COGMA

Church of God Mission Academy

STUDY GUIDE 21

The Language *of* the Bible

STUDY GUIDE 3 OF 4:

Visions and Dreams

An overview of understanding symbolic revelation through Scripture.



Equipping and empowering for effective service

2 Timothy 2:2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE STUDENT

My Study Plan

Preparing a Study Plan before starting this Study Guide will assist you in completing it within a designated timeframe. It also helps in developing the discipline required for studying God's Word effectively.

Proverbs 16:3:

> *Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.*

My Study Guide Journal

Keep a record as you progress through your Study Guide, including the Personal Responses for each section, for future reference and goal setting.

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Important Points

- COGMA does not claim to be infallible or the authority.
- Infallibility and authority belong only to God and His Word.

COGMA therefore strongly advises that you prayerfully study the content of each Study Guide with the heart of a Berean (**Acts 17:10–12**).

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PREFACE

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The Bible contains many visions and dreams through which God revealed His character, His purposes and important spiritual truths. These accounts appear throughout both the Old and New Testaments and form an important part of the language of Scripture.

Visions can contain unusual images, animals, objects, numbers and scenes that are not intended to be understood as ordinary literal descriptions. Their meaning must therefore be approached carefully. We cannot decide what a symbol means simply because an interpretation seems possible. The Bible must interpret itself.

This principle is especially important when studying verses such as Peter's vision in Acts, the Mount of Transfiguration, the visions of Daniel and Ezekiel, and the book of Revelation. Each verse must be understood according to its context, its symbolic language and the wider harmony of Scripture.

Dreams and visions are closely related, but Scripture also shows that they can serve different purposes. Some reveal events or spiritual truths, while others call the person receiving the vision to respond or act upon what God has shown. We must therefore consider not only what was seen, but also why the revelation was given.

Understanding these forms of biblical language requires patience and careful study. Some verses may appear difficult at first, but God has not given His Word to confuse His people. As we gather the relevant Scriptures, consider the context and allow the Word of God to explain its own imagery, the meaning becomes clearer.

Above all, the purpose of studying visions and dreams is not to become fascinated with mysterious pictures or prophetic symbols. Biblical revelation must lead us towards the truth God has revealed in Jesus Christ. The symbols serve the truth being communicated and should never become more important than that truth.

The symbols are not the destination. The vision is given to reveal the spiritual truth to which the symbols point, and that truth must remain centred in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must a biblical vision be understood through what God has revealed in the Bible?

Personal Reflection

Where have you relied on an impression or striking picture without testing its meaning?

Action Step

Revisit a vision whose imagery has strongly impressed you. Read its context, test your assumption by the Bible and correct any meaning that lacks support.

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING VISIONS AND DREAMS

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Visions and dreams appear throughout the Bible and form an important part of the language God used to communicate truth. They are found in both the Old and New Testaments and

include the visions of Daniel and Ezekiel, Jacob's dream, Peter's vision in Acts, Paul's vision of the third heaven, the Mount of Transfiguration and the book of Revelation.

These verses can contain unusual scenes, images and symbols that are not always immediately understood. For this reason, visions and dreams must be studied carefully and interpreted in harmony with the whole Word of God.

The purpose of this Study Guide is to help us recognise how biblical visions and dreams communicate spiritual truth and how Scripture itself provides the keys to their meaning. We will examine:

- Why visions appear throughout Scripture;
- Why symbolic language is often used;
- How symbols can reveal character, relationships and spiritual truth;
- Peter's vision concerning the Gentiles;
- The Mount of Transfiguration;
- The symbolic language of the book of Revelation;
- How Scripture interprets symbols such as hail;
- The similarities and differences between dreams and visions.

As we study these verses, one principle must remain central: The Bible must interpret itself. Visions are not an invitation to speculation or imagination. Their meaning must come from Scripture, context and the harmony of God's Word.

Above all, biblical visions and dreams should help us understand more clearly what God has revealed concerning Jesus Christ, His Kingdom and His people. The images and symbols serve the truth being communicated, and our attention must remain upon that truth rather than upon the unusual form in which it was revealed.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why do visions and dreams need careful study of their context and the Bible's own explanations?

Personal Reflection

What expectation about visions or dreams has the Bible's teaching corrected for you?

Action Step

Choose a dream or vision in the Bible. Identify what God was communicating and describe how this changes the way you approach unusual experiences.

VISIONS ARE THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE

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Visions appear throughout Scripture. They are found in both the Old and New Testaments and were used by God to communicate truth concerning His character, His Kingdom, His people and His purposes.

Some visions are relatively simple, while others contain what Scripture describes as *"dark sayings."* These are truths expressed in ways that require careful study before their meaning

becomes clear. We should not avoid such verses simply because they appear difficult because God has given His Word to be studied and understood.

Examples Throughout Scripture

The Bible records many different visions and dreams, including:

- Jacob's dream of the ladder in Genesis;
- The visions of Daniel concerning kingdoms and God's Kingdom;
- The visions of Ezekiel;
- The Mount of Transfiguration;
- Paul's vision of the third heaven;
- Peter's vision of the great sheet containing animals;
- The visions recorded throughout the book of Revelation.

These examples show that visions are not confined to one particular period of biblical history. God used them at different times and for different purposes.

Daniel received visions concerning kingdoms and future events, while Peter received a vision that changed his understanding concerning the Gentiles. The Mount of Transfiguration used symbolic imagery to direct attention towards Jesus Christ, and John received the visions recorded in Revelation.

The details differ, but the same important principle applies: We must understand what God intended to communicate through the vision. The unusual picture is not the final message because the purpose is the truth being revealed through it.

Revelation Is Described as a Vision

The book of Revelation provides one of the clearest examples of extensive visionary language. John himself identifies what he saw as a vision.

John wrote in **Revelation 9:17**:

> *"And thus I saw the horses in the vision, and them that sat on them, having breastplates of fire, and of jacinth, and brimstone: and the heads of the horses were as the heads of lions; and out of their mouths issued fire and smoke and brimstone."*

Notice John's words, *"I saw the horses in the vision."* This is important because the unusual pictures John describes must be understood within the language of a vision.

Horses with heads like lions and fire, smoke and brimstone coming from their mouths are not ordinary descriptions of natural events. They form part of symbolic imagery that must be interpreted through Scripture.

Later in this Study Guide, we will examine more closely how the Bible itself provides the keys for understanding such pictures. The symbols must remain under the authority of the Word rather than being interpreted through imagination.

Visions Were Given for a Purpose

Biblical visions were not given simply to create mystery or curiosity. They communicate spiritual truths that God intended His people to understand.

Studying them can help us:

- Understand God's character more clearly;
- Recognise His purposes throughout Scripture;
- Understand His Kingdom;
- See how different verses of Scripture relate to one another;
- Recognise truths concerning Jesus Christ and His people.

The fact that some visions require careful study should encourage us to search the Scriptures rather than abandon the subject. Difficulty does not give us permission to speculate, but it should lead us to gather the relevant verses and allow Scripture to establish the meaning.

As we continue, we will see that the images themselves are not the final truth. They are the means through which God communicates something greater. The vision gives the picture, while Scripture reveals the meaning.

Personal Response

Key Truth

For what purposes did God give visions in the biblical accounts studied?

Personal Reflection

Have you focused on the unusual experience more than the message God communicated?

Action Step

Read one biblical vision in context. Examine whether you have focused on its images more than its message, and explain how you will change that emphasis.

