

What's *Really* Figurative?

With this lesson, we want to examine in a little more depth some of the principles that were introduced in the previous lesson. Most notably, we want to look at the difference in the use of literal and figurative language in the scriptures.

How often has the question been asked: “Do you think the Bible is literal or figurative?” This question reveals that the person asking the question does not have any kind of understanding of the nature of the Bible. This question treats the Bible as if it is one, independent work. While the Bible indeed comes from one source (God), it is actually a compilation of 66 individual books, as we have seen in previous lessons. Those books are comprised of several different genres of literature (see Lesson 4). Because there are numerous genres included in scripture, it is vital to understand that there are differences in the way that words are used. To answer the question above, the answer is, “Yes!” There are sections of the scripture that are clearly literal. *Literal* means:

lit•er•al | 'li-t(ə-)rəl| *adjective*

[Middle English, from Middle French, from Medieval Latin *litteralis*, from Latin, of a letter, from *littera* letter] 14th century

1 *a: according with the letter of the scriptures*

b: adhering to fact or to the ordinary construction or primary meaning of a term or expression: ACTUAL <liberty in the literal sense is impossible—B. N Cardozo>

c: free from exaggeration or embellishment <the literal truth>

d: characterized by a concern mainly with facts <a very literal man>

2: *of, relating to, or expressed in letters*

3: *reproduced word for word: EXACT, VERBATIM <a literal translation>—lit•er•al•i•ty* |,li-tə-'ra-lə-tē| *noun*—*lit•er•al•ness* | 'li-t(ə-)rəl-nəs| *noun*¹

When we see passages of scripture as literal, we believe that the author is recording things as they happened. Sometimes, these may be unbelievable events to the human, secular mind. Accounts such as that of Jonah and Great Fish, for example, are often considered to be fictional accounts, fables with moral stories. However, there is nothing in the passages that would suggest that this account is anything except a factual account of events as they happened. Yes, Jonah was *literally* swallowed by a great fish, and then later vomited out on dry land!

On the other hand, there are also sections of scripture that are clearly figurative. Figurative means:

fig•u•ra•tive | 'fi-g(y)ə-rə-tiv| *adjective*

14th century

1 *a: representing by a figure or resemblance: EMBLEMATIC*

b: of or relating to representation of form or figure in art <figurative sculpture>

¹ Merriam-Webster, Inc. Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. 2003 : n. pag. Print.

2 a: expressing one thing in terms normally denoting another with which it may be regarded as analogous: METAPHORICAL <figurative language>

b: characterized by figures of speech <a figurative description>—fig•u•ra•tive•ly adverb—fig•u•ra•tive•ness noun²

Much of the poetic books of scripture are written in figurative language. In a few moments, we will take a look at some more specific examples of this, but for the time being, consider David's writing in Psalm 23:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).

Clearly, as David penned this stunning verse, he did not intend the reader to think that there was a literal "valley of the shadow of death" that could be marked on a map. He was using figurative language to express an idea that he was facing difficult circumstances and that God was there to help him.

How do we know?

If the Bible has both literal and figurative passages, how are we to know which is which? It is, of course, very important to recognize the difference between the two. Deciding something is either *literal* or *figurative* is not an arbitrary decision. There are, in fact, textual clues that will help to determine this in the context. While we will spend a significant amount of time discussing how to approach a given context in a future lesson, it is imperative at this juncture to understand that textual clues to a literal or figurative interpretation can be found within the immediate context of a passage. This is not unlike any other type of literature that one might read. There are different literary devices that can be used by the author to express his intent. An author can express himself in a literal way, i.e., simply telling the facts (as in history). Or he can express himself in a more creative, figurative way. Most of the literary devices that are present in secular writing are also present in the biblical text. Let's take some time to consider some of these literary devices, as found in scripture

Simile. A simile is a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by like or as.³ This type of comparison is easy to spot, as it uses a connective phrase, such as *like* or *as*. When used, the author is clearly not identifying the first part of the phrase as being literally the second. Consider this passage:

The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth..." (Acts 8:32)"

As the Eunuch was reading this prophetic passage, he could not figure out who was being discussed in the passage from Isaiah 53. He knew that it was not a literal sheep being led to the slaughter, but rather a man, who was to be led like a sheep to slaughter. The comparison of the man being led to his death was made clear by the well understood imagery of a sheep being led to the slaughter. A simile shows similarity between the two phrases. In this example, the man was literally being led to His death, but the figure of a sheep led to slaughter is used to emphasize the action.

