

# Greco-Roman Symbolism in the Book of Revelation

Robert C. Newman



# Old Testament Allusions

- Revelation makes many allusions to the Old Testament, but doesn't quote from it.
  - UBS Greek New Testament has no entries for Revelation in its 'Index of Quotations'
  - Has 632 entries in its 'Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels'



# Old Testament Allusions

- Some of these allusions are to a specific passage or theme:
  - Rev 1:7 'he is coming with the clouds'
    - To Dan 7:13 'one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven'
  - Rev 5:6 'a lamb, looking as if it had been slain'
    - To the theme of sacrifice found throughout the Old Testament

# Old Testament Allusions

- Other allusions are more complex:
  - The several references to a two-edged sword coming from Jesus' mouth are a combination:
    - Of Isa 49:2 'He made my mouth like a sharpened sword'
    - And Isa 11:4 'He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked'
  - The beast of Revelation 13 is a combination:
    - Of the four beasts of Daniel 7

# Other Allusions

- Besides these many Old Testament allusions, some suggest that Revelation includes allusions to non-biblical works:
  - UBS Greek New Testament 'Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels' has 32 entries for apocryphal and pseudepigraphal Jewish works.
  - Our interest here is with Greco-Roman connections rather than Jewish ones.

# Greco-Roman Allusions

- William M. Ramsay has found a number of these in the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2-3).  
Some examples:
  - Sardis was never taken by storm, but only by stealth at night (cp Rev 3:3): (NIV) Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.
  - Laodicea was plagued with a water supply which was only lukewarm by the time it reached the city (cp Rev 3:16): (NIV) So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth.
  - These are not controversial.

# Greco-Roman Allusions

- Evangelicals are more skeptical about alleged allusions to Greco-Roman paganism:
  - Partly due to biblical teaching against idolatry
  - Partly to impression some commentators give that author of Revelation was faking a vision
- I suggest another spin on this data, that God (the book's ultimate author) was communicating to his Greco-Roman readers in terms they would understand, since most of them were raised in paganism.
- Let's see.

# Symbols with Little or No Old Testament Background



# Little or No OT Background

- (1) The white stone (Rev 2:17)
- (2) Deep secrets & mysteries (Rev 2:24; 10:7)
- (3) The seven hills (Rev 17:9)
- (4) Title on her forehead (Rev 17:5)



# The White Stone

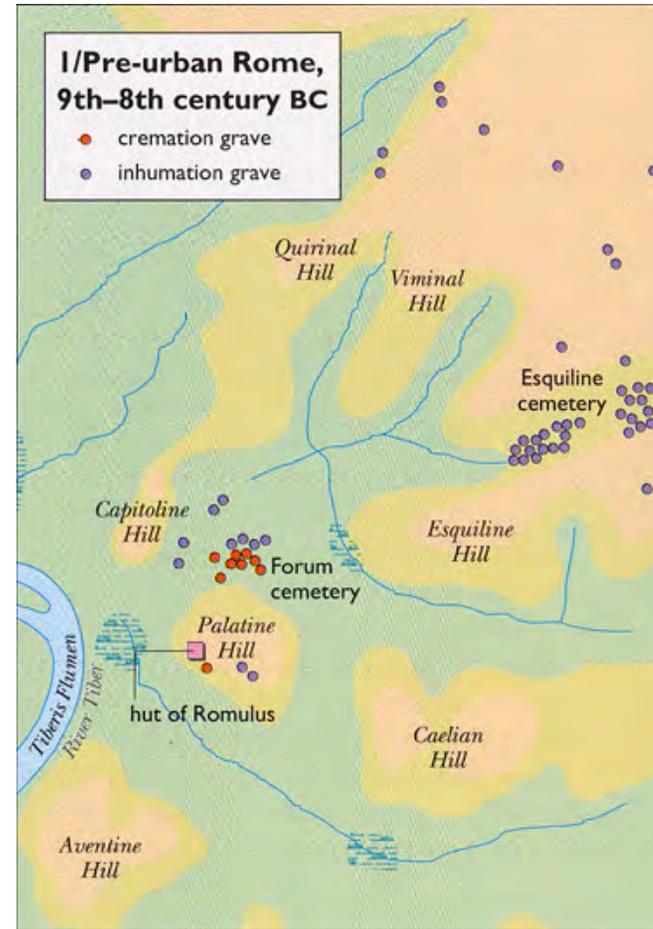
- Jesus promises the overcomer: "I will give him a white stone with a new name written on it" (Rev 2:17)
  - Jury voting with colored stones:
    - White = innocent
    - Black = guilty
  - Pebbles as admission tickets to a banquet
- So acquittal at judgment or admission to the Messianic banquet

