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Is the Bible Literal or Symbolic?

2 Peter 3:16,17: (NASB) ¹⁶*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;* ¹⁷*so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*

Special Guest: David Stein

Christians who believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word have long recognized that Bible study requires interpretation. And it is no surprise that there have been differences among students of the Bible about what various texts mean. One of the major areas of interpretation and difference is the question about if the Bible is to be understood literally or symbolically. It is a question we need to consider seriously if we truly want to learn what God has placed in His Word for us to know. It cannot be a matter of preference! It must be a commitment to seek the truth in full submission to God's will.

So... is the Bible literal or symbolic? **The answer is: YES!** This is probably not a surprising answer! It makes sense that God would use every literary means to instruct, and that is exactly what we find in the Bible. We try to understand the Bible literally as a first approach. Any symbolic understanding of the Scriptures has to be based on what it means literally. If you stray from a literal interpretation to any large degree, that is an area of preference and fancy. We want to be in areas of understanding instead.

An example of symbolic meaning in scripture: John 1:29: (NASB) *The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, Behold, **the Lamb of God** who takes away the sin of the world! "Lamb of God"* - obviously not literal! In using this to describe Jesus, John knew he was talking to a Jewish audience. They knew that every year a Passover lamb was a sacrifice to God and that it had something to do with the expiation of sin. So when he chose that symbol to describe Jesus, he triggered in the mind of his audience this connection with what he knew Jesus had come to the world to do.

Some examples of literal meaning in texts: John 2:1: (NASB) *The first miracle of Jesus turning water into wine...* Literally true! Although there may be a symbolic meaning, those who would deny it was literal because it was a miracle start to undermine the whole basis for understanding God's word as inspired. Remember our theme text that said in part, "*all scripture inspired by God is profitable for teaching.*" We have to believe the Bible is true.

John 3:14: (NASB) *As **Moses lifted up the serpent** in the wilderness, even so must the **Son of Man be lifted up**.* Literally true! Some Literalists worry that if you interpret the Bible symbolically you lower the value of a literal interpretation. Fundamentalists are very upset about that because they want to preserve the inspiration of the Bible. For example, it is not uncommon to hear in Christian circles that Adam and Eve, Moses in the wilderness, etc., are just metaphorical stories that didn't really happen. We believe that they were literally true but also have symbolic meanings. Jesus was referring to a real event in the Old Testament. God was making a judgment on the people of Israel, who were dying. The way He enabled them to be able was to have Moses make a copper serpent and lift it up. If the people would gaze at it, they would live and survive the bites from fiery serpents. Jesus connects that literal happening with a symbolic happening of him being lifted up on the cross. He wants us to understand that the copper serpent then was in fact a symbol of HIM in a sacrificial capacity. ...So it is literal and symbolic.

Examples of mixed literal and symbolic meaning in texts: Matthew 8:22: (NASB) *But Jesus said to him, Follow me, and allow **the dead to bury their own dead**.* We want to allow the Bible to interpret the symbol. Here we have two different 'deads,' the literal dead and the metaphoric dead. The metaphoric dead are those judicially dead. That is, those who are dead from the standpoint of God's judgment upon all mankind.

How can we be sure of what any specific symbol means?

2 Peter 1:20: (NASB): *Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. We cannot apply something we want it to mean and then interpret to get it there. Our desire is to find the truth - what God has in store for us. As students of the Bible we need to let the Bible interpret itself. How do we do that?*

Psalms 46:1-5: (NASB) ¹*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.* ²*Therefore we will not fear, though the **earth** should change and though the **mountains** slip into the heart of the sea;* ³*Though*



its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah. ⁴There is a **river** whose streams make glad the **city** of God, the holy dwelling places of the Most High. ⁵God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.

Here are the symbols used in these verses: **earth mountains sea river city**

God is very gracious in that He has provided symbols that allow us to do a study to see how they are used. We will see that often literal meanings also apply as symbols. The truth has always been there, although obscured by a lot of error through the ages. It was very bright in the first century, but then there was an obscuring and a lot of error was introduced, but we are at the end of the age now where a lot of these things are becoming clear again. We wouldn't call that process "maturing," but rather "clarifying." It is time for truth to be revealed since we are getting so close to the setting up of the kingdom. Let's now go back to Psalms 45:1-5 and look closer at the symbols used. The first thing we should note is that usually there is an association of symbolic meaning with the literal meaning of the symbol.

earth Note that the earth is solid, stable, especially in contrast with the sea. When we look for the symbolic meaning of this, we would expect it would be associated with some kind of stability.