DILIGENCE, WISDOM AND DARK SAYINGS

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Some biblical visions are not immediately understood. Their meaning may be expressed through unusual pictures, symbols and what Scripture describes as *"dark sayings."*

This does not mean that God intends His Word to remain permanently hidden. It means that some truths require patience, careful study and a sincere desire to understand what He has revealed. Understanding visions is therefore not something to approach casually because we must be willing to search the Scriptures, compare verses and allow the Word of God to explain itself.

God Rewards Those Who Diligently Seek Him

The writer of Hebrews wrote in **Hebrews 11:6**:

> *"But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."*

Notice the words *"diligently seek him."* God honours the person who sincerely desires to know Him and understand His Word. This does not mean that every difficult verse becomes clear

immediately because understanding often develops as we continue to study, compare Scripture and remain willing to learn.

The purpose of studying visions is therefore greater than gaining information. Through the Word of God, we come to understand more of His character, His Kingdom and His purpose. Diligent study should draw us towards truth rather than simply increase our knowledge of difficult verses.

Searching for Wisdom

The book of Proverbs compares the search for wisdom with searching for something precious. Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 2:4-6**:

> *"If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding."*

Silver and hidden treasure are not normally found without effort because they must be searched for. In the same way, some truths in Scripture require us to search carefully.

We may need to examine the context, compare related verses and consider how the same image or expression is used elsewhere in the Bible. This is especially important when studying visions because one verse may provide the key that helps explain the imagery found in another.

The goal is not intellectual pride, but *"the knowledge of God."* True biblical wisdom comes from God and remains subject to His Word.

The Reward of Careful Study

Careful study of biblical visions can strengthen our understanding in several ways. It can help us:

- Recognise the harmony of Scripture;
- Understand symbolic language more accurately;
- See connections between different verses;
- Discern the character represented by biblical images;
- Understand God's Kingdom and His purposes more clearly;
- Avoid interpretations based upon imagination.

Difficult verses should therefore encourage careful study rather than speculation. We do not force meanings into a vision simply because we want an answer, and neither do we abandon the verse because the meaning is not immediately obvious.

We search patiently and allow Scripture to provide the explanation. As related verses are brought together, the meaning of symbolic language can become clearer without depending upon imagination or personal opinion.

As we continue through this Study Guide, this principle will become increasingly important. Many of the visions we will examine contain symbolic language that becomes clearer when related Scriptures are carefully compared.

Diligence searches. Scripture explains. God gives wisdom and understanding through His Word.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why do difficult sayings call for diligence and wisdom rather than quick speculation?

Personal Reflection

When a prophetic picture is hard to understand, do you investigate or settle for a guess?

Action Step

Take a difficult prophetic picture you have been quick to explain. Compare the relevant verses and record which assumption you must reconsider or leave unresolved.

THE LANGUAGE OF VISIONS IS SYMBOLISM

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Biblical visions often communicate through symbolic language. Rather than presenting truth only through ordinary statements, God uses pictures, objects, animals, people and unusual scenes to communicate spiritual meaning.

When Scripture identifies something as a vision, we must therefore be careful not to assume that everything shown is intended to be understood literally. A vision may describe something that can be pictured naturally while actually communicating a spiritual truth.

Symbolic Language Communicates Deeper Truth

Jesus explained that spiritual truth is not always presented in a form that everyone immediately understands. Jesus said in **Luke 8:10**:

> *"And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand."*

Jesus spoke of *"the mysteries of the kingdom of God."* The word mystery does not mean that God's truth can never be understood. It describes something that must be revealed and understood according to God's Word.

This principle helps us approach visions correctly. The picture itself may be unusual, but the truth being communicated is not meaningless. God uses the image to direct our attention towards something that Scripture can explain.

We must therefore distinguish between:

- What was seen in the vision;
- What the picture represents;
- What spiritual truth God intended to communicate.

Confusing these can lead to serious errors in interpretation. We must not assume that the object seen in the vision is itself the final subject of the revelation.

Rightly Dividing the Word

Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 2:15**:

> *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."*

Understanding visions requires the same careful approach that should govern all Bible study. We must study the verse, examine its context and allow related Scriptures to help explain what is being shown.

We should not decide that an image means something simply because the interpretation sounds interesting or impressive. The authority remains with Scripture.

This is particularly important because symbolic language can create powerful mental pictures. If the picture is interpreted incorrectly, the conclusion may also be wrong. Careful interpretation therefore requires us to move beyond the image and search for the meaning Scripture gives it.

The Picture Is Not Always the Reality

A symbol stands in the place of something else. For example, when Scripture uses a wolf to describe a false teacher, the person is not literally an animal because the wolf communicates something about character.

In the same way, when a vision contains animals, beasts, horns, mountains, stars or other unusual images, the objects seen may represent truths beyond their natural appearance. The symbol provides the picture, while the spiritual truth is the reality being communicated.

This does not mean that every object in the Bible should be treated symbolically. A wolf in an ordinary historical account may simply be a wolf, and a mountain may be a literal mountain. The context must show us what kind of language is being used.

When Scripture tells us that something was seen in a vision, however, we should recognise that the imagery may carry meaning beyond a simple natural description. We must then allow Scripture to establish what that meaning is.

Scripture Must Explain the Symbol

The safest principle for interpreting visionary language is the same principle that governs sound Bible study generally: Let the Bible interpret itself.

The meaning of a symbol should be established through Scripture rather than imagination. Sometimes the explanation is given directly within the same verse, while at other times another Scripture uses the same picture and provides the key to its meaning.

Peter's vision in Acts 10 is an important example. He saw a great sheet containing animals and was told to rise, kill and eat. If the vision were understood only at the level of its imagery, it could easily be interpreted as being primarily about food.

However, Peter later explained what God had shown him. The vision used animals, but the truth concerned people.

This demonstrates an essential principle: Do not stop with what was seen. Search Scripture for what the vision means.

Biblical visions use symbolic language to communicate spiritual truth. The image attracts our attention and provides the picture, but the Word of God must provide the interpretation. This principle will guide us as we examine Peter's vision more closely in the next section.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does symbolism communicate truth in a vision without making every detail literal?

Personal Reflection

Which symbol have you explained from imagination rather than the Bible?

Action Step

Reconsider a symbol you have explained from imagination. Find the Bible's explanation and change your account wherever it goes beyond what is written.

PETER'S VISION: LET THE BIBLE INTERPRET THE VISION

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Peter's vision in Acts chapter 10 provides one of the clearest examples of why biblical visions must be interpreted through Scripture rather than by the images alone. The vision contained animals, but the truth God was revealing concerned people.

At this stage, Peter was still carrying Jewish ideas concerning separation from the Gentiles. Although Jesus Christ had already established the New Covenant, Peter's understanding was still being brought into the fullness of that reality.

What Peter Saw

Luke wrote in **Acts 10:11-16**:

> *"And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven."*

If we stopped with the picture itself, we might conclude that the main purpose of the vision concerned food. Peter saw animals that Jewish law had classified as unclean, and he was told to kill and eat.

His immediate response was, *"Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean."* Peter naturally responded to the picture through his Jewish background, but the meaning of the vision was greater than the animals he saw.

Peter Explains the Vision

Later in the chapter, Peter tells us what God had shown him. His explanation must govern the way we understand the earlier picture.

Peter said in **Acts 10:28**:

> *"And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean."*

Peter does not explain the vision by saying that God had simply shown him that he could now eat animals previously considered unclean. Instead, he says, *"God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean."*

This is the biblical interpretation of the vision. The animals were the symbolic picture, but the spiritual truth concerned people.

The Vision Confronted Peter's Jewish Thinking

Under the Old Covenant, Israel had been separated from the Gentile nations through many outward distinctions. Peter had grown up within those covenant practices, and those distinctions had shaped the way he viewed Gentiles.

