich nur nach langem Kampfe durch das Schlechte und Verwerfliche hindurcharbeite, zuletzt aber gewiss den Sieg behalte._ (Schulze)

Luther had a similar negative attitude towards apocalyptic symbols. He compared the enigmatic visions and symbols in The Apocalypse of John with other New Testament books, written, in his view, in clear, accessible form by the apostles. An apostle, according to him, could not have written The Apocalypse of John, because the apostles did not use visions and symbols. Other texts are written


And because no apostle could have written the work, its status is inferior to those works that the apostles without any doubt did indeed write.

It would of course be unfair to keep Luther responsible for the negative attitude of scholars of later times to the symbolic language of The Apocalypse of John in particular and apocalypses in general. Luther wrote more positively on The Apocalypse of John later (cf Schmidt 1947:167-168). But his pronouncements are typical of a very general attitude towards a code which few readers understood, and, even after so much progress in research, still do not seem to want to understand today.

The basic sentiments, as well as the prejudiced dogmatic conviction about the superiority of the prophets to other movements, underlying all these interpretations are clear. It is important to note that these sentiments are accompanied by an equally unacceptable conviction that form and content can be separated.

In order to illustrate the complex nature of the situation, one should note some remarks written by that famous scholar, Sir William Ramsay, who cannot be suspected of ignorance or incompetence when it comes to the interpretation of a book like The Apocalypse of John. In his interpretation of the symbolism of the seven letters, he struggles through an explanation of the "angels" of the churches which are mentioned in 1:20 and writes:
The symbolism was complicated and artificial; and, when he (i.e., the author) began to write the actual letters, he began to feel that he was addressing the actual Churches, and the symbolism dropped from him in great degree. The symbolism was imposed on the writer of the Apocalypse by the rather crude literary model, which he imitated in obedience to a prevalent Jewish fashion. He followed his model very faithfully, so much so that his work has by some been regarded as a purely Jewish original, slightly modified by additions and interpolations to a Christian character, but restorable to its original Jewish form by simple excision of a few words and paragraphs. But we regard the Jewish element in it as traditional, due to the strong hold which this established form of literature exerted on the author. That element only fettered and impeded him by its fanciful and unreal character, making his work seem far more Jewish than it really is. Sometimes, however, the traditional form proves wholly inadequate to express his thoughts; and he discards it for the moment and speaks freely.

One nowadays marvels at the ease with which (neo-Platonic?) pronouncements like these assume that form and content can be separated (language "contains" ideas!). A totally new understanding of apocalyptic language, in which form is so decisive, is necessary. The history of research, therefore, does not only illustrate the necessity to overcome prejudices that prevent an adequate understanding of symbols, but it also forces us to focus on the methods used in the interpretation of symbols. Because of the seminal place of symbols in apocalypses, one must know how to analyse them adequately. At the same time an adequate methodology would help one to avoid illegitimate methods like the improper distinction between the form of symbols and their contents.

2 METHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

Too often past explorations into apocalypses have been merely theoretical and generalising without recourse to the texts themselves. In contrast, scholarly work on apocalypses today is generally much more inductive than before. Laborious exegetical work on specific apocalypses has improved our knowledge of the general phenomenon of apocalypticism and such specific investigations proved helpful in the interpretation of other apocalypses. Recent research has thus produced new insights into the nature of apocalypses. One has only to read Hellholm (1983) and Collins (1986) to realise what momentum apocalyptic research has built up in the last five years. In the light of the remarks of Koch and Rudolph, quoted above, it will be especially conspicuous because of inductive research: Inductive research, which takes the concrete text as point of departure, can hardly provide an adequate understanding of the text if it does not account for the symbolic language of apocalypses at a very early stage of interpretation.
It is therefore necessary to concentrate on symbols as they are used in The Apocalypse of John, not only because of the lack of such studies, but because, as results of inductive research on apocalypses proved, the key role such a study of the text may play in the understanding of apocalypticism. This is even more the case because the use of symbolic language varies in apocalypses and illegitimate transfer of information could take place from one apocalypse to the other, as has indeed so often happened in the past.

This introductory observation must be expanded by some specific remarks on the methodology needed for a study of apocalyptic symbols. As will become clear, it is no longer possible to study symbols in one part of The Apocalypse of John in isolation of the rest of the text and its situation. This is so because symbols of a text are not only interrelated, but they are also strongly integrated in the communication situation of the text. What Hartman (1983) convincingly said about genre, namely that it is decisively determined by the interrelationships of parts in the text as a whole and by its function in the communication process, is equally true of symbols.