Metaphor. A metaphor is very similar to a simile. Metaphor is defined as: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in drowning in money) broadly: figurative language.⁴ Rather than using the connective phrases *as* or *like* (as in a simile), metaphors make a more direct compar-

2 Merriam-Webster, Inc. Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. 2003 : n. pag. Print.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

ison. Consider the following passage as an example:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want (Psalm 23:1).

This psalm is quite well known, and is full of literary devices. This metaphor identifies God as a shepherd, and therefore His faithful people as sheep. Neither of these are literally true, but rather serve as a figure of the relationship between God and His people. We certainly do not expect to see the Lord literally standing in a field, dressed as a shepherd!

Personification. Personification is defined as: attribution of personal qualities especially: representation of a thing or abstraction as a person or by the human form.⁵ More simply put, *personification* is giving of human attributes to non-human entities. This is a literary device that is used extensively in poetic passages. One of the most dramatic examples is found in the descriptions of wisdom as given by the wise man, Solomon, in the Proverbs.

Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars; She has slaughtered her meat, She has mixed her wine, She has also furnished her table. She has sent out her maidens, She cries out from the highest places of the city, "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, "Come, eat of my bread And drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake foolishness and live, And go in the way of understanding" (Proverbs 9:1–6).

Here, Solomon has given wisdom the characteristics of a person. Wisdom cannot literally build a house, or slaughter meat, etc. Clearly, when this device is used, it is intended to convey a figurative idea, rather than depict a literal scene.

Anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is defined as: an interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics: HUMANIZATION.⁶ This is quite similar to personification, but is usually used in relation to God. That is, Anthropomorphism is typically a special type of personification in which human characteristics are attributed to God so that we might be able to more easily, or fully understand Him. Consider:

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their cry. The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, To cut off the remembrance of them from the earth (Psalm 34:15–16).

Here, the psalmist gives human characteristics to God, making Him more “relatable” to man. That does not indicate that God literally has these characteristics! He is Spirit, not flesh, and so He does not literally possess these characteristics of humans.

Many will include various human emotions and actions as being a literary device when used of God. While this may be true on occasion, part of the issue becomes determining what characteristics are uniquely human. For example, for one to assume that describing God as “jealous” is an anthropomorphism, one would have to show that “jealousy” is a uniquely human characteristic, and that God does not actually exhibit that (or any) emotion. As this is impossible to show, attributing God’s emotion to merely “figurative language” is not a fair representation.

Allusion. An allusion is defined as: 1: an implied or indirect reference especially in literature also: the use of such references. 2: the act of alluding to or hinting at something.⁷ An allusion is a literary device where the author (or speaker) mentions something that will make the reader/hearer think of something else. It is intended to draw the mind to something familiar, so that it might help to explain the actions of the immediate context. This was effectively used by Jesus, while on the cross. At one point, He cried out:

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34)

Jesus was calling the mind of the informed back to Psalm 22, a psalm that declared the coming Messiah, and the suffering that He would endure. Jesus’ cry was a declaration that He was fulfilling the prophecies!

Metonymy. Metonymy is defined as: a figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated.⁸ An example of this would be using the word “crown” for “king”, such as, “The vineyards belong to the crown.” The land, in this example, would not literally belong to the crown that sits on the king’s head, but rather to the king himself. The term *crown* is used to identify the king.

A Biblical example of this can be found in Paul’s instructions concerning the Lord’s Supper:

In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes (1 Corinthians 11:25–26).

One would not literally drink the cup itself. Rather, the cup stands for the contents that are found therein. There was no importance placed upon the cup itself. Paul wanted them to know that when they drank the fruit of the vine, they were declaring the Lord’s death till He comes.

Notice that with Metonymy, the two things that are used interchangeably are not at all similar in nature. A king and a crown are two completely different things, just as a cup and its contents are completely different. Even so, we easily see the connection between the two elements, and we are able to understand the author’s intent. No one thinks that Paul was instructing that the cup used in the Lord’s supper was somehow supposed to be processed so that it could be drunk! It is evident that he was addressing the fruit of the vine that was contained in the cup.

Synecdoche. Synecdoche is defined as: a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole (as fifty sail for fifty ships), the whole for a part (as society for high society), the species for the genus (as cutthroat for assassin), the genus for the species (as a creature for a man), or the name of the material for the thing made (as boards for stage)⁹

Synecdoche is used quite often both in our spoken and written language. For example, a rancher might declare that he has “2000 head of cattle.” He does not mean that he has literally 2000 bovine heads on his ranch, but rather 2000 animals. The *head* he cites represents the whole animal!