# Deep Secrets

- Rev 2:24 – reference to 'deep secrets' of Satan
- Rev 10:7 – allusion to 'the mystery of God'
- These bring to mind the mystery religions of the Greco-Roman world, with the attraction of their secret rites and initiations. Everyone would have some acquaintance with these.
- Lesson: There are evil mysteries and there are good mysteries. You need to have the right 'mystery religion.'

# Seven Hills

- The harlot seated on the seven hills in Rev 17:9 would suggest Rome to nearly any reader of John's time.
  - Familiar from Horace, Virgil, Martial, Cicero, Propertius
- This provides reader a hint that the harlot is not only Babylon but also Rome.



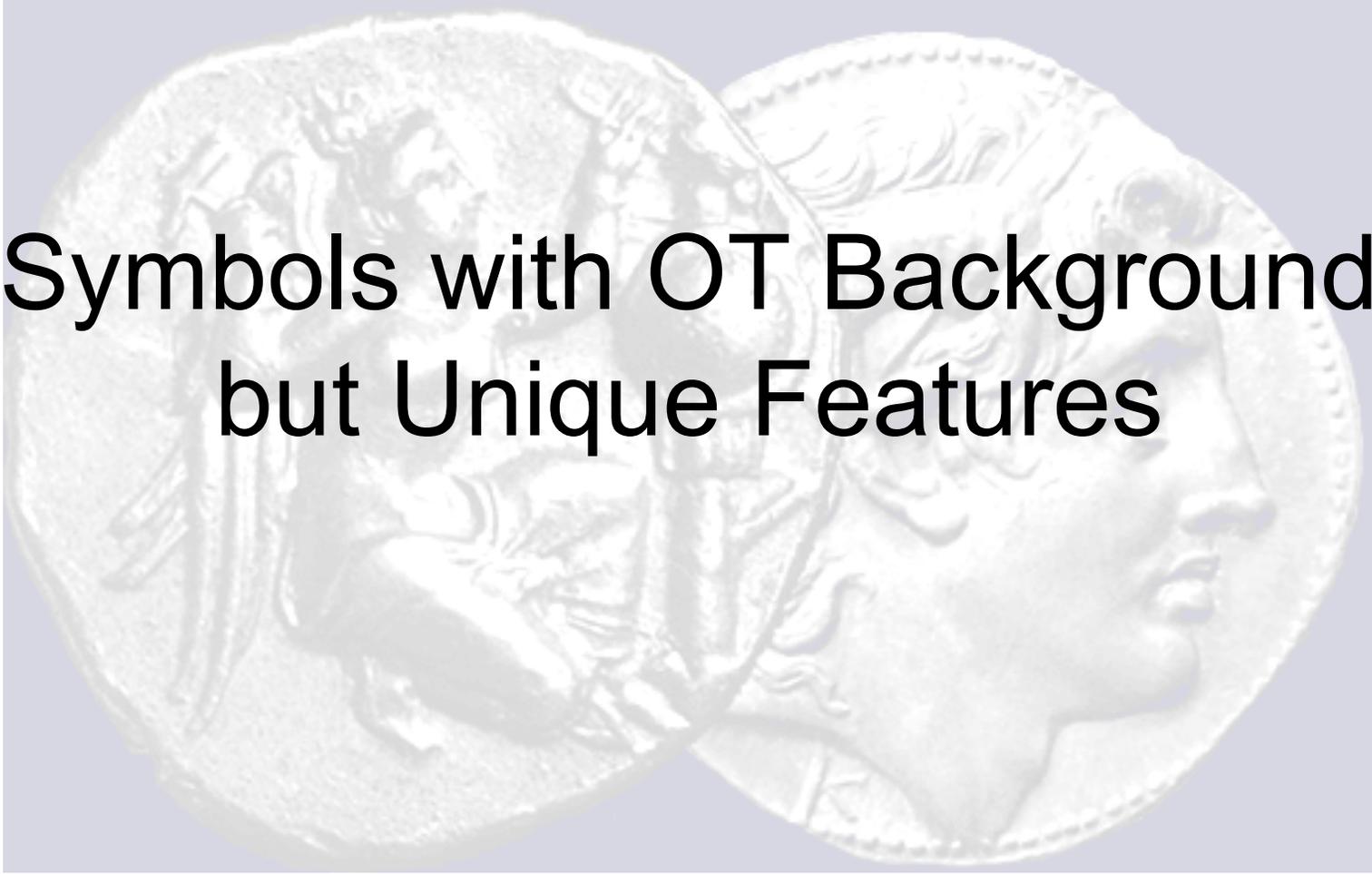
# Name on Forehead

- Rev 17:5 – title on forehead of harlot
- Other occurrences in Revelation:
  - Rev 13;16-17 – name of beast on foreheads of its followers
  - Rev 14:1 – name of God and the Lamb on foreheads of their followers
- Exodus 28:36-38 – high priest has gold plate on his forehead with name of God

# Name on Forehead

- Yet Roman harlots wore a label with *their* names on their brows, and the title on the forehead of the harlot here in Revelation is *her* name, not someone else's.
- So Revelation gives its original readers a vivid picture of a harlot, such as they would often see in the streets of their own cities.

# Symbols with OT Background but Unique Features



# Some Unique Features

- (5) Crowns to the overcomers (Rev 2:10, 3:11)
- (6) The four horsemen (Rev 6)
- (7) The seven-sealed scroll (Rev 5)
- (8) He who is, and was, and is to come (Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5)
- (9) The seven stars (Rev 1:16, 20)

# Crowns to Overcomers

- Rev 2:10 – 'crown of life' promised to one who overcomes
- Rev 3:11 – hold on so 'no one will take your crown'
- Though crowns are mentioned frequently in the Old Testament, the figure here seems to be that of a crown as reward.
- This is common for victors in Greco-Roman world, both:
  - Military victory
  - Athletic victory



# Four Horsemen

- These horses and riders in Revelation 6 have a background in Zechariah 1 and 6.
- Yet the figures in Rev 6 are allegorical in a way those in Zechariah are not.
- This fits the Greco-Roman penchant for allegory, seen in their artwork & coinage.