Acts records a period of covenant transition in which Jewish believers were being brought out of those former distinctions and into the completed New Covenant reality established in Jesus Christ. Peter therefore needed his understanding corrected.

The vision showed him that he must no longer treat Gentile people as spiritually unclean simply because they were Gentiles. God was preparing Peter to enter the house of Cornelius and minister the Gospel to people whom he previously would have avoided.

The vision was not establishing another Gospel for Gentiles. It was revealing that the same salvation found in Jesus Christ was for them also.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How did Peter's vision confront his earlier way of thinking?

Personal Reflection

Where might a settled assumption keep you from hearing what the full verse teaches?

Action Step

Read Acts 10 through Peter's explanation. Consider whether background or habit has shaped your judgement of others, and identify what needs correcting.

One People in Jesus Christ

This truth agrees with the teaching found throughout the New Testament. Paul wrote in **Galatians 3:28**:

> *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."*

The New Covenant does not establish separate ways of salvation for Jew and Gentile. Those who are saved are *"all one in Christ Jesus."*

Natural nationality does not determine entrance into the people of God. Both Jew and Gentile must receive spiritual life through Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 12:13**:

> *"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."*

Notice the repeated emphasis upon one:

- One Spirit;
- One spiritual baptism;
- One body;
- One salvation in Jesus Christ.

Paul is not describing a literal water ceremony that places people into the Church. He is describing the spiritual work of God by which those who are born again are brought into the one body of Christ. The same Spirit of Christ is received by Jew and Gentile alike.

The Image Must Not Control the Interpretation

Peter's vision teaches an important principle for interpreting all biblical visions. We must not assume that the natural object seen in a vision is the final subject of the revelation.

Peter saw a great sheet containing four-footed beasts, wild beasts, creeping things and birds. Some of those animals were considered common or unclean, yet Peter himself explains that the message concerned human beings.

The image was symbolic. If we had interpreted the vision only from the picture, we could easily have missed the principal truth God was revealing.

This is why the Bible must interpret itself. The correct interpretation comes when we follow the vision through the verse and allow Peter's own explanation to govern our understanding.

The Greater New Covenant Truth

Peter's vision revealed something much greater than a change in dietary practice. It confronted a covenant distinction that had separated Jew from Gentile and prepared Peter to recognise that salvation through Jesus Christ was not restricted by nationality.

The Gospel is for people of every nation, and the Church of God is not natural Israel enlarged by the addition of Gentiles. Neither are there two separate covenant peoples with different ways of salvation. There is one spiritual body composed of those who are born again through Jesus Christ.

Peter saw unclean animals, but God was teaching him about people. The vision provided the picture, while Peter's explanation provided the meaning.

Jesus Christ revealed the greater New Covenant reality: Jew and Gentile are brought into one body by one Spirit.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What greater New Covenant truth became clear through Peter's vision and its fulfilment?

Personal Reflection

Have you ever judged someone by background or nationality rather than recognising that the same Gospel is for all people?

Action Step

Compare Peter's vision with his treatment of Cornelius. Examine any prejudice you have accepted and identify a respectful action that expresses the one Gospel.

THE PURPOSE OF SYMBOLISM IN VISIONS

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God's use of symbolism in biblical visions is purposeful. The unusual pictures are not included simply to make the visions mysterious or difficult. Symbols can communicate spiritual truth in ways that ordinary statements may not express as vividly.

Symbolism serves several important purposes in biblical visions:

- To reveal spiritual truth;
- To require the hearer to search carefully for understanding;
- To create memorable pictures;
- To communicate character and meaning through imagery;
- To communicate across language and cultural boundaries.

These purposes help us understand why visions often contain unusual images. The picture attracts attention, but the purpose is always the truth God intends to communicate through it.

Symbolism Can Conceal and Reveal

Symbolic language does not always make its meaning immediately obvious. This requires the Bible student to search the Scriptures rather than simply accept the first interpretation that comes to mind.

Jesus said in **Luke 8:10**:

> *"And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand."*

Jesus shows that spiritual truth may be presented in a form that requires spiritual understanding. This does not mean that God wants sincere Bible students to remain confused, but that we must seek, study and allow Scripture to reveal the meaning.

The symbol may conceal the truth from a casual observer while becoming understandable as the Bible provides the key. This is why difficult imagery should lead us towards careful study rather than imagination.

Symbolism Creates Memorable Pictures

One of the strengths of symbolic language is its ability to create a picture in the mind. We often say, *"A picture paints a thousand words,"* because a vivid image can communicate character, danger, strength, weakness, judgement or hope very quickly.

A wolf immediately creates a different impression from a lamb, while a destructive beast produces a different picture from a peaceful kingdom. Hail falling from heaven also creates a powerful image that draws attention towards the truth represented by the symbol.

The picture helps make the message memorable, but the image must never become more important than the truth it was given to communicate. We do not study visions simply to become fascinated with unusual beasts, animals, numbers or heavenly scenes.

We study the picture in order to understand the spiritual truth.

Symbolism Can Communicate Beyond Ordinary Words

Symbols can also communicate ideas across different languages and cultures. The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, yet many of its pictures can still be recognised by readers from very different backgrounds.

Images such as the following can communicate strong ideas even before every word surrounding them has been fully explained:

- Light and darkness;
- Sheep and wolves;
- A lamb;
- A powerful beast;
- Water;
- Fire;
- A harvest.

These pictures provide a starting point for understanding, but we must not assume that every symbol carries exactly the same meaning in every verse. Context and Scripture must still determine the interpretation.

The value of symbolism is that it gives the mind a picture through which spiritual truth can be communicated. The picture assists understanding, but Scripture must establish what that picture means in its particular setting.

The Symbol Serves the Truth

When studying a biblical vision, we should therefore ask both what the person saw and what truth God was communicating through what they saw. The first question identifies the picture, while the second moves us towards the purpose of the vision.

The symbol is not the final destination because the image is a means of communicating something greater. Our attention must move from the picture towards the spiritual truth God intended to reveal.

In the sections that follow, we will see how biblical symbols can reveal character, relationships and spiritual realities. Whether the image is a wolf, a lamb, a beast, Moses and Elijah in a vision, or hail falling from heaven, the same principle remains.

The picture must be interpreted by Scripture, and the symbol must serve the spiritual truth God intended to reveal.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must the symbol in a vision serve the truth it communicates?

Personal Reflection

Have you become more interested in an image than in the message the Bible gives through it?

Action Step

Choose a vision that interests you. Shift your attention from describing its imagery to receiving its teaching, and explain what that truth changes for you.

SYMBOLISM REVEALS CHARACTER

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One important purpose of symbolism is to reveal character. A symbol can communicate something about the nature, behaviour or influence of a person, kingdom or spiritual condition through a picture that is easily recognised.

This is why Scripture uses images such as wolves, lambs and beasts. The animal itself is not the final subject because its recognised character helps us understand the spiritual truth being communicated.

When interpreting these pictures, we must still allow Scripture to establish the meaning. We should not assign characteristics simply because they seem appropriate. The biblical context must govern the interpretation.

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

Jesus used the character of a wolf to warn His disciples concerning false prophets.

Jesus said in **Matthew 7:15**:

> *"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."*

Jesus was not describing literal animals. He used familiar imagery to reveal the character of deceptive religious teachers.

Outwardly, they appear harmless because their appearance resembles sheep. However, Jesus says that inwardly they are *"ravening wolves."*

The picture communicates several characteristics:

- A wolf is dangerous;
- A wolf seeks its prey;
- A wolf destroys rather than protects;
- The sheep's clothing conceals its true character.