Psalms 24:1: (NASB) *The **earth** is the LORD'S, and all it contains, **The world, and those who dwell in it.** We are given an association in this verse between the earth and the people of the world. They constitute a stable social structure - civilization. Psalms 33:8: (NASB) *Let all the **earth** fear the LORD; Let all the **inhabitants of the world** stand in awe of Him.* In Hebrew it is common to state something and then state the same thing using slightly different language. The **earth** and the **inhabitants of the world** represent the same thing. Micah 1:2: (NASB) ***Hear, O peoples**, all of you; **Listen, O earth** and all it contains, and let the Lord GOD be a witness against you, the Lord from His holy temple.* Clearly the physical earth isn't going to listen because soil doesn't have ears! But this is typical of a pattern we find in these and many other examples. The Bible gives us the clues of what these symbols mean. This assures us that we are on the right track. **earth = the social structure of man, the stable portion of mankind, civilization, the community in which man resides.***

mountains Mountains are large, controlling natural structures that impose their presence on man. Scientifically, all the weather on earth has to do with where the oceans are and where the mountains are. Micah 4:1-2: (NASB) Micah is talking about a kingdom. The verse is asking people to come to the kingdom of God, which would be established above all of the kingdoms of man - it will be the "chief of the mountains." **mountains = kingdoms, both the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of man**

Can understanding Bible symbolism really be as easy as following directions?

It is exciting to see that symbols retain their meaning throughout the entire Bible. It is very rare that a symbol will change its meaning, which gives us a lot of confidence that we are achieving a level of understanding in what God wants us to know. Inconsistency would be a sign of error.

sea The sea is large, unstable and uncontrollable, especially in contrast to the earth.

Was the story of Jonah just a metaphor or did it really happen? But more importantly, what did Jesus believe? Jesus believed it really happened. He talks about Jonah being in the belly of the great fish, so if Jesus believed it, we will believe it. Isaiah 57:20: (NASB) *But the wicked are like the tossing **sea**, for it cannot be quiet, And its waters toss up refuse and mud.* This is another example of the Bible interpreting itself, using the simile of the tossing, restless sea being like the wicked, those that are lawless and unable to be restrained. **sea = the restless masses of mankind**

river Literally a stream of water flowing from one place to another.

We note that rivers are made of water. Water is clearly a symbol of truth, especially the refreshing and purifying qualities of truth. John 4:13,14 Revelation 22:1,17: Here there is a river of the water of life. No one will have life without the truth. Jesus said he had waters he would give that would satisfy forever. In other words, it would provide eternal water.

John 4:13-14: **river = a stream of truth that refreshes, purifies, energizes and brings knowledge of great joy.** Note: Revelation 21:1: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and **there is no longer any sea.** In the Kingdom of God in glory, there will be a new arrangement of mankind with true worship ("new heaven") and a righteous and stable social arrangement ("new earth"). But there will be no restless part of mankind anymore ("**no more sea**").*



city A group of people living together with common geography, interests and polity.

Revelation 21:2: (NASB) And I saw **the holy city, new Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready **as a bride adorned for her husband**. Every Christian who has studied the relationship of the church to Jesus knows that the church is likened to a bride. Here the bride adorned for her husband is compared to the holy city, the new Jerusalem. Here the city represents the true church. Revelation 17:18: (NASB) The woman whom you saw is **the great city**, which reigns over the kings of the earth. Here, however, the great city represents a false church. Earlier in verse 5, this city is identified as Babylon the great. Babylon was an ancient city of pagan religion, false ideas. Revelation uses this as a symbol to represent false Christian ideas.

city = A church, either the true church or the false church!

Now we have enough to suggest an interpretation of Psalm 46!

¹God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble. ²Therefore we will not fear, though the **earth** (the present social order) should change and though the **mountains** (the kingdom of this world) slip into the heart of the **sea** (the restless masses of mankind desiring change through revolution and anarchy); ³Though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah. ⁴There is a **river** (of truth and understanding) whose streams make glad the **city of God** (the true church), the holy dwelling places of the Most High. ⁵God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. (the dawn of God's Millennial Kingdom under Christ) It isn't the physical earth that collapses on itself, but it is society that collapses.

Type-Antitype

To illustrate the meaning of type and antitype, consider a typewriter. The type is the reversed mirror image of a letter or number that is embossed on the character hammer. That hammer is directed to hit an ink ribbon above the paper. It presses its character through the ribbon and shows the typed character on the paper. That typed character is the "antitype." You can see the correspondence of the type to the antitype. They are a mirror image of each other.

A Biblical Type: A symbolic picture which points to a later reality.

A Biblical Antitype: The reality.

(Type:) 1 Corinthians 10:11: (NASB) Now these things happened to them as an **examples**, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. The Greek word for "example" is τύπος - tupos - it means a die or stamp, (like a typewriter) an example of a type.