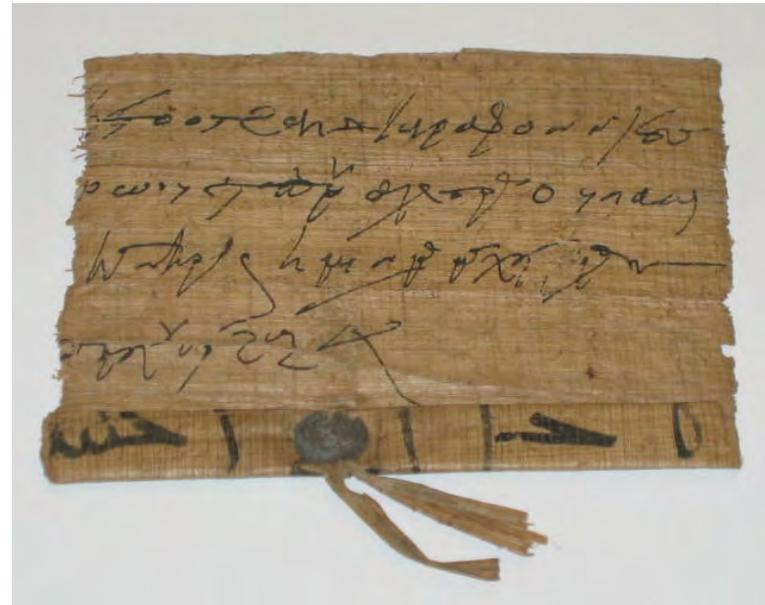


# Four Horsemen

- Whatever the first horseman represents, the others are surely:
  - (2) War
  - (3) Famine
  - (4) Death
- I suggest the 1<sup>st</sup> is also allegorical, representing Conquest, rather than Christ or Antichrist as often suggested.

# Seven-Sealed Scroll

- Sealed documents were a standard practice in the ancient near east to protect legal transactions from fraud:
  - Dan 12:9
  - Isa 29:11



# Seven-Sealed Scroll

- But seven seals has no OT background, whereas Roman wills and some other legal documents were typically sealed with seven seals.