The warning is powerful because the picture makes the danger easy to understand. False teaching may appear religious, gentle or acceptable on the surface while actually causing spiritual harm.

The symbol therefore reveals character. The outward appearance and inward reality are very different.

Lambs Among Wolves

Jesus also used the opposite picture when speaking about His disciples.

Jesus said in **Luke 10:3**:

> *"Go your ways: behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves."*

A lamb gives a very different picture from a wolf. The wolf communicates danger and destruction, while the lamb communicates meekness, vulnerability and harmlessness.

Jesus was teaching His disciples that they would go into circumstances where they might face hostility and opposition. They were not being sent to overcome others through the same destructive spirit they might encounter.

These two symbols therefore communicate contrasting characters. The nature represented by the wolf is very different from the nature represented by the lamb.

The picture is simple, but the contrast helps us understand the character Jesus expected His disciples to demonstrate even when surrounded by opposition.

The Character of the Roman Kingdom

Visions can also use symbolic imagery to communicate the character of kingdoms. Daniel was shown a succession of earthly kingdoms, and the fourth kingdom is represented by an unusual and terrifying beast.

Daniel wrote in **Daniel 7:7**:

> *"After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it: and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns."*

The fourth kingdom corresponds with the Roman Empire, the kingdom that dominated the world into which Jesus Christ came. Daniel's imagery communicates the character and power of that kingdom.

It is described as:

- "Dreadful and terrible";
- "Strong exceedingly";
- Possessing "great iron teeth";
- Devouring;
- Breaking in pieces;
- Stamping what remained beneath its feet.

The vision does not require us to imagine that the Roman Empire was literally an animal with iron teeth. The beast communicates the character and power of the kingdom.

It was strong, destructive and capable of crushing those who opposed its authority. The symbolic picture allows that character to be communicated vividly.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does the vision's picture reveal the character of the Roman kingdom?

Personal Reflection

Have you judged a person or kingdom by outward strength instead of the character the Bible reveals?

Action Step

Examine Daniel's description of the fourth beast. Consider whether outward power has impressed you more than godly character and explain how the Bible changes that judgement.

The Kingdom of God Is Different in Character

Daniel had already been shown that during the period of these earthly kingdoms God would establish His Kingdom.

Daniel wrote in **Daniel 2:44**:

> *"And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever."*

The Kingdom of God was not another earthly empire established through the same methods as Rome. Its character is different.

Daniel's vision also presents the contrasting picture of God's authority and judgement.

Daniel wrote in **Daniel 7:9-10**:

> *"I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened."*

The imagery is very different from the destructive beast. Daniel is being shown the authority, purity and judgement of God's Kingdom.

Paul wrote in **Romans 14:17**:

> *"For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."*

In this context, God's righteousness speaks of His way, the right way according to God. The character of His Kingdom is therefore governed by what is right according to Him rather than by the methods and values of earthly kingdoms.

Notice the contrast. Rome is pictured through imagery that communicates destructive earthly power, while the Kingdom of God is described through:

- Righteousness;
- Peace;
- Joy in the Holy Ghost.

Both kingdoms possess authority, but they do not possess the same character. The Roman Empire exercised natural political and military power, while the Kingdom of God is spiritual and is characterised by the life and righteousness of God.

The symbolism therefore helps us see more than the existence of two kingdoms. It helps us recognise the very different character of their authority.

Symbolism Helps Us Recognise Character

This is one reason visions use striking pictures. A symbol can communicate character quickly and powerfully.

A wolf tells us something about a false prophet, while a lamb communicates something very different about the disciples Jesus sends. A dreadful beast communicates the destructive character of an earthly empire, while the Kingdom of God is revealed through spiritual qualities that stand in clear contrast to such earthly power.

When studying a vision, we should therefore ask, *"What character is this symbol revealing?"* That question can be especially important when the symbol concerns God, His Kingdom, His people or powers that oppose His truth.

Our goal as Bible students is not simply to identify symbols correctly. We want to know Jesus Christ more clearly, understand His Spirit and recognise the character of His Kingdom. The imagery serves that greater purpose.

The symbol gives us the picture. Scripture reveals the character. The truth directs us towards a clearer understanding of God and His Kingdom.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can symbolism make hidden character recognisable?

Personal Reflection

Which outward appearance have you trusted without testing the character shown by the Bible?

Action Step

Consider an influence you once accepted because it looked respectable. Compare its teaching and fruit with the Bible, and explain what your response should now be.

SYMBOLISM CROSSES LANGUAGE BARRIERS

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Another strength of symbolic language is its ability to communicate through pictures that can often be recognised across different languages and cultures. The Bible was written in Hebrew,

Aramaic and Greek, yet many of the images it uses can still communicate clearly to people who speak very different languages.

A picture can sometimes communicate an idea before every word surrounding it has been fully understood. For example:

- A wolf communicates danger and aggression;
- A lamb communicates gentleness and harmlessness;
- Light suggests something very different from darkness;
- Fire can create a picture of power, judgement or purification;
- Water can present a picture of cleansing, life or abundance.

The exact meaning of any biblical symbol must still be determined by Scripture and context. We should never assume that a symbol has the same meaning in every verse simply because the natural picture appears similar.

However, the visual nature of symbolism gives it a powerful ability to communicate. The image provides the picture, while Scripture establishes the spiritual truth being communicated through it.

Symbols Create Lasting Pictures

Words can sometimes change in meaning over long periods of time, and translations may express the same thought differently. A strong biblical picture, however, can remain memorable, which is one reason visions often use such striking imagery.

When Daniel saw unusual beasts, the images communicated character and power. When Jesus spoke of wolves and lambs, the contrast was immediately understandable. When Revelation describes dramatic symbols, those pictures draw the reader's attention towards the spiritual truths they represent.

Symbols therefore help:

- Create memorable images;
- Communicate character;
- Reinforce spiritual truth;
- Carry ideas across linguistic boundaries.

This does not remove the need for careful Bible study. A picture may be memorable and easily recognised, but Scripture must still explain what the picture means.

The strength of symbolic language lies in the combination of vivid imagery and Scriptural interpretation. The picture helps communicate and preserve the idea, while the Word of God establishes the truth represented by that picture.

The image may cross the language barrier, but the Word of God must provide the meaning.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can a symbolic picture communicate across language barriers?

Personal Reflection

Have you enjoyed explaining a vivid symbol without letting its truth challenge your own life?

Action Step

Choose a symbol you could explain to another person. Use its Bible setting to explain the truth and identify how that truth should govern your own life first.

THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION: A VISION REVEALING JESUS CHRIST

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The Mount of Transfiguration is an important example of how symbolism in a vision can reveal relationships between different parts of God's Word. Many people understand the account as though Moses and Elijah literally returned and physically appeared with Jesus, but Jesus Himself identifies what the disciples had seen as a vision.

Matthew wrote in **Matthew 17:9**:

> *"And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead."*

Jesus called what they had seen *"the vision."* This is important because the appearance of Moses and Elijah must therefore be understood according to the symbolic language of the vision. The purpose was not to teach that Moses and Elijah had physically returned from the dead, but to use them to communicate spiritual truth concerning Jesus Christ.

Moses Represents the Law

Moses is closely identified with the Law throughout Scripture. God used him to deliver the Law to natural Israel, and that Law pointed forward towards Jesus Christ.

John wrote in **John 1:17**:

> *"For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."*

Moses therefore provides a clear picture of the Law. After His resurrection, Jesus showed that Moses and the prophets had been pointing towards Him.

