

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

201 - The Nature & Characteristics Of Symbols

1. Introduction

A variety of symbolic and figurative elements appear throughout the Bible. They provide evidence of the intelligence of God and validate the word as inspired. They're the product of a mind that weaves the literal and figurative together in such a way that one confirms the other. The ability to understand symbolic elements in the scriptures is critical to comprehending biblical doctrine. Building on the content that we've already covered we can now begin to examine the text in more detail. By doing this we'll develop an appreciation for the depth of the scriptures as we take a look at the **Nature & Characteristics Of Symbols** in the Bible.

2. Coming to terms with terms

Symbols are around us everyday. They're common and generally go without notice. Speech for example is composed of words that represent ideas and convey meaning. Type on a page is a visual manifestation of speech and also relates ideas and concepts. Numbers are everywhere from our phones to our homes and everywhere else. Money is a shared symbol we use in exchange for goods and services. We don't have any problem with these since they're so common. We usually don't even think in terms of symbols as we go about our daily affairs. We're used to them and use them all the time.

If we begin a discussion and I tell you that I want to talk about symbols, what does that bring to mind? Usually it stirs up images and ideas of things that are mysterious, complex and shrouded with vague uncertainty. Unfortunately, that's exactly what happens when we talk about symbols in the Bible. The scriptures are presented by some groups of believers as being filled with mysteries and shadows of things to come. Discussions of religious cults, secret organizations and such like often include the Bible as a similar system and its often treated as such. Some compare symbolic forms in the biblical narrative to ancient pagan writings and rituals seeking to establish a common bond between them. Over the years we've seen books, movies and documentaries made about hidden messages coded into the scriptures and numeric sequences that can be extrapolated to reveal obscure knowledge and the list goes on. But is that really the nature of symbols in the Bible?

The biggest problem with symbols and figurative language in the scriptures is the fact that many people don't accept that the Bible is inspired by God. There are a lot of believers who don't really understand that concept. They sometimes find themselves agreeing with the ideas of historians, anthropologists or other academics that the Bible was in many ways borrowed from other cultures. In this interpretation the Bible is just a Hebrew version of older stories that were modified over time. What happens when we change our perspective and acknowledge God as the author of the Bible? We find a level of connection in the scriptures that begins in Genesis and ends on the last page of Revelation. We see a book filled with such design and engineering that challenges how we think about it. When we look at it like this we can see a story that continues to deepen every time we read it. But to get to that point we have to gain a very intimate

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understanding of the subject.

When the term symbol is used in conjunction with the Bible it can take on a life of its own and could end up being more misleading than clarifying. In its simplest form, we can think of a symbol as something that stands for something else. In other words, symbols represent something. When we think of one thing representing a person, place or event we can avoid becoming complex, vague or mystical. That's what symbols are in the Bible. They're elements of the message that represent something else. Looking at them like this points us in the direction of understanding biblical symbolism in a more realistic manner. So the first part of a definition of biblical symbols is that they're elements that represent something else.

Let's take a look at our functional definition of symbols as they appear in the scriptures. We can define a

Biblical symbol: as an element of the scriptures that represents or stands for something else. This may include a person, idea or event, among other things, and can be linked to these either directly or by inference.

Let's add another dimension to this that will be useful as we build the study. This dimension forms a necessary boundary to what we can do in respect to interpreting symbols. We can say that any symbol, representing something else, is restricted in application and interpretation based on the relative context it appears in. That's a mouthful and we'll break that down throughout the study. Stated a bit simpler we need to understand that symbols can't be applied to just anything we think they might be related to. The text in which they appear will ultimately determine what something means. So now let's add this to our definition. We can define a

Biblical symbol: as an element of the scriptures that represents or stands for something else. This may include a person, idea or event, among other things, and can be linked to these either directly or by inference. Understanding or interpretation of the symbolic form will be restricted by the context in which it appears.

Now that we have a working definition of what symbols in the Bible are we need more information to identify and understand them.

3. A closed system

We've defined symbols in the Bible, but we need to add another layer to our understanding before we look deeper at their functions and behavior. Some individuals attempt to evaluate current world events in light of their interpretation of the scriptures as a whole. Some insist that the Bible, like the writings of Nostradamus, can be used to tell what's going to take place in the world around us. Predictions of war, disasters, government conspiracies, UFO's and

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other events are heralded as being spoken of in the scriptures. The problem is that most of these explanations are either too exaggerated to be taken seriously, or, are predictions or things that never happen. This leads us to an aspect of biblical symbolism that's very important to understand at the beginning.

