

# BIBLICAL SYMBOLISM

One of the richest sources of spiritual truths in the Scriptures is the use of symbolism. The concepts and images conveyed in symbols and types give unity to the Scriptures and focus our hearts on the center of the Scriptures, Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega, The Lamb of God, the bread of life, the living water, the way, the truth and the life, The good shepherd, etc. They point us to His person and work- what He has done and is yet to do.

## Types

Types are pictorial representations of Christ and redemption. Prophecies that are acted out rather than spoken. The word comes from a Greek word meaning “to strike” as a hammer striking a die and leaving an impressed image or pattern. The “type” is the impression, the die would be its “antitype”. Scripture’s types are preordained actions or objects which are “shadows” (Hebr 10:1), “examples” (1 Cor 10:6), “copies” or “patterns” i.e. prefiguring (Hebr 8:5) what would come to fulfillment in Christ and His work of salvation.

Dr. J. Barton Payne defines a Type as a “*divine enactment of future redemption*”. In this definition we see the four characteristics: 1) of Divine origin, 2) redemptive in focus, 3) pictorial, and 4) future. There should be a notable point of resemblance or analogy between the two, and evidence that the type was designed and appointed by God to represent its antitype.

Types should not be confused with allegories where something is seen as hidden, or something foreign is found in the meaning of a symbol - Types had the same spiritual or moral meaning both for the Israelites and for what they prefigure on the higher level. Like symbols, types are representations of spiritual truth, however unlike symbols which may relate to the past, present or future however, types always prefigure a future reality to which they correspond. Types are thus best understood in the light of their fulfillment.

We are encouraged to look for Types in the Bible by the unity of the Old and New Testaments and the relationship of them to each other - since what is latent in the former becomes patent in the latter. The Lord himself encourages us by inviting us to search the Scriptures for they speak of Him. (Luke 24:25-44; John 5:39-44). Certainly the identifications of typical elements in the Old Testament by New Testament writers, especially the book of Hebrews, but also Jesus, Peter and Paul, encourages us in this as well.

Types fall into six categories: **persons** - like Adam, Melchizedek, or Elijah; **Events** like the flood, the Exodus, the raising of the bronze serpent, or striking water from the rock; **Objects** like the Tree of Life, the Tabernacle and its various furnishings; **Offices** like Moses as a Prophet, or the priesthood; **Institutions** like the sacrificial system, and the Sabbath, and **Ceremonies**. like Passover, releasing the scapegoat, or the feast