Luke wrote in **Luke 24:27**:

> *"And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."*

The purpose of the Law was never to become independent from Jesus Christ. Moses and the prophets were directing people towards the One in whom God's purpose would be fulfilled.

Philip expressed the same truth when speaking to Nathanael.

John wrote in **John 1:45**:

> *"Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."*

Moses therefore represents the Law that pointed towards Jesus Christ. The vision brings Moses into the picture, but the attention must finally move beyond Moses to the One of whom Moses wrote.

Elijah Represents Spirit and Power

Elijah presents a different picture. His ministry was marked by zeal, courage and the power of God, and Scripture later uses his name when describing ministry in that same spirit and power.

When Elijah was about to depart, Elisha asked for a double portion of his spirit.

The writer of Kings recorded in **2 Kings 2:9**:

> *"And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me."*

The same language appears when the angel spoke concerning John the Baptist.

Luke wrote in **Luke 1:17**:

> *"And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

John the Baptist was not literally Elijah returned to earth. He came *"in the spirit and power of Elias."* Scripture therefore shows that Elijah can be used to communicate a truth concerning spirit and power without requiring Elijah himself to be physically present.

This helps us understand Elijah's place within the Transfiguration vision. Elijah represents prophetic Spirit and power, while Moses directs us towards the Law. Neither, however, is the final focus of the vision.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does Elijah represent in the transfiguration vision?

Personal Reflection

Have you given Elijah or Moses more attention in this vision than the command to listen to Jesus Christ?

Action Step

Read the Transfiguration account and consider why the vision directs attention to Jesus Christ. Explain how you will keep Him central instead of the figures surrounding Him.

Jesus Christ Is the Purpose of the Vision

The central purpose of the vision becomes unmistakable when the voice from the cloud speaks.

Matthew wrote in **Matthew 17:5**:

> *"While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him."*

The command is not to continue looking towards Moses or Elijah as separate sources of spiritual authority. The command is *"Hear ye him."*

The vision brings the Law and prophetic Spirit and power into relationship with Jesus Christ and then directs all attention towards Him. Jesus Christ is not simply another figure standing alongside Moses and Elijah because He is the One towards whom the Law and the prophets were pointing.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 1:24**:

> *"But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God."*

Jesus Christ is *"the power of God."* The greater reality is therefore found in Him, and the symbols within the vision must direct our attention towards that reality.

The Law Could Point, but Christ Gives Life

The Law could reveal truth, identify sin and point people towards Jesus Christ, but it could not itself give the spiritual life required for salvation. True spiritual life comes through Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **Romans 8:9**:

> *"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."*

Notice that Paul speaks of *"the Spirit of God"* and *"the Spirit of Christ"* in the same verse. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ. Jesus Christ comes to dwell within the born-again believer by His Spirit.

Jesus said in **John 6:63**:

> *"It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life."*

The Spirit quickens and gives spiritual life. That life is not produced by outward knowledge of the Law or by human effort to imitate Jesus Christ. At the new birth, Jesus Christ gives spiritual life and comes to dwell within the believer by His Spirit.

Word and Spirit Find Their Fulness in Jesus Christ

The vision therefore brings together important truths. Moses represents the Law and the Word that pointed towards Jesus Christ, while Elijah represents prophetic Spirit and power. The vision then centres everything upon Jesus Christ with the command *"Hear ye him."*

Through Jesus Christ, the Spirit and truth are united. A person cannot receive the Spirit of God while rejecting His truth, and the truth of God cannot be spiritually received apart from the Spirit of Christ.

This also helps us understand the symbolic teaching concerning the two witnesses in Revelation.

The Transfiguration vision therefore should not be used to teach that Moses and Elijah must later return physically as the two witnesses in Revelation.

The truth revealed through the Mount of Transfiguration therefore centres completely in Jesus Christ. The Law pointed towards Him, the prophets testified of Him, the power of God is found in Him, and the Spirit received at the new birth is the Spirit of Christ.

The vision is not given to leave our attention fixed upon Moses or Elijah. Their presence within the vision serves the greater truth being revealed concerning Jesus Christ.

The purpose of the vision is to reveal Jesus Christ as the One in whom the Word, the Spirit, the power and the saving purpose of God find their fulfilment.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do Word and Spirit find their fullness in Jesus Christ in the transfiguration account?

Personal Reflection

Where might you give the figures in the vision more attention than Jesus Himself?

Action Step

Read **Matthew 17:5** *and consider the command 'hear ye him.' Identify a competing voice or assumption you need to bring under the authority of Jesus Christ.*

THE BOOK OF REVELATION: ONE SYMBOLIC VISION

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The book of Revelation is one of the clearest examples of visionary language in the Bible. Its pages contain beasts, horns, horses, seals, trumpets, stars, dragons, cities and many other striking images.

These pictures should not be interpreted as ordinary literal descriptions. Revelation tells us from its opening verse that its message was communicated through signs.

John wrote in **Revelation 1:1**:

> *"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John:"*

The word *"signified"* is important. The Greek word is SEMAINO, carrying the thought of making something known through a sign or indication. Revelation therefore communicates spiritual truth through signs and symbolic pictures.

A road sign, for example, points towards a destination without being the destination itself. In the same way, the symbols of Revelation direct our attention towards the spiritual realities they represent.

The Revelation Is of Jesus Christ

The first words of the book establish its central subject: *"The Revelation of Jesus Christ."* The Greek word translated *"revelation"* is APOKALUPSIS, carrying the thought of an unveiling or revealing. The purpose of revelation is therefore to bring into view something that had been hidden.

Revelation should therefore not be approached primarily as a book of frightening images or mysterious predictions. Its purpose is to reveal Jesus Christ and, through Him, truths concerning His people and His Kingdom.

Paul described the revealing of God's purpose in similar language.

Paul wrote in **Romans 16:25-26**:

> *"Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith:"*

Notice the movement from something that had been hidden to something that was *"made manifest."* Biblical revelation unveils truth so that what was hidden can be understood.

The purpose is therefore not to conceal God's message permanently from His people. Revelation brings truth into view.

Revelation Was Given to Christ's Servants

Revelation 1:1 also tells us who was intended to receive its message. It was given *"to shew unto his servants"* the things communicated through the vision.

The book was not written only for scholars, historians or specialists. It was given to the servants of Jesus Christ. A person must be born again to understand its spiritual message. Revelation is sealed to those who are not born again, but to the born-again followers and disciples of Jesus Christ it is an open book, meant to be understood.

Near the end of the book, John was specifically told not to seal its message.

John wrote in **Revelation 22:10**:

> *"And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand."*

The command *"Seal not"* shows that the prophecy was not intended to remain permanently closed. The book is meant to be studied and understood.

This does not mean that every symbol becomes clear without effort. As we have already seen, visions require careful study, comparison of Scripture and a willingness to allow the Bible to interpret itself. Difficulty is not the same as impossibility.

Personal Response

Key Truth

For whom was the Revelation vision given, and what was it meant to communicate?

Personal Reflection

Do you approach Revelation as a message to receive or mainly as a puzzle to solve?

Action Step

Read **Revelation 1:1** *and 22:10. Examine whether speculation has displaced receiving Christ's message, and explain how you will approach the book differently.*

John Saw the Horses "In the Vision"

The symbolic character of Revelation is also confirmed by John's own description. He tells us directly that the unusual imagery he describes belonged to the vision.

John wrote in **Revelation 9:17**:

> *"And thus I saw the horses in the vision, and them that sat on them, having breastplates of fire, and of jacinth, and brimstone: and the heads of the horses were as the heads of lions; and out of their mouths issued fire and smoke and brimstone."*

John does not describe ordinary natural horses. Their heads are *"as the heads of lions,"* and from their mouths come *"fire and smoke and brimstone."*

Most importantly, John says, *"I saw the horses in the vision."* The imagery belongs to the vision and must therefore be interpreted according to the symbolic language being used.