One example may be helpful: In Revelation 12 the woman and the dragon are mentioned in the same context. In 12:1 the woman is introduced by the phrase: καὶ σμεῖον μέγα ὁφθη ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, while the introductory phrase in the following verse 3 for the description of the woman is καὶ ὁφθη ἀλλο σμεῖον ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ. After the appearance of the sign of both the woman and the dragon, some events are described. The two symbols of the woman and the dragon should be read together, and the one symbol interprets the other. The woman, a human figure, is involved in a very human and natural event: she gives birth to a child. The dragon, a wild animal, in contrast, does supernatural things: he casts down stars of heaven on the earth. The full impact of the woman-sign becomes only clear when it is contrasted with the dragon, the animal-like or non-human representative of extreme evil. Her humanity is an indication of her special status and her superiority above the dragon. The fact that these two symbols are joined syntagmatically and by the same introductory formula, is therefore indicative of the fact that they should be interpreted together.

Such an approach rejects an eclectic study of symbols - something already realised by Swete when he wrote (1908:cxiii) that symbols cannot be explained from the Old Testament only or in terms of "Babylonian folklore", because they are "essentially a creation of the writer's own mind." The problem would then be to establish what this "mind" means. The author's "mind" must be read in terms of the text he has produced and can only be reconstructed from a reading of his work as a whole. An eclectic approach could produce a distorted picture of this "mind". Ellul (1977:33-35) stated that the symbols in The Apocalypse of John must be interpreted

*by means of a correct reading of the word which relates to them. It is necessary then to go back from the text to the symbol and not to study the symbol more than the text.*
The word which relates to the text is, according to him, "what is said in the text concerning the symbol" (Ellul 1977:35). These remarks also illustrate to what extent the symbols are embedded in the text, even though Ellul too easily assumes that visions are accompanied by explanations in The Apocalypse of John. He tends to overlook the fact that "explanations" given in the text are often nothing more than new symbols.

The interpretation given by the author of a specific symbol can be fully determined only by taking into account the text as a whole. The author's interpretation of a specific symbol (which is seldom given in The Apocalypse of John) is supported or elaborated upon in the rest of the book. This in turn implies that symbols should be understood in terms of the particular way in which an author understood them, and not in the first instance against the background of the use of a symbol in other traditions or apocalypses. An author used several symbols which are closely interrelated and which should be interpreted together.

An explanation may be helpful: The traditional motif of the Lamb is taken over and applied to Christ specifically in passages where the microcosmic situation of the church is discussed (5-7; 12:11; 14:1,4; 21:14,22,27; 22:1,3 - cf Foerster 1970:226-227). In these passages the Lamb-motif is used together with the title Lion of Judah and these two are mutually interdependent. The meaning of this description of the Lamb is determined by both its relation with the Lion of Judah and the fact that it is used in a context where the situation of the church is discussed. The use of this symbol is in line with the author's combination of mutually exclusive objects and elements (lion-lamb, sweet-sour) elsewhere in the book. This symbol should in the first instance be explained in terms of its grouping with symbols in its immediate context and the way in which the author specifically understood it, rather than in a traditional sense only.

The previous remarks do not mean that symbols are to be read in relation to the preceding or following symbols only. They must also be interpreted paradigmatically in so far as symbols in different parts of the text are related and should be studied together. An example is the motifs of sealing and measuring which are found throughout the book. The measuring of the temple (11:1-2) should be read in conjunction with the sealing of the faithful in chapter 7, even though there are several chapters which separate them.

How decisive a literary interpretation becomes is especially clear when one considers the use of the symbolic title ὄ ὑν καὶ ὅ ἄν καὶ ὄ ἐρχόμενος for God (cf 1:5 etc). It is a title which symbolically indicates God's involvement in history. A small, but significant change in this title takes place from 11:19, after which God is only called ὄ ὑν καὶ ὅ ἄν. From 11:17ff the future events which relate the coming of God are described (Foerster 1970:227).

Further clarification is, however, needed: The study of symbols cannot be done in a loose manner by simply comparing all symbols in the macrotext
of The Apocalypse of John without differentiating among them. One has to keep in mind that some symbols in the text would share a closer mutual relationship than others. Hellholm (1986) furthered the above-mentioned remarks of Hartman by indicating that the interrelationship of parts of a text has a hierarchical nature. Practically this implies that the meaning of a symbol is determined to a greater or lesser extent by those into which it has been embedded or which it determines in a hierarchical structure.

In the symbolic description of the One like a Son of man in 1:12-16 several features contribute to the extraordinary nature of this figure. His head, eyes, feet, voice and face are all compared to some object - white wool, a flame of fire, burnished bronze, the sound of many waters and the shining sun. These comparisons enhance the uniqueness of his appearance, although they are as such and on their own not overtly unusual.

