

Symbolism in Scripture

(by Bob Pulliam)

We're pretty good at understanding something that is literal. When symbols are used, however, people usually go nuts. Then there are those who see symbolism where little or none is intended. How do we know when symbolism is at work? And how do we interpret symbolic passages?

How to Know When Symbolism is Present:

When We Are Told That it Is...

You would think that this would settle the matter, but some still do not care when they are told. They still try to find literal fulfillment of the symbols. The book of Revelation is an excellent example of this. We are warned at the very beginning of the book that it was "signified" by Jesus' Angel. The word *signified* means to make known by signs. We are later told what certain symbols represent (*e.g.* Rev 1:20; 17:18 - see Symbols Explained below). There is no doubt that Revelation contains symbolism. The common problem is taking the symbols and trying to apply them to the 21st century world.

When the Literal Meaning Would be Impossible...

By "impossible" we are not saying that it is something God could not accomplish. We are referring to an impossibility for the text. A good example of the would be the dry bones of Ezekiel 37. The meaning of the text is not that God is going to literally raise Israelites from the dead. The dry bones are symbolic of the present state of Israel. They were in captivity and felt that all hope was dried up. Now if you doubt this, look at verse eleven. Here God tells us that the bones represent a living people (for "they indeed say"). So if you didn't catch the impossibility of the text, God tells you in plain terms that symbolism is at work.

If Literal Use Would Create a Contradiction...

The Lamb (Jesus) is described as having seven horns and seven eyes "which are the seven Spirits of God". Now we know that there is only one Spirit (Eph 4:4). What must we conclude about the passage? It involves symbolism.

If Symbols Are Explained...

We noted above that several symbols in the book of Revelation are explained for us. The image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream was symbolic because in Daniel's interpretation we are told what each part of the image represented. We also saw an explanation of symbols in Ezekiel 37.

How Do We Interpret Symbolism?

As we just discussed, Many symbols are explained in the Bible. When they are, we are not given the prerogative to come up with a different explanation. We must use what is given. If what is given conflicts with another area of our understanding on the subject, then something is wrong with another area. The inspired writers were never wrong about the

meanings they assigned to symbols. When we leave their explanations behind, we have stopped studying the Bible, and started writing our own.

Must Be Within the Scope of the Work...

Nebuchadnezzar's dream of Daniel 2 has a particular scope. It covers four world empires and a fifth kingdom that God will establish. If we begin to see in that image something outside of that scope, we can be sure that we are straying. The image was not a lesson showing that one should not build something with the heaviest stuff on top. We also need not speculate on why there are two legs on the last empire, and how that would apply to the Roman empire which it represented. The purpose of the dream is simple, and need not be cluttered by the imaginations of men.

The book of Revelation was written concerning things that were near (Rev 1:3). Chapters two and three actually set up the remainder of the book. A great deal is said about impending persecution, and the need to overcome in the face of such. The Lord also speaks of punishing those who harm His people. When we enter the chapters that follow, we should not be surprised to find terrible things happening. To whom? To the people who are receiving this book. That really should strike us as most probable to begin with. If these things are reserved for some future events, why are they given to churches which would not be in existence when they occurred? Not even close to when they occurred. When the cities wouldn't even exist! The book of revelation has no reason to extend into the future until chapter 20 when that transition takes place quite naturally with a long symbolic period of time (during which we now live).

Symbolism May Be Understood by Fulfillment...

If you have symbolism being used in a prophecy, and you know when it is fulfilled, then you have been granted a particular insight into the details. Not always, but nearly always. Isaiah 2:2-4 will illustrate this. It speaks of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. What does that mean? When we look at the remainder of the prophecy, we find that this has been fulfilled in the present kingdom of our Lord. Was it not at Jerusalem that the law of the Lord would go forth? Is that not what took place in the book of Acts. In the New Testament we find it to be a kingdom of peace. While the nations may rage about us, those who belong to the Lord do not go into battle among themselves. Christians in one nation do not war against Christians in another nation. If they did, they would not be *Christians*. We do not learn the art of warfare as Children of God. The kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ has never gone to war against any nation upon earth.

This same kingdom of peace is found in Isaiah 11:1-9. Verses six through nine are sometimes taken to be literal, and therefore presently unfulfilled. The passage, however, is filled with symbolism from verses one through five. We begin with a rod and a stem to speak of the family of David. He has a "rod of His mouth", and the breath of his lips will slay the wicked. What will His belt be? Is this not symbolism? Why, then, would we be surprised that the descriptions of verses six through nine are symbolic? And when, again, is the fulfillment of these things? Doesn't Jesus now reign over us? Is He not King of kings, and Lord of lords? The fulfillment can be seen now. Especially when compared to the description of the fulfillment of Isaiah 2 above.

The prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 contains symbolism. In Acts 2 we have the fulfillment of that prophecy. How do we know that? Peter said so (Acts 2:16ff). If you believe Peter, then you seek an understanding of the symbolism in that prophecy by looking at it's fulfillment in the book of Acts.

How Did the First Readers Understand It?...

How did the intended recipients of the book of Revelation (the seven churches of Asia) understand it? They were expected to benefit from it, weren't they? Can you find anything that indicates they were not expected to understand it? I haven't seen the slightest hint! Don't you think they applied the words of Revelation to their time? Sure they did!... Just as the Protestant church applied them to the Roman Church of their day. Just as churches applied the book of Revelation to Hitler and WWII during that period. But to whom was it written? It was written to the seven churches of Asia. They are the only ones who have had the right to apply it in this way! Because it was addressed *to them*.

Conclusion...

Symbolism is one of the most difficult aspects of scripture for most people. One thing that should be remembered, however. When it comes to what we are to do and be to please God; we have been told in no uncertain terms. If the book of Revelation have never survived down to our day, you could still know all that God demands, please Him, and inherit everlasting life. If this one area stumps you. Leave it alone for now. Concentrate on what you can know from a book that is understandable.