Revelation presents a connected visionary revelation in which signs and symbolic pictures communicate spiritual truths. We must therefore move beyond the natural appearance of the image and search Scripture for the truth it represents.

The Symbol Must Point to the Reality

When Revelation speaks of beasts, dragons, horses, hail, stars or other unusual images, we should not begin by asking how these things might literally appear upon the earth. We should first seek the Scriptural meaning of the picture.

We should ask:

- What is the symbol?
- How does Scripture use that picture elsewhere?
- What character or spiritual truth does it represent?
- What does the immediate context reveal?
- How does the interpretation agree with the rest of God's Word?

This is the same principle we have followed throughout this Study Guide: The Bible must interpret itself. The symbols of Revelation are not the final reality because they are pictures that point towards the spiritual truths God intends to reveal.

Above all, the book must remain centred upon its declared subject: *"The Revelation of Jesus Christ."* We should never allow the beasts, numbers, judgements or other symbols to become more important than the One the book was given to reveal.

Revelation is one symbolic vision. Its language is communicated through signs, its message is intended to be understood by Christ's servants, and its central purpose is to reveal Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must a symbol in Revelation point to the reality it represents?

Personal Reflection

Where are you tempted to make a detailed picture more important than its teaching?

Action Step

Take one image in Revelation that attracts your curiosity. Check its biblical meaning and explain what spiritual truth matters more than the image itself.

THE HAIL: LETTING SCRIPTURE INTERPRET THE SYMBOL

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One of the best ways to understand symbolic language is to follow a symbol through Scripture and allow the Bible itself to establish its meaning. Revelation provides a clear example through the symbol of hail.

John wrote in **Revelation 16:21**:

> *"And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent: and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great."*

If this verse is interpreted literally, we might imagine enormous physical hailstones falling from the sky. However, Revelation is a vision communicated through symbolic language, so we must ask what the hail represents.

We should not guess or attach our own meaning to the picture. We must search Scripture for the answer.

Hail Is Frozen Rain

Naturally, hail is rain that has become solid. That simple observation gives us a starting point because, if hail is related to rain, we can search the Bible to discover whether rain is used symbolically elsewhere.

Moses wrote in **Deuteronomy 32:2**:

> *"My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass:"*

Here Scripture itself provides an important connection. Moses says, *"My doctrine shall drop as the rain."*

Rain is used as a picture of doctrine. If rain represents doctrine, and hail is rain made solid, the picture of hail communicates solid doctrine or firm truth.

This illustrates the principle we have been learning throughout this Study Guide. We did not invent the meaning through imagination because another Scripture provides the key.

Hail Sweeps Away the Refuge of Lies

Another verse strengthens this interpretation.

Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 28:17**:

> *"Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place."*

Notice what the hail does: *"the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies."* Literal ice cannot destroy a lie, but truth can expose and destroy falsehood.

This gives further Scriptural support to the meaning of the symbol. Hail presents a picture of strong, solid truth that exposes falsehood and sweeps away places where error has been allowed to hide.

The symbol therefore carries the thought of doctrine that is firm, clear and capable of confronting error. The picture becomes clearer as Scripture interprets Scripture.

Sound Doctrine Exposes Error

Paul also explains the importance and work of sound doctrine.

Paul wrote in **Titus 1:9**:

> *"Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers."*

Sound doctrine performs an important work. It can:

- Expose error;
- Correct false teaching;
- Convince those who oppose the truth;
- Establish believers in God's Word;
- Bring the truth clearly before those who need salvation.

This agrees with Isaiah's picture of hail sweeping away a refuge of lies. The power is not in human argument or intellectual ability because the authority belongs to the faithful Word of God.

Truth exposes what is false.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can the picture of hail show sound doctrine exposing error?

Personal Reflection

Which part of the proposed explanation of hail have you assumed was established without checking the Bible for yourself?

Action Step

Compare the verses used to explain hail. Identify which link needs the closest support and be willing to correct any claim that goes beyond the Bible.

The Symbol Becomes Clear Through Scripture

Notice the process we have followed. Revelation first presents the symbol of hail, and then Deuteronomy connects rain with doctrine. Isaiah shows the hail sweeping away lies, while Titus explains the work of sound doctrine.

When these Scriptures are brought together, the picture becomes much clearer. This is what it means to let the Bible interpret itself.

The meaning does not depend upon a private idea attached to an unusual image. Related Scriptures establish the interpretation and keep our understanding within the harmony of God's Word.

This method also protects us from interpreting a symbol simply according to its natural appearance. We begin with what John saw, but we allow the wider Word of God to establish what the picture communicates spiritually.

Solid Truth at Pentecost

The penetrating power of truth can also be seen on the Day of Pentecost. Peter preached the Word of God plainly, and those who heard were deeply convicted.

Luke wrote in **Acts 2:37-38**:

> *"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."*

The people were *"pricked in their heart."* The truth had reached them, exposed their condition and brought conviction.

This verse belongs within the historical and covenant transition recorded in Acts and must be understood in harmony with the completed New Covenant reality in Jesus Christ. It must not be used to teach that literal water produces the new birth, places a person into Christ, or that a born-again believer must later receive the Holy Spirit as a separate spiritual experience.

The spiritual reality is found in Jesus Christ. At the new birth, the believer receives the Spirit of Christ and is made spiritually alive in Him.

What Acts 2 demonstrates in this context is the penetrating power of the preached Word. Truth exposed sin, brought conviction and confronted those who heard with their need to respond to God.

Let Scripture Build the Interpretation

The hail of Revelation therefore provides an excellent example of how symbolic interpretation should work. We begin with the picture, search for related Scriptures and identify the biblical meaning before allowing the wider Word of God to confirm the interpretation.

The result is not speculation. The interpretation is built by bringing the Scriptures together and allowing the Bible to provide the meaning of its own imagery.

Revelation's hail represents solid doctrine and truth, powerful enough to expose falsehood and sweep away the refuge of lies. The symbol therefore communicates something much greater than a natural weather event.

This is why visionary symbols should never be interpreted in isolation. Revelation gives the picture. Scripture supplies the key. The Word of God reveals the spiritual meaning.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What sequence of the Bible comparisons supports the interpretation of hail?

Personal Reflection

Have you accepted a symbolic meaning without tracing the verses that build it?

Action Step

Trace the hail comparison from Deuteronomy through Isaiah and Titus. Consider where you have repeated an interpretation without checking it, and change that habit.

THE ORIGIN OF THE HAIL: HEAVEN, THE TEMPLE AND THE CHURCH

BACK TO CONTENTS

We have established that the hail in Revelation represents solid doctrine or truth. The next question is where that hail comes from.

Revelation 16 describes the hail as coming *"out of heaven."* Because Revelation uses symbolic language, we must not automatically assume that John is describing the physical sky. We must allow other Scriptures to identify the spiritual meaning.

Scripture Speaks of More Than One Heaven

The Bible uses the word heaven in different ways. Three important uses help us understand the symbolic language of Revelation.

The first heaven is the physical sky or firmament above the earth.

Moses wrote in **Genesis 1:8**:

> *"And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day."*

The second heaven refers to the dwelling of God, distinct from the earth.

Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 5:2**:

> *"Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few."*

The third heaven is connected with the spiritual realm of visions and revelations.

Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 12:1-2**:

> *"It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven."*

Notice that Paul connects the third heaven with *"visions and revelations of the Lord."* In this setting, the third heaven points towards a spiritual realm of revelation rather than another physical level somewhere above the sky.