The reason why explanations and applications of biblical symbolism, particularly prophetic language, is frequently off the mark is due to a failed understanding of the Bible itself. We know that the Bible is inspired as Paul states in **2 Timothy 3.16**, and was delivered to human agents by the Holy Spirit as noted by Peter in **2 Peter 1.21**. But why? Did God intend to provide us with a complicated book filled with formulas that could be decoded to tell what candidates will win elections or what countries will end up fighting each other or where the next natural disaster will take place? No.

The Bible is a closed system. What do I mean by that? One thing I stressed several times in the previous series, was the importance of preserving context. This holds true for understanding symbolic and figurative elements as well. Prophecies and representative forms by their nature have specific meaning and application determined by their context. Who's being addressed, what's the subject under consideration, what circumstances are being described or are in existence. These are some of the things that have to be considered when attempting to understand images and figurative forms in the Bible.

All of these are directed toward something specific. It can be a promise from God, an event that will occur, or in the case of types, may only be realized when we take the Old and New Testaments both into account. These things form limits on how we should interpret anything in the Bible. As I stated, the Bible is a **closed system**. It doesn't deal with everything that happens everywhere in the world and certainly can't be used to predict what will happen in the next year or century. This will become clearer as we proceed, but for now we have to realize that the nature of symbolism in the Bible has a more limited and objective nature than what some think it does. This is made even clearer when we look at the functions or behavior of symbolic forms in the text.

4. Functions of representational forms

Representational forms, including figurative, prophetic and symbolic elements are employed in a number of ways. Their appearance and usage take on specific patterns in the text. The patterns and functions they perform accomplish two things. First they demonstrate consistency throughout the narrative showing the stability of the biblical text. Skeptics, not understanding things stated in the Bible, dismiss the scriptures as nonsense, or as subjective expressions reflecting ideas from the author's culture of origin. The consistency of these however leads to the second thing accomplished by them and that's the confirmation of authorship. Although human agents were used to record the word, it originated with God. The similarity of expression and consistent manner in which symbolic elements appear direct us to a

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single point of origin - God.

So, if God is the originator of the text, and symbolic forms, expressed in various ways, have a consistency in their appearance and usage, what does that mean for us? The similarity helps identify what came from God. God doesn't sign his work with a greeting or signature so other means are employed to identify inspired revelation. Forgeries and other attempts at crafting things that sound like they came from God will contain inconsistencies when the use of symbolic forms is mimicked. We can note the appearance of images, figures, language, numbers and other things and see how they appear and behave consistently throughout the Bible. But the first thing we can be aware of is that these things identify God as the originator and perform critical functions as they serve to point to that which is being represented.

Four functions can be identified as representative elements appear in the scriptures. These include **boundaries** or **limitations**, **remembrance**, **identity** and **inheritance**. These also provide a means of bridging the gap between the printed word and doctrine. We can better understand abstractions created by symbols as we see fulfillment in events that take place and in the revelation of God's purpose. Difficult passages are made less confusing when we understand how to interpret these things and do so within the context established in the writings. We can also understand the difference between subjective and objective interpretation as we try to understand these elements. Let's take a closer look at each of these functions.

1. **Boundaries** or **limitations**: as symbolic, figurative and prophetic elements appear we'll see that they define limits in the way they can be interpreted. The idea of a boundary is useful when we see that there are ways in which certain forms are used. Interpreting them incorrectly will create problems between passages because the consistent utilization has been violated. Symbolic elements are detectable by the consistent way in which they are used and failure to recognize these patterns will lead to failures in understanding their meaning.

2. **Remembrance**: Mankind is forgetful and as we study the scriptures we can see that representative elements serve to bring things to mind. They also serve to note things that are harmful spiritually. God has left a number of devices in place in the scriptures to remind us of his power, judgment and the actions he's taken. Other things are done and stated in ways that confirm that something is a work of the Lord.

