

Lesson 20 – SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

I. What is Symbolism?

- A. The term “symbol” comes from a Greek word **symbolom** which means “to throw together.” This word is the Greek equivalent of the Latin word *signum* from which we get our word “sign.” A symbol may be graphic (drawings), enacted (actions), or verbal (expressions).
- B. Symbolism can be found in historical events as well imagined things.
1. Jesus cursed the fig tree to symbolize the **deadness** of Judaism. **Mk 9:11-20**. The action really occurred, but it was also symbolic.
 2. Daniel sees a vision of a ram and a goat fighting **Dan 8:3-8**. The event did not actually occur, but the vision symbolized the **conflict** between the Persian and Greek empires.
 3. Some of the greatest debates about symbolism involve prophecy. Are they to be fulfilled as envisioned, symbolically, or both?
 4. Some of the greatest errors in Bible interpretation involve reading historical events as if they are merely symbolic (e.g. Adam & Eve, Noah’s Flood, Jesus’ Miracles & Resurrection).

II. Varieties of Symbolic Language (expressions)

- A. **Simile**: a comparison in which one thing is said to resemble the other with the use of the word “like” or “as.”
1. **Ps 1:3**, “He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water”
 2. **Isa 53:6**, “All of us like sheep have gone astray”
- B. **Metaphor**: a comparison between two things in which the one is said to *be* the other. A linking verb are sometimes used.
1. **Ps 23:1**, “The Lord is my shepherd”
 2. **John 1:29**, “Behold, the Lamb of God”
 3. **Acts 20:29**, “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock”

- C. **Hyperbole**: a deliberate exaggeration designed to add emphasis or increase the effect of what is said.
1. **2 Sam 1:23**, “Saul and Jonathan...were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions”
 2. **John 21:25**, “I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.”
- D. **Personification**: the ascribing of **human** characteristics or actions to inanimate objects or ideas.
1. **Ps 77:16**, “The waters saw You, God...they were in anguish”
 2. **1 Cor 15:55**, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” [Note: The latter half of the verse is a **zoomorphism**.
- E. **Anthropomorphism**: ascribing human traits to God.
1. **Ps 8:3**, “the work of Your fingers”
 2. **Ps 64:7**, “Cause Your face to shine upon us”
- F. **Metonymy**: the substitution of the name of one thing for that of another closely **associated** with it.
1. **Ps 23:5**, “You prepare a table before me” [i.e., He prepares a dinner table with food, not simply a well-made table].
 2. **Luke 16:18**, ““Father, I have sinned against heaven [i.e., “God”], and in your sight”
 3. **Luke 16:29**, “But Abraham said, “They have Moses [i.e., “the Law”] and the Prophets; let them hear them.””
- G. **Synecdoche**: a figure of speech in which a **part** of something is used to refer to the **whole** (or vice versa).
1. **Ps 44:6**, “I will not trust in my bow, nor will my sword save me” [This doesn’t mean he will trust in other manmade weapons.]
 2. **Micah 4:3**, “Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” [speaks of complete disarmament, not just the elimination of swords]

3. **Rom 13:4**, “But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing.” [Other forms of punishment in addition to the sword are authorized as well.]

H. **Sarcasm**: a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of what is actually stated.

1. **I Kings 18:27**, “Elijah mocked them and said, ‘Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.’”
2. **Mark 7:9 (ESV)**, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!”

I. **Euphemism**: a figure of speech that substitutes a gentler expression in the place of the more harsh, offensive, or shocking thought.

1. **Gen 18:11 (KJV)**, “Now Abraham and Sarah *were* old *and* well stricken in age; *and* it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.” This meant she was post-menopausal.
2. **Acts 1:25**, “Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” This refers to his special place in Hell but does so more obliquely.

3. **Additional Observations:**

- a. Euphemisms often **overlap** with metonymy (where a related thing is mentioned in place of the main thing).
 - (1) **Lev 18:22**, “You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.” Lying down is metonymous for engaging in sex because it entails a **related** action. This doesn’t provide a loophole for sexual sin performed while not lying down!
 - (2) **1 Sam 24:3 (KJV)**, “Saul went in to cover his feet.” This likely refers to making a bowel movement since one’s feet are often covered when tending to this business.
- b. Euphemisms may convey **deeper** beliefs about the action.
 - (1) **Acts 7:60b**, “Having said this, he fell asleep.”

- (2) Falling asleep is a euphemism for dying. In pagan thought, no one ever awoke from such sleep, but the Gospel teaches us that our bodies will rise again!

III. **Principles for Identifying and Interpreting Symbolic Language** (adapted from material by Dr. Matt Weymeyer)

A. **Identifying Symbolic Material**: Symbolic language is a normal part of communication, but it is not the primary mode. Ask:

1. **Is it to some degree **absurd** when taken literally?** A literal view of symbolic language makes you scratch your head. **Zech 5:5-7**.
 - a. **Is it **clearer** if taken symbolically?** When you conclude that the literal meaning of the language is absurd, a symbolic interpretation would yield some degree of clarity.
 - b. **Can the symbolic usage be **catalogued**?** Determine whether the language falls into an established category of symbolism.

1. **Interpreting Symbolic Material:**

- a. **Is its significance indicated in the immediate **context**?** In some cases, symbolic language is used in a given passage and the significance of that language is indicated in the near context. **Zech 5:8-11; Rev. 1:12, 16; Phil 3:2**
- b. **Is the writer making an allusion to earlier revelation? **John 1:29** and **Isaiah 53:7; Rev 5:5** and **Isa 11:1, 10****
- c. **Is there a **pattern** of usage of that symbol in Scripture?**
- d. **If a simile or metaphor, is there a clear point of comparison?**
- e. **Does the cultural **background** of a key word or concept shed light on the symbolic language?**
 - Psalm 22:16 and Philippians 3:2 call evil people “dogs.” Understanding how dogs were viewed in those cultures may help in determining the significance of the symbol.
 - Matthew 11:29 exhorts His would-be followers to take Jesus’ “yoke” upon them. Understanding how a “yoke” functioned in that culture unpacks the exhortation.