This becomes especially important when we compare the heavenly imagery of Revelation with the New Testament teaching concerning the Church and the believer's spiritual position in Jesus Christ.

Hail Comes From Heaven

Hail appears several times in Revelation. John wrote in **Revelation 8:7**:

> *"The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up."*

Again, hail appears as part of the symbolic vision. Another verse gives us further information concerning its source by connecting the hail with the temple of God.

John wrote in **Revelation 11:19**:

> *"And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail."*

Notice the connection. The hail is associated with *"the temple of God,"* and that temple is seen *"in heaven."*

If the hail represents solid doctrine, we must now ask what the temple of God represents under the New Covenant. The New Testament provides the answer.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does the statement that hail comes from heaven show about its source?

Personal Reflection

Have you accepted an explanation of where the hail comes from without comparing the related verses?

Action Step

Read the hail vision and its setting. Examine whether you have given authority to an interpretation without identifying its source, and correct your reasoning.

The Born-Again Believer Is the Temple of God

Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 6:16**:

> *"And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."*

Under the New Covenant, God's temple is not primarily a physical building. Paul says directly to born-again believers, *"ye are the temple of the living God."*

The reason is found in the same verse because God says, *"I will dwell in them."* The Church is the dwelling place of God because Jesus Christ dwells within His people by His Spirit.

This is not simply an external religious relationship. The born-again believer possesses the indwelling life of Jesus Christ, and together His people form His spiritual dwelling place.

The Temple Is the Body of Christ

Paul also describes believers as the body of Christ.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 12:27**:

> *"Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."*

The born-again people of God together form the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. Paul then identifies this body with the Church.

Paul wrote in **Colossians 1:18**:

> *"And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."*

The relationship becomes clear:

- Born-again believers are the temple of God;
- Born-again believers are the body of Christ;
- The body of Christ is the Church;
- Jesus Christ is the Head of that body.

The temple seen in the vision therefore directs us towards the spiritual Church of God rather than towards a future physical temple. The New Testament identifies God's dwelling place with His born-again people.

Seated in Heavenly Places in Christ

Paul gives another important key when describing the spiritual position of those who are saved.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:5-6**:

> *"Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:"*

The believer is not waiting for some future event before entering this spiritual position. Paul says that God *"hath raised us up together"* and *"made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus."*

This is a present spiritual reality. The born-again believer has been quickened and made spiritually alive through Jesus Christ and now occupies a heavenly spiritual position *"in Christ Jesus."*

This helps us understand the heavenly temple pictured in Revelation. The Church is composed of born-again believers who are the temple of God and who are spiritually seated in heavenly places in Christ.

Solid Doctrine Proceeds From the Church

We can now follow the symbolic picture:

- Hail comes from heaven;
- Hail is connected with the temple of God;

- The New Testament identifies born-again believers as God's temple;
- The Church is the body of Christ;
- Born-again believers are seated in heavenly places in Christ.

The vision therefore presents a picture of solid doctrine and truth proceeding from the Church of God. The earlier Scriptures concerning hail help establish what the symbol represents, while the New Testament identifies the temple and heavenly position spiritually.

This does not mean that the Church creates truth. Truth belongs to God and comes from His Word. Jesus Christ remains the Head of the Church, and every teaching must remain subject to Scripture.

The Church's responsibility is to faithfully proclaim the truth God has already revealed. When that Word is preached clearly and faithfully, solid doctrine exposes error, challenges false teaching and sweeps away the refuge of lies.

The imagery of Revelation is powerful, but its meaning becomes clear only when Scripture interprets Scripture. The different verses work together to establish the spiritual picture.

The hail represents solid doctrine. The temple represents the born-again Church. The heavenly place is the believer's spiritual position in Christ. The truth proceeds from God's Word through His people, with Jesus Christ remaining the Head and source of all spiritual life.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How are the temple, the Church, and sound doctrine connected in the hail vision?

Personal Reflection

Have you treated an interpretation taught by the Church as authoritative without checking that it agrees with God's Word?

Action Step

Compare the verses connecting the temple, Church and God's Word. Examine how responsibly you handle biblical teaching and name one way to guard against presenting personal ideas as God's truth.

DREAMS AND VISIONS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

BACK TO CONTENTS

The Bible contains both dreams and visions. They are closely related because both can communicate spiritual truth through pictures and symbolic language, but they are not always identical in purpose.

One distinction seen in Scripture is that a dream may reveal what God is going to do without requiring the person to take action, while a vision may call the person receiving it to respond. This can be seen by comparing Daniel's dream with Peter's vision.

Daniel's Dream

Daniel chapter 7 records a dream concerning four kingdoms and the Kingdom of God. Daniel was shown events that would unfold according to God's purpose.

Daniel wrote in **Daniel 7:1**:

> *"In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel had a dream and visions of his head upon his bed: then he wrote the dream, and told the sum of the matters."*

Daniel received revelation concerning events over which he had no control. The dream revealed what would happen, but Daniel was not instructed to bring those kingdoms into existence or perform some action that would cause the prophecy to be fulfilled.

God was revealing His purpose. Daniel's responsibility was to receive and record what had been shown to him.

Peter's Vision Required Action

Peter's vision in Acts chapter 10 was different. God used the symbolic picture of the animals in the sheet to change Peter's understanding concerning Gentile people, but the vision was not given simply so that Peter could learn something.

Peter later explained the meaning of the vision.

Peter said in **Acts 10:28**:

> *"And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean."*

Peter had received the revelation, but now he had to respond to it. His understanding concerning Gentile people had been corrected, and that change needed to affect what he did.

Luke wrote in **Acts 10:19-20**:

> *"While Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee. Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them."*

The instruction was clear: *"Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them."* Peter could not simply understand the vision intellectually and then continue as before.

The revelation required obedience. Peter went with the men and entered the house of Cornelius, something his previous Jewish thinking had caused him to avoid.

Revelation Should Affect Our Response

Daniel's dream and Peter's vision demonstrate that biblical dreams and visions may serve different purposes. A dream may reveal God's purpose concerning events that the receiver does not control, while a vision may reveal truth that requires the person receiving it to change their understanding and act accordingly.

We should not turn this distinction into an absolute rule that every dream is passive and every vision demands immediate action. Scripture itself must establish the purpose of each account.

The important question is therefore not simply whether the revelation is called a dream or a vision. We must also ask, *"Why was this dream or vision given?"*

Biblical dreams and visions can reveal God's character, His purposes and His truth. Some provide understanding concerning what God will do, while others may require the person receiving the revelation to respond in obedience.

Through the Spirit of Christ and the study of God's Word, these revelations can deepen our understanding and prepare us to serve others more faithfully. Where Scripture shows that a response is required, understanding must move into obedience.

The dream or vision gives the revelation. Scripture shows its meaning, and where God requires a response, truth must lead to action.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How are biblical dreams and visions alike, and how do they differ?

Personal Reflection

Have you assumed that the form of an experience determines its meaning?

Action Step

Compare Daniel's dream with Peter's vision. Reconsider any assumption that all such experiences demand the same response and explain how the Bible should guide you.

HOW TO STUDY BIBLICAL VISIONS AND DREAMS

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Biblical visions and dreams must be studied with the same care that should govern every part of the Word of God. Their symbolic language does not give us permission to invent meanings or interpret pictures according to personal imagination.

The controlling principle is simple: Let the Bible interpret itself. When God uses a symbol, the meaning should be established through Scripture, context and the harmony of His Word.

Begin With Prayer

Bible study should begin with a sincere desire to understand what God has revealed. We depend upon the Spirit of Christ to help us understand the Word, but spiritual dependence never replaces careful study.