The same thing is true about Biblical literature. We can see a part representing the whole of something. For example:

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them (Acts 2:41).

Here, Luke is using the part (souls) to represent the whole (people). No one would ever read Luke’s writing and think that he was literally saying that only the souls of the people who were baptized were added to the group, and the rest of their bodies were not affected! We understand that he was using this literary device to identify that the whole person was added to the church. Another example:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles (Romans 16:3–4).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Here, Paul was using *neck* as representing the lives of Aquila and Priscilla. They had not literally only risked their neck, failing to endanger any other part of themselves. They had endangered their lives by helping Paul, and he made that clear by using synecdoche.

Idiom. An idiom is defined as: an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either grammatically (as no, it wasn't me) or in having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements (as Monday week for "the Monday a week after next Monday").¹⁰ An idiom is typically drawn from a particular culture or time, and means something specific to that culture or time. The words themselves would not indicate the actual meaning of the phrase used. For example, the southern phrase, "Bless your heart" has a distinct meaning in the southern culture that would not necessarily be understood in other cultures. Certainly, it is not a phrase that is supposed to be taken literally.

We find idioms used in the scriptures as well. One example is found in Peter's first epistle:

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 1:13).

Here, "gird up the loins of your mind" is an idiom drawn from the culture of Peter's day. A man would wear long robes, which would get in the way of running if he had to hurry somewhere. So, he would be required to tie the robes up around his waist to free up his legs to hurry. This idea of "girding the loins" came to mean that a man was preparing for some activity. He was preparing himself to be able to move quickly to some task. So then, "gird up the loins of your mind" was an idiom that Peter used to convey the need to prepare the mind for activity ahead that he was warning of.

Unfortunately, some of the modern translations have made the decision to translate the idea of some idioms, such as the one in our example above, rather than to simply translate the words. This sets a dangerous precedent, as they first have to make a decision about what the idiom means, and then insert that into the text rather than simply translating what the author wrote.

Idioms can be difficult, as we must first have an understanding about culture that the idiom came from before we can understand its message. But, there are plenty of reliable sources to help us understand the settings that these idioms came from, so that we can indeed understand the message just as the original author intended for his audience.

Hyperbole. Hyperbole is defined as: extravagant exaggeration (as "mile-high ice-cream cones").¹¹ This is a literary device that overstates something to the extreme for emphasis. The literal meaning of the words is not to be taken, but recognized as being an over-exaggeration. For example, a parent might say to a child, "If I've told you once, I've told you a million times, pick up your toys!" Most likely, that parent has not literally told the child to pick up his toys "a million times," but rather is expressing the idea that they have repeated themselves a lot.

There are examples of hyperbole in scripture as well. Consider Jesus' teaching:

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26).

Clearly Jesus was not teaching that every single person must come to hate their physical family, or else they cannot be His disciple. This was an exaggeration to emphasize the need to love and serve Him, even more than one would love his physical family.

Another example from scripture:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (Matthew 23:24)

In this teaching Jesus was exaggerating the approach of the Pharisees, who were diligent about things like tithing from the smallest plants, but then overlooked the more important matters of the law (justice, mercy and faith). They clearly were not literally swallowing camels! Yet, the hyperbole used by Jesus made it clear that they were getting the small stuff right (straining the gnat) while missing the big stuff (swallowing a camel).

Chiasmus. A chiasmus is an inverted relationship between the syntactic elements of parallel phrases.¹² In a chiasmic phrase, there are two elements which are parallel but inverted. Because of the inverted parallelism, the two elements of the phrase contrast with one another. Here are a couple of examples:

*“Home is where the great are small,
and the small are great.”
~Anonymous*

*“Direct your efforts more to preparing the youth for the path,
and less to preparing the path for the youth.”
~Ben Lindsey*

As you can see, the second line of these quotes invert the ideas of the first line to set a contrast, establishing the main point that the author intends. The same type of format is used in scripture as well. Consider God’s message through Isaiah:

“Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed” (Isaiah 6:10).

Notice that in the first part of the parallel, God lists the heart, the ears and the eyes. In the contrasting section, He inverted the order, speaking of the eyes, the ears and then the heart. In so doing, He clearly emphasized that the changing of the heart is what He desired, and that the people were going to be stubborn and refuse to open their eyes and ears so that they might be willing to change their hearts!

Jesus also used chiasmus in His teaching. Here is one example:

But many who are first will be last, and the last first (Matthew 19:30).