The whole description becomes even more special when further symbols are added and it is said that He is the One who held seven stars in his right hand and from whose mouth a sharp two-edged sword came. Seven stars in a hand and a two-edged sword from the mouth, are difficult to visualise. Where both of these symbols are used together, it becomes impressive, especially when they are used together with the important Son of man-figure.

It is interesting that the elements without comparisons in 1:12-16 are those which are taken up in the following explanation: the seven stars are explained, as well as, strangely enough, the seven lampstands mentioned at the very beginning of the vision. The only element without comparison which is left unexplained in this vision, is the sharp two-edged sword. One may, in fact say that because an explanation of the lampstands and swords is given so soon after the vision in chapter one, while the two-edged sword is left unexplained, actually focuses attention on this sword, because it must have made the reader wonder about its meaning.

In the letter to the first congregation in Ephesus (2:1ff), the introductory verse (2:1) refers back to the vision of the One like a Son of man by taking up the symbolic motifs of the seven stars and the seven lampstands in the vision of chapter one. This confirms the importance of these two motifs in the first vision. But the author returns to the sword soon afterwards in 2:12 in the introduction to the next letter to Pergamum: "The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword".

There is a reference to a sword in the same letter in 2:16, where Pergamum is warned to repent, otherwise "I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth". The meaning of the two-edged sword, however, becomes only unequivocally clear in 19:15, namely that it is symbolic of the message of judgement in the book.

The same is true of the symbolic meaning of the colour "red", which is used in Revelation 6:4 for the second horse. In a recent lexicon this colour is explained as follows:
As in other instances of color terms, it may be necessary in Re 6:4 to use an expression which is particularly applicable to a horse (Louw & Nida 1988:697).

Such a remark is clearly based on a misunderstanding of symbolism in The Apocalypse of John, where symbols deliberately transcend the ordinary and a colour like red is added to depict the horse exactly as non-horselike. This colour is not an indication of the natural colour of an animal. It is a symbolic word and degrades the horse to the realm of the demonic (cf Bousset 1906:267; Mounce 1977:154). On the same page in this lexicon there are no references under κόκκινος to the use of this word in Revelation 17:3-4, where both the animal on which the woman sat and her clothes have a scarlet colour - clearly a strong symbolic colour. Bousset (1906:264-265) displayed sensitivity to the symbolic nature of these colours when he traced them to Zechariah 6:2, where, according to him, they symbolise the four directions of the wind. The important point is that the colours of the horses in The Apocalypse of John 6 are all symbolic and should be interpreted as such, a fact which is mostly overlooked in commentaries. It is remarkable that the colour of the second horse, for example, is often eclectically interpreted as symbolic, but that little attempt is made to explain the colours of the other horses. Why would an author use only one colour symbolically?

Although passages like Zechariah 6 may be of help in determining their meaning, one will have to look at the way colours are used in The Apocalypse of John generally.

The above-mentioned lexicon does, inconsistently enough, recognise the symbolic value of other usages of colours in the New Testament, specifically, for example, of the white clothes in Revelation 7:14 (cf Louw & Nida 1988:698 where the "figurative language" is explained as indicative of purity). This fact clearly illustrates the problems when the simple fact of a paradigmatic reading of symbols is ignored and an inadequate methodology is applied to the text. The importance of my methodological comments is aptly illustrated by the inconsistencies on one page of this lexicon.

These remarks illustrate how an analysis of the text must not only account for the way one symbolic element is built into a well structured unit together with other symbols (syntagmatic reading), but also how it is developed in the rest of the text (paradigmatic reading).

In the final analysis much more than the literary context is to be taken into account to explain symbols in a methodologically sound way. Symbols cannot be understood in isolation, because they are integrated within an overall structure of meaning from which they derive their collectively shared significance. The social life-world behind The Apocalypse of John ultimately becomes the important grid against which one must read the symbols, because symbols are completely integrated into this social life world. A
literary analysis of symbols therefore needs to be complemented by a social analysis.

A word of caution is needed here: It is important that a literary analysis precedes a social analysis. The literary analysis presupposes that symbols form a coherent whole and are carefully structured into the narrative world the author established by his work. But the literary analysis is on its own not enough, because it may often happen that the social function of a text may decisively determine the meaning of symbols. The nowadays often repeated insight that the seemingly incoherent parts of The Apocalypse of John are strongly bound together by the social function, reflects how social function can illuminate the meaning of a text. This is, for example, the case in Revelation 11, where so many of the smaller units find their meaning in the way they describe the task and situation of the congregation.