Prayer and study belong together. We should approach the verse humbly, asking God to help us see what is actually written rather than what we expect or want the verse to say.

Gather the Relevant Information

Before deciding what a vision means, gather the facts. Ask:

- Who received the vision or dream?
- What was happening at the time?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What images or symbols appear?
- Does the verse itself explain any of them?
- What happened before and after the vision?
- Was the receiver required to take action?

Peter's vision demonstrates why this is important. If we stopped with the animals in the sheet, we could misunderstand the subject. Reading the complete account reveals Peter's own explanation that the vision concerned people.

The whole verse must therefore govern the interpretation. We should not build our understanding upon one image while ignoring the explanation provided by the surrounding verses.

Find Corresponding Scriptures

Another important step is to search for what we sometimes call the *"mates"*, other Scriptures that use the same or related language. These verses can provide important keys for understanding symbolic pictures.

This was demonstrated with the symbol of hail. Revelation gives us the picture of hail, Deuteronomy connects rain with doctrine, Isaiah shows hail sweeping away lies, and Titus explains the power of sound doctrine.

The Scriptures together establish the meaning. One verse should not be isolated from the rest of the Bible when other verses help explain the language being used.

The Bible must be allowed to interpret the Bible.

Consider Context, Audience and Timeframe

A correct interpretation must consider the setting in which the vision or dream appears. Ask:

- What subject is being discussed?
- Who is speaking?
- Who is being addressed?
- What covenant setting is involved?
- What period of biblical history is being described?
- Is the verse literal, symbolic, prophetic or visionary?

These questions are especially important in Acts and Revelation. Acts records believers living through a period of covenant transition, while Revelation communicates through symbolic visionary language.

Ignoring those settings can lead to incorrect conclusions. Transitional conduct in Acts must not be allowed to redefine the completed work of Jesus Christ, while visionary pictures in Revelation must not automatically be treated as literal descriptions.

Ask Unbiased Questions

Bible study should not begin with a conclusion that we are determined to prove. We should approach the verse honestly and be willing to ask, *"What does the Scripture actually say?"*

An interpretation must be allowed to stand or fall according to the Word of God. If our traditional understanding conflicts with the context and harmony of Scripture, Scripture must remain the final authority.

This requires humility. We are not studying the Bible simply to confirm what we already believe, but to understand faithfully what God has written.

Use Study Tools Carefully

Concordances, dictionaries, other translations and the COGMA Symbols book available in the website resources section can help us investigate words, symbols and expressions. These are useful study tools, but they are not the final authority because the Bible remains above every study resource.

Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 2:15**:

> *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."*

That principle is especially important when studying visions and dreams. Symbolic language requires careful study, but our conclusions must remain grounded in Scripture.

We pray, gather the evidence, compare Scriptures, consider context, audience and timeframe, and test every conclusion against the harmony of God's Word. Study tools may assist that work, but Scripture must govern it.

The symbol may begin the enquiry, but Scripture must determine the meaning.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What steps should you take when studying a biblical vision or dream?

Personal Reflection

Which step—context, the Bible comparison or careful use of study tools—do you most often overlook?

Action Step

Apply the Bible-study method to a vision you find difficult. Identify the step you usually omit and put it into practice before reaching a conclusion.

CONCLUSION: LET THE BIBLE INTERPRET ITSELF

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Visions and dreams form an important part of the language of the Bible. Throughout Scripture, God used them to reveal His character, His purposes, His Kingdom and truths that His people needed to understand.

Some visions are easy to recognise, while others contain unusual symbols and what Scripture describes as dark sayings. These verses require patience, diligence and careful study because their meaning must never be controlled by imagination. The central principle of this Study Guide has therefore been: Let the Bible interpret itself.

Peter's vision demonstrated this clearly. The animals in the sheet were not the final subject of the vision because Peter explained that God had shown him not to call any man common or unclean. The symbolic picture revealed the New Covenant truth that Jew and Gentile are brought together in Jesus Christ.

The Mount of Transfiguration also showed how a vision can reveal relationships within Scripture. Moses represented the Law, while Elijah represented prophetic Spirit and power.

Yet the vision directed attention beyond both of them towards Jesus Christ with the command: *"Hear ye him."*

The book of Revelation must be approached according to the same principle. It is one symbolic vision filled with signs that communicate spiritual truths. Its beasts, horses, hail and other images should not be forced into literal interpretations when Scripture provides the keys to their meaning.

The symbol of hail demonstrated how this works. Revelation gives us the picture, while other Scriptures connect rain with doctrine and hail with truth that sweeps away lies. The heavenly temple then directs us towards the born-again Church, through whom the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed.

Dreams and visions may also serve different purposes. Some reveal what God has determined, while others require a response. Peter did not simply understand his vision because he acted upon what God had shown him.

Good interpretation therefore requires us to:

- Gather the relevant Scriptures;
- Consider context, audience and timeframe;
- Find corresponding verses;
- Recognise symbolic language;
- Test every interpretation against the harmony of God's Word;
- Keep Jesus Christ central.

The purpose of studying visions is not to become fascinated with mysterious pictures, but to understand the truth God has revealed. The symbols serve that truth and must remain under the authority of Scripture.

When Scripture interprets Scripture, the symbol becomes clearer and the vision serves its purpose. Our attention is then directed beyond the picture towards Jesus Christ, His Word and His present spiritual reality.

The vision gives the picture. Scripture provides the meaning. Jesus Christ remains the centre of the truth being revealed.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does the conclusion insist that the Bible interpret its own symbolic language?

Personal Reflection

Which interpretation from this teaching most corrected your earlier approach?

Action Step

Choose a biblical vision and follow its explanation through the Bible. Identify one earlier assumption that needs correction and explain how the truth directs you towards Christ.

SUBMISSION TO COGMA FOR APPRAISAL

Instructions

Complete this section after you have finished the Study Guide. It must be completed online.

The link is located at the bottom of the online Study Guide — https://cogma.com.au/study-guides/

Your answers should reflect your understanding, your personal response, and how you intend to live by the truth you have studied. Answer honestly and be specific.

1. Main Truth

What are biblical visions and dreams for, and why do diligence, context and the Bible's own explanations matter when their language is symbolic?

2. Understanding

In Peter's vision, how do the events and Peter's own explanation establish the meaning of the image? What greater truth would be missed by interpreting the picture alone?

3. Personal Reflection

How have biblical symbols that reveal character or communicate across languages changed the way you respond to a striking image in the Bible? Explain one earlier idea you now need to reconsider.

4. Response to Truth

In the transfiguration vision, how do the figures and the testimony of Word and Spirit direct attention to Jesus Christ? How should that affect your response to Him?

5. Action Step

Choose a symbol from a vision in Revelation or the hail study. Which verses will you compare, which earlier assumption will you test, and how should that truth affect your response? State when you will begin.

6. Early Response

Have you begun comparing the verses and examining the assumption identified in Question 5? If so, explain what changed in your understanding or response. If not, explain what prevented you.

7. Ongoing Practice

What repeatable practice will help you compare biblical dreams and visions, use study tools carefully, and let the Bible interpret their symbols over time?

8. Doctrinal Clarity

How do the verses about hail connect its heavenly origin, the temple, the Church, and sound doctrine? Explain which link needs the most careful support from the Bible.

9. Living the Truth

What attitude or action in your own life is challenged by Peter's vision or the Transfiguration? Identify what the Bible teaches and how you intend to respond.

10. Final Response

How will you receive the truth God communicates through a biblical vision or dream while allowing the Bible to establish its meaning? Explain what you will do when an image seems unclear.