These phrases are often parallel to one another with only an inversion of one section. In this example, Jesus only inverted two words, rather than whole phrases as we have seen in the previous examples.

Apostrophe. Apostrophe is the addressing of a usually absent person or a usually personified thing rhetorically (Carlyle’s “O Liberty, what things are done in thy name!” is an example of apostrophe).¹³ Typically, when using apostrophe, the author is personifying an abstract idea, and addressing it, though it is clear that there can be no response. The following lines from a nursery rhyme illustrate the use of apostrophe:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!*

This literary device is used quite frequently in scripture as well. One way in which this is used is

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

when a speaker addresses his own soul:

Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance (Psalm 42:5).

In other examples, non-sentient beings are personified and called upon to act in a manner that is completely impossible for them.

Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done it! Shout, you lower parts of the earth; Break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, And glorified Himself in Israel (Isaiah 44:23).

Sing, O heavens! Be joyful, O earth! And break out in singing, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people, And will have mercy on His afflicted (Isaiah 49:13).

Let heaven and earth praise Him, The seas and everything that moves in them (Psalm 69:34).

In each of these examples, the inanimate objects are called upon to praise the Lord. They are not literally capable of doing this, but the author is using this literary device to emphasize the need for all the creation to praise the Lord.

Merism. A merism is similar to synecdoche, but instead of being one part represents the whole of something, a combination of parts reflects the whole. For example, we often use the phrase “lock, stock and barrel” to represent the whole of something. There is a combining of parts to show the whole.

This is used in the creation account, where the phrase “an evening and a morning were the first day” was used (Genesis 1:5). The two parts of the day are put together to represent the whole, and completed day.

Another example is found in the psalm:

You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, Nor of the arrow that flies by day, Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday (Psalm 91:5–6).

By combining night, day, darkness and noonday, the psalmist conveys the idea that there would never be a time that he would be afraid. He could have confidence in God at all time, and so he did not need to worry! He combined the parts of the day to emphasized the whole.

Paradox. A paradox is a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true.¹⁴ When reading a paradox, the statement may seem to not make sense on the surface, but conveys a truth. In literature, paradox is often used to convey a major theme in the work, a main point. For example, in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, he wrote, “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.” Clearly this presents a contradiction, but it also reveals the main theme of that work.

In scripture, there are many statements that can be identified as paradoxes. From Isaiah:

“Hear, you deaf; And look, you blind, that you may see (Isaiah 42:18).

One who is deaf cannot hear, and one who is blind cannot see. Yet, this paradox is used to call to those who needed to see and hear the word of God, seeking for them to make a change.

Another example, from Jesus’ teaching:

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

will save it (Mark 8:35).

This, on the surface, appears to be a contradictory statement. Want to save your life? You will then lose it! But, if you are willing to sacrifice your life, then you will preserve it. When one understands that Jesus was speaking of the spiritual life being impacted by the actions in the physical life, the paradox makes sense, and conveys an eternal, spiritual truth. If you want to preserve your spiritual life, then you cannot emphasize the preservation of the physical!

Irony. Irony is the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning.¹⁵ When irony is being used, the meaning of the phrase will actually be the opposite of the actual words being used. This is often conveyed in sarcasm. There are a couple of good examples of this in scripture which we can consider.

Then Job answered and said: "No doubt you are the people, And wisdom will die with you! (Job 12:1–2)

In the midst of this speech, Job was not really praising his friends for their wisdom, but rather was being sarcastic and pointing out that though they thought themselves wise, they did not really have the answers they believed they had! Paul, when addressing the Corinthians used a very similar tactic:

You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! (1 Corinthians 4:8–10)

Paul's address shows that the Corinthians had become puffed up in themselves. They clearly were not really the wise, and the strong, especially compared to the apostles! However, Paul was able to use this literary device to drive home his point. His sarcasm made the point that they needed to listen to him, and the other apostles, and not think of themselves as being spiritually superior and not in need of their instruction!

Symbolism. Symbolism is the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations.¹⁶ The use of symbols is a clear indicator that the author does not intend for his words to be taken literally. The symbol used stands in place of the actual element that the author is considering. Symbolism is often used to veil the meaning of the author, and can only be understood if there is a key to unlock that meaning.

And four great beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other. (Daniel 7:3)

'Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth. (Daniel 7:17)

Here, Daniel provided the symbolism of the beasts, but then also gave a key to understanding that symbolism by defining the beasts as the four kings would come. John, in the book of Revelation, uses similar symbolism, and provides a similar key to understanding:

"Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time. (Revelation 17:9–10)

By looking at the description for the symbols used, one can come to a better understanding of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

cryptic language being used by both of these authors. It is evident that neither were talking about literal elements. Daniel was not contemplating a literal beast, and John was not envisioning literal beasts with 7 heads. They described what their symbols meant!