(Antitype:) 1 Peter 3:21: (NASB) **Corresponding to that**, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (Peter was corresponding the flood with baptism. The flood was the type, baptism was the antitype.) The Greek word for "corresponding to" is ἀντίτυπος - antitypos - it is that which corresponds to something else. KJV: "like figure"

1 Corinthians 2:10: This is of no interest to natural man - where God is coding His will in symbolic form. But those who want to discern spiritual truths, this is an exciting discovery! It is like mining for gold, discovering truths that link up ancient things with what is happening today.

What about the partaking of Jesus' body and blood - literal? Symbolic?

The sacrifice of Jesus to redeem mankind is a common theme and thread of truth throughout the entire Bible. **Let's start at the very beginning:** Genesis 3:7, 21: (NASB) ⁷Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and **they sewed fig leaves together** and made themselves loin coverings...²¹The **LORD God made garments of skin** for Adam and his wife, and clothed them. Fig leaves were insufficient, so God covered them with skins. Where are skins from? An animal had to be slain. God had a sacrificial animal covering them from the beginning. This is another type - another picture - of the antitype of Jesus and our being covered by his sacrifice. And what about the fig leaves? These are often a picture of Israel, who wanted to gain life by being obedient to the Law. But they couldn't. Just like Adam and Eve, who tried to prove themselves worthy by their own actions, Israel needed a covering from outside.

Hosea 9:10: I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your forefathers **as the earliest fruit on the fig tree** in its first season. God provided Jesus as our covering and the covering of mankind as he "**tasted death for every man.**" Hebrews 2:9 All of this is a symbolic indicator of both man's sinful condition and God's intention to save man from their sins by the blood sacrifice of Jesus. This brings us back to our starting point where John the Baptist called Jesus the "**Lamb of God.**"



The Memorial Emblems - Symbols or Literal?

Matthew 26:26-28: We know that a large segment of Christendom believes this is absolutely literal. In the Catholic mass there is a ritual known as TRANSUBSTANTIATION where the emblems are believed to be literally converted into the actual body and blood of Jesus though the senses are said to be veiled to the 'fact.' The mass becomes a fresh sacrifice of Jesus for believers. We agree that the Jews back then took him literally. Under the Law, it was absolutely forbidden to eat or drink blood. So when Jesus makes the statement, *"unless you drink the blood and eat the flesh of the son of man, you will have no life in you,"* that turned them off. Why did he say that? Many left him after this, and he asked his disciples if they were going to leave him, too. They didn't understand what he meant - they did take it literally because of the way that he stated it. Did he say this on purpose to drive certain ones away?

Now the problems (as we see them) with the literal translation:

1. How could the emblem literally be Jesus' body in the upper room? He was there! His body was actually holding the piece of bread. Was it another body? Was there no blood in his veins when he held up the wine? Was it extra blood? Remember, he hadn't given his life yet - he was still alive.
2. This was not the view of early Christian writers. "Transubstantiation" as a word did not come into existence until the 12th century.
3. Jesus broke the bread and said it was his body. But in fact, not a bone of his was broken. It gives us the sense of the breaking apart being a picture of the sacrificing of the life of Jesus.
4. Under the Law, the ingestion of blood was illegal. As a Jew, he would have been violating the Law and encouraging others to do so. We are told he was sinless and did not violate the Law.
5. The mass requires Jesus to be "re-sacrificed" every time, even though Paul says in Hebrews 9:28, *so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await him.*
6. Jesus wanted us to remember this anniversary. Paul actually includes us in this by saying we are all one body. 1 Corinthians 10:15-17:

If the bread represents the literal body of Jesus, then the bread also has to represent our literal bodies, but that doesn't make sense. Rather, it is our participation in what these things mean. For example, when I exercise faith in the blood of Jesus, I am symbolically drinking his blood, saying, "I need this to live, I need this for salvation." When I exercise faith in the body of Jesus, I'm saying, "He died for me. I have to eat of the value of his merit, in order that I may have life." Christians are not taught to drink literal blood or be cannibals! The thought here is that we are to be blessed by his sacrifice by participating with Jesus in living a life of daily sacrifice, putting to death our flesh (our earthly desires and earthly wants) as Jesus did his. It always points back to his original event of giving his body on the cross. In pointing back to that singular event, from a symbolic perspective, it makes that event so much greater than having to redo the event literally over and over again. To us, that would diminish the original. 1 Corinthians 10:15-17: Communion means "common union" - the idea of participating with Jesus is our common union with our Lord. Paul says that we are part of the one bread because we have the unity with Jesus in the bread. Partaking of his goodness and his merit helps us do the will of God. This is a spiritual discernment.

God's word is presented in symbols and in literal stories. We don't dismiss any part of God's inspired word. He presented it to us on many levels. The chief theme that runs through the whole Bible is the sacrificial death of Jesus for all of mankind. The Bible is a book that is given to us by God and tells us the history of mankind from before he was created to eons of time after we live now. It gives us everything we need to know, but some of it is veiled in symbols and in parables. We need to be students to figure it out!

*So is the Bible literal or symbolic...?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*