- Perhaps this is intended to be Jesus' will he is opening, or the title deed to planet earth.



# He Who Is...

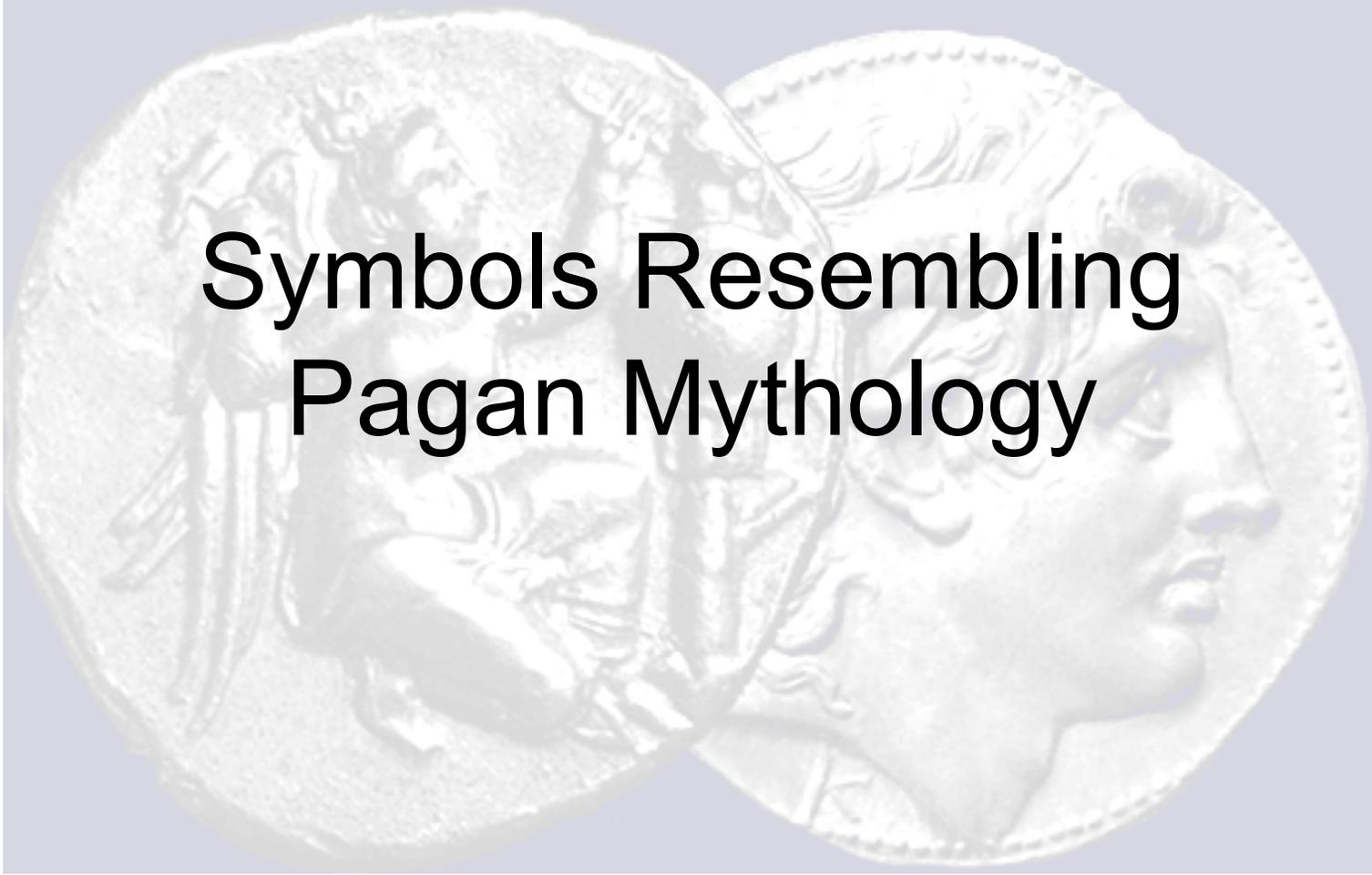
- The triple characterization of God (who is, was, and is to come) seen in Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8, with a shorter double version in 11:17 and 16:5, clearly has roots in God's revelation to Moses in Ex 3:14.
- Yet this triplet is more elaborate than either the Hebrew or Greek in Exodus.