The many different views on the social setting of The Apocalypse of John illustrates how very difficult it is to determine the social situation of the The Apocalypse of John. I referred above to the fact that the language of The Apocalypse of John seldom allows for a precise determination of the time of events and persons. The boundaries between past and present, as well as the boundaries between future and present, are fluid (Lohmeyer 1953:193-194). What Koch (1983:431) said about Daniel is equally valid for The Apocalypse of John:

Die verschlüsselte Sprache führt dazu, dass der Exeget im dunkeln tappt mit der Frage, ob z.B. Dan 8,25 insgesamt zukünftig gemeint is oder nur mit seinem letzten Satz.

It is equally true that it is difficult to establish the historical persons to whom the character in the book refers.

3 THE LORD WAS CRUCIFIED IN SODOM AND EGYPT

The above mentioned remarks and especially the fact that apocalyptic symbols display a distanciation towards history and reality, can be illustrated by a discussion of The Apocalypse of John 11:8. Here the following is said about the two witnesses after they are attacked by the beast from the abyss:

Their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.

The city is not Jerusalem

Now it is clear that this pronouncement in chapter 11:8 makes little sense if the reference is to the earthly Jerusalem, especially if the book was written in 90 A D after the destruction of the city. Charles (1920:288) wrote:

Jerusalem was, therefore, the city meant both by the original writer and also by our author. And yet the latter cannot have taken the entire section literally, for Jerusalem no longer existed in his time.

This interpretation of Charles rests upon the assumption that the the author of the book wrote in the time of Domitian in order to encourage his readers
"to resist the blasphemous claims of the state, and to proclaim the coming victory of the cause of God and of His Christ" (Charles 1920:xxii).

The city was Rome
The literal reference to Jerusalem is of course immediately questioned by the preceding remark that the city is also allegorically (pneumatikos) called Sodom and Egypt. Scholars who related this phrase to Rome rather than Jerusalem, claimed as proof other verses in The Apocalypse of John in which the great city refers to Rome - according to their reading of this phrase (16:19; 17:18; 18:10ff), as well as the inexplicable fact that Jerusalem, which would hardly present a threat to the readers of the book, should be denoted by a symbol. In the time of this book, the only real threat to the community would be the Roman state. It would, according to them, be understandable why Rome would be represented by a symbol, because Rome could become dangerous to Christians (Van Schaik 1971:115-116). Schüssler Fiorenza (1981:118) writes, the expression "great city" that

is the moral and spiritual equivalent of Sodom and Egypt refers clearly to the oppresive power of Rome since the Romans were legally responsible for the execution of Jesus.

Scholars who identify Rome as the referent of the great city, struggle to interpret the phrase that the city was the place where the Lord was crucified. They then see Rome as the guilty partner to the death of Christ, or to the extended death of Christ through the crucifixion of Peter. The two witnesses in this instance would be Peter and Paul.

All these attempts try to make sense of the symbols by relating them in some way or other to a specific historical referent. By doing this, scholars are in fact inverting the purpose of the author with his symbols. They move away from the symbolic and exhaust the meaning of the symbol by finding a historical referent for it. To my mind, Prigent is closer to the truth when he wrote (1981:168):

...c'est à dessein que notre auteur donne à Jérusalem le nom même qui désigne la capitale du monde païen: c'est l'intention de tout ce passage de montrer que le monde où s'exerce le ministère prophétique de l'Eglise est à la fois le lieu saint où adorent les fidèles et le domaine de Satan, le sanctuaire livré aux païens.

The phrase that the great city is "allegorically" called Sodom and Egypt, is, as was said, a clear indication of the symbolic nature of this passage. This is confirmed by an investigation of the "great city", which is mentioned in 16:19, this time in connection with Babylon, although without identifying it explicitly with Babylon. Later, in chapter 18, where the great city is repeatedly mentioned (cf vv 10,16,18,19,21), the identification with Babylon is clear (cf v 10 and 21). The meaning of chapter 11:8 should be determined in the light of these references to the great city. How intricate the relationships, syntagmati-
cally and paradigmatically, become, is clear from 17:18, where the great city is identified with the harlot of chapter 17. Now the city, the harlot and symbols like Jerusalem, Sodom and Egypt become a unit - indicative of the evil forces which are responsible for the persecution of the church - and should be read together (syntagmatically and paradigmatically) in order to determine their individual meanings adequately. To my mind the key to the meaning of the city can be found in the explanation the author gives in 17:18 and 15.

And the woman that you saw is the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth (17:18).
The waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues (17:15).

All this indicates how elusive symbols in The Apocalypse of John can be. They do not really function as allegories, referring to historical events or characters. This, in turn, makes it very difficult to determine the historic references of symbols and the social situation of the book.

WORKS CONSULTED


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