3. **Identity**: This is an important function in regard to the Bible. How can we identify what's right, wrong, true or false. Representative forms once more serve to provide a way to know what came from God. The way things are stated, what's being described, how something is described, the physical characteristics and other things reveal patterns that point to a specific event or identify followers of the Lord. When some things are promised or alluded to their fulfillment can be identified by comparing the symbolic expression with the actual occurrence.

4. **Inheritance**: God identifies the nature of inheritance and characteristics of heirs

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throughout the scriptures. Utilizing a common concept such as this we can understand the implications when interpreting and studying the Bible. God uses specific mechanisms to identify his children. These mechanisms link the faithful together by their nature and underlying spiritual qualities. Those who will inherit the promises of God are characterized in ways that can be seen both physically and symbolically.

These are four things that will help us create a framework for understanding symbols in the Bible. As we'll see this also complements our study of content and further strengthens the idea of preserving the context of books, chapters and verses. So now that we have a definition and identified functions these perform in the scriptures we need to understand the forms they appear in.

5. Forms of symbolic expression

The idea of symbols and symbolism for most people brings to mind images of things that are dark, obscure and mysterious. And as we begin to search the scriptures that may be how they seem. Some religious groups focus on the mystery of the scriptures and allude to things that we can't understand. One of the things I want to accomplish in this study is to demystify the Bible. God didn't give us a library of hidden meanings and shadowy premonitions. Just the opposite. In this chart I've shown the relationship between the testaments in a way that will help us understand how God has worked over the ages to accomplish what he set out to do. Paul stated that God had hidden his work in a mystery which had been revealed in the first century in **Colossians 1.26**.

OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT
Concealment	Revelation
Allusion	Explanation
Questions	Answers

Relationship of the Old & New Testaments

The Old Testament conceals while the New Testament reveals. The Old Testament alludes to things that will come about and does so indirectly through a variety of elements that are often misunderstood. Finally there are questions raised about the work of God in the Old Testament but as we turn to the New Testament we find answers and explanations. The way that God does this is by means of different forms of representative elements that include

1. Symbols
2. Types
3. Figures

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4. Prophetic or figurative language

Some of these overlap and I'll discuss that as the study progresses. This chart describes each of these so let's review it.

Form	Expression	Validation
Symbol	figures, values, images	Appearance of things that are stated as the fulfillment or can be determined through comparison with the scriptures
Type	objects, figures, descriptions	References, explanations, figures that draw on what has been described
Prophecy	events, individuals, processes or procedures rendered in figurative / symbolic language	Specific statements or descriptions of these that match what was foretold

Forms of representational elements

1. **Symbols:** a variety of elements appear in the scriptures and represent a number of things. These can appear in dreams, visions, physical manifestations etc. They can express ideas or be related to specific individuals or events. Many of these are explained at some point or can be determined by study and comparison with other passages.

2. **Type:** this is a form of symbolism that represents something else in a definite manner. A type is an element that possesses the nature or characteristics of that which it represents. This can be determined by detailed explanations in the scriptures or by means of comparison. Types are limited in nature referring to one particular thing which restricts application to general ideas.

3. **Figures, figurative language & prophecy:** I've combined these elements as they're frequently seen together. A **figure** might be an individual, object, event or process to name a few ways in which they appear. **Figurative language** is often made up of non-literal statements that appear in prophecies. **Prophecy** can be very literal but is often filled with figurative language that is non-literal and figures that become symbolic for other things. The presence of these elements, particularly when they occur in the same context can be difficult to separate and interpret. This presents a challenge as we try to understand the scriptures but careful comparison with other passages and preservation of the context will lead us in the right direction.

As we progress in the following lessons we'll see all of these at work and deepen our ability to appreciate the Bible and understand things at a deeper level. The true power of these elements is that they reinforce the identity of the Bible as a work of God. The consistency and

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complexity of concealment and later revelation I believe to be beyond the ability of humans to accomplish. As the lessons develop I think you'll be able to see the Bible in a new light and build the tools needed to increase your understanding and appreciation for not only the book but its author.

6. Next

Some of the most misunderstood symbolic elements in the Bible are numbers. These are frequently associated with mystical ideas that border on the fantastic or magical. In the next lesson I'll discuss the most common numbers, what they are, how they're used, and how they're misunderstood. Join me in the next lesson for **The Numbers Of God**.