# He Who Is...

- GK Beale notes that "a similar threefold formula is found in pagan Greek literature as a title of the gods..."
- This suggests that Revelation may use the phrase to remind its readers who really is the everlasting God.

# The Seven Stars

- The stars in Jesus' hand (Rev 1:16, 20) are the seven angels associated with the seven churches.
- The number seven is a major feature of the structure of Revelation.
- Yet it is possible that there is a reference here to some particular seven stars:
  - The Pleiades
  - The Great Bear (Big Dipper)
  - The Seven Planets



# Symbols Resembling Pagan Mythology

# Resembling Pagan Mythology

- (10) The woman, the child and the dragon (Rev 12)
- (11) The harlot riding the beast (Rev 17)



# Woman, Child, Dragon

- This incident has attracted much attention.
- Each item separately can be reproduced from the OT and Jewish sources, but not the whole.
- The shape of the story is close to:
  - (1) The Egyptian myth of Isis begetting Horus, opposed by the red dragon Typhon, with Horus later killing the dragon.
  - (2) The Greek myth of Leto bearing Apollo, opposed by the dragon Python, and Apollo later killing it.

# Isis w/ Horus, and Typhon



# Leto with Children



# Woman, Child, Dragon

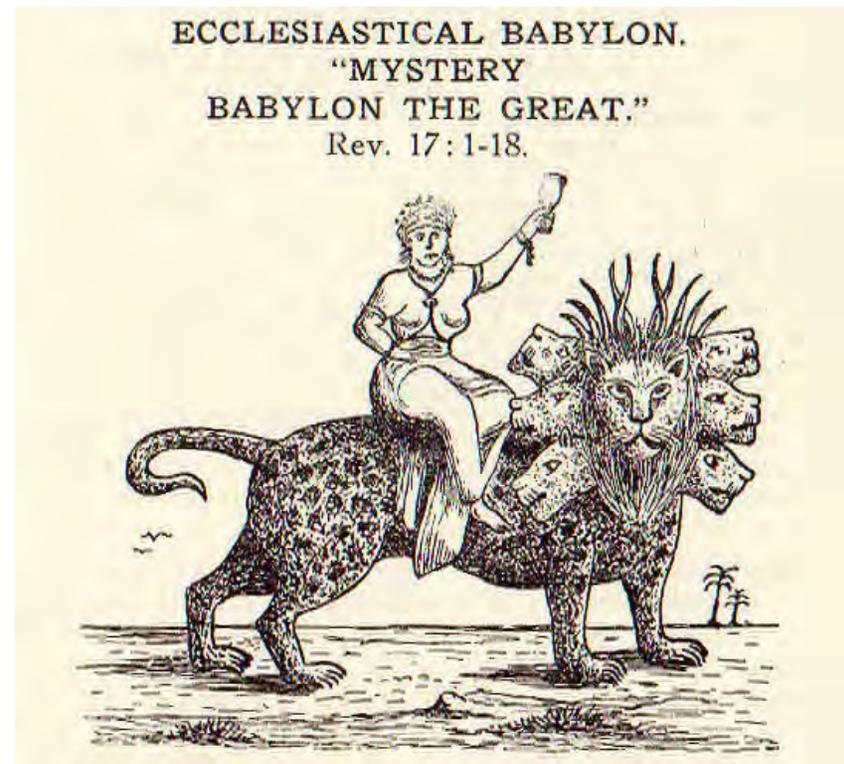
- What should we make of this?
- RH Charles has John borrowing from paganism.
- CS Lewis, in *Pilgrim's Regress* and in *Till We Have Faces*, suggests that God implanted stories among the pagans, which (though distorted & corrupted by them) still testify to God's redemptive purpose.
- This would fit Jesus' remark in John 12:23-24 (when Greeks came to him) about a grain of wheat dying & rising to produce many seeds.