Literary Devices in the Original Languages...

There are some literary devices that are only evident in the original languages. This is one area that we lose the beauty and creativity of the writing (though not the meaning) when we have to translate to a different language. We do not see the elements as a reader of the original would have seen it. Below are a few examples:

Acrostic. An acrostic is a composition usually in verse in which sets of letters (as the initial or final letters of the lines) taken in order form a word or phrase or a regular sequence of letters of the alphabet.¹⁷ The best example of this is found in Psalm 119, where each stanza of 8 verses begins with the same Hebrew letter, and progresses through the whole Hebrew alphabet with each letter. We do not see the repetition of these letters in the English, so we lose the creativity of the author in working through the alphabet with each succeeding stanza.

There are other passages that employ the use of acrostics as well:

In the common form of acrostic found in Old Testament Poetry, each line or stanza begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. This literary form may have been intended as an aid to memory, but more likely it was a poetic way of saying that a total coverage of the subject was being offered -- as we would say, 'from A to Z.' Acrostics occur in Psalms 111 and 112, where each letter begins a line; in Psalms 25, 34, and 145, where each letter begins a half-verse; in Psalm 37, Proverbs 31:10-31, and Lamentations 1, 2, and 4, where each letter begins a whole verse; and in Lamentations 3, where each letter begins three verses. Psalm 119 is the most elaborate demonstration of the acrostic method where, in each section of eight verses, the same opening letter is used, and the twenty-two sections of the psalm move through the Hebrew alphabet, letter after letter.¹⁸

In many of these examples, we may be surprised to learn that an acrostic is being employed. There is certainly no hint of it being present in the English.

Alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of usually initial consonant sounds in two or more neighboring words or syllables (as wild and woolly, threatening throngs).¹⁹ Because the repeated sounds are found only in the original languages, we again are unable to appreciate the creativity of the authors in using this device.

*sha'alu shalom yerushalayim
yishlayu ohavayik
yehi shalom bechelek
shalvah be'armenotayik²⁰*

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, Prosperity within your palaces." (Psalm 122:6-7)

When written out in the original Hebrew, we can see the repetition of certain sounds which enhance the poetic form. We cannot see the same alliteration in the English translation. We can imagine though, how powerful such a device could be to one reading this in the original language, and understand how beautiful the language was to develop and use this device so effectively!

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ J.A. Motyer, "Acrostic," in *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 12.

¹⁹ Merriam-Webster, Inc. *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. 2003 : n. pag. Print.

²⁰ <http://www.westminster.edu/staff/nak/courses/BibPoetry.htm>

Assonance. Assonance is the resemblance of sound in words or syllables, or a relatively close juxtaposition of similar sounds especially of vowels.²¹ An example of assonance is:

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

Here the author repeats the short “e” sound, as well as the short “i” sound.

Like with the above example of alliteration, assonance in the biblical text is not evident when translated into a different language. When the translation is made, the sounds are clearly not the same, so we lose the creativity of that literary device.

Conclusion...

It is important for us to understand these literary devices and their uses in literature in general, and in the Bible text especially. When we see these devices in use, it tells us that the author did not intend for his words to be taken literally, but rather that he was conveying ideas in a more creative way. These devices are used heavily throughout the poetic writings of scripture, but are certainly not limited to those passages (as has been made evident by many of the examples used throughout this part of our study.)

When we are studying God’s word, we need to be mindful of the different types of devices, and what they convey to us. To consider these examples of symbolic language to be literal would lead us to many faulty conclusions. If we see symbolic language used, we must try and decipher what message the author intended us to grasp from it! While this can be challenging, it is in no way impossible. It is a part of our effort to understand all that God has revealed for us!

²¹ Merriam-Webster, Inc. Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary. 2003 : n. pag. Print.

Questions...

1. What is the difference between literal and figurative language in the scriptures?
2. What types of literary devices are used in scripture?
3. Is the interpretation of the various literary devices in scripture different than other forms of literature? Why or why not?
4. When an author uses symbolism (like John did in the book of Revelation), what happens if one tries to interpret his writings literally?
5. What literary devices of scripture are only evident in the original languages?
6. Why are these devices particularly challenging?
7. What is lost, and what is not lost when these literary devices are translated over into a different language, such as English?