# Woman, Child, Dragon

- It would also fit recent suggestions by some missiologists regarding redemptive analogies:
  - See Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*
- See a similar approach in Ernest L. Martin, *The Star That Astonished the World* and my PowerPoint talk, "The Star of Bethlehem: What Was It?"

# Harlot Riding Beast

- In Rev 17, John sees a vision of the harlot Babylon riding the beast of chapter 13.
- Again, both components have OT background, but not the combination.



# Harlot Riding Beast

- The harlot has OT symbolic background along two lines:
  - Israel as harlot:
    - Isa 1:21
    - Jer 2:20
    - Ezek 16
  - Pagan city as harlot:
    - Tyre – Isa 23:17
    - Nineveh – Nahum 3:4

# Harlot Riding Beast

- The riding motif does not occur in the OT.
- But in Greco-Roman mythology, there is a striking parallel in the Europa myth. According to Apollodorus and Ovid:
  - Zeus sees Europa, daughter of a Phoenician king, playing with her friends at the seashore.
  - He disguises himself as a bull & gets Europa to climb on his back.
  - He heads out to sea, takes her to Crete, & has children by her.
  - Clearly, the rider was not here in control of the mount!

# Zeus & Europa



Antonio Carracci 1583-1618; Ratto d'Europa. Photo ©Maicar Förlag-GML

# Harlot Riding Beast

- For believers seeking to correlate Revelation with current events, it is intriguing to note that the Europa symbol has recently been used to represent the European Union:
  - UK stamp
  - *TIME* article
  - *Der Spiegel* cover
  - 2 Euro coin
- Perhaps we are to read the harlot picture as alluding to Europe as well as Babylon & Rome.

# Harlot Riding Beast





# Conclusions

# Conclusions

- In our quick tour of Revelation, we found a number of allusions to Greco-Roman symbols, more than ten.
- I suspect a real inhabitant of the ancient Greco-Roman culture could have found even more.
- Most of the pictorial elements chosen to make Revelation vivid to its original readers come from Scripture, which is not surprising since the readers are professing Christians.

# Conclusions

- Yet a significant number are from their background Gentile culture, and some even from pagan mythology.
- It is true that Revelation does not tell us it is getting these pictures from the culture, but neither does it tell us it is getting the others from the OT.
- Only the person who is familiar with the material will recognize the allusions.

# Conclusions

- Regarding the question of contextualizing the Gospel, the example of Revelation needs to be factored into our thinking.
- This should also cause us to consider, what sort of presence did God maintain among the Gentiles during those centuries when he concentrated on Israel?
- What sort of presence is He maintaining even now?

# For Further Reading

- A more detailed treatment of this topic is given in my paper, "Greco-Roman Symbolism in the Book of Revelation," available from the Theological Research Exchange Network, at [www.tren.com](http://www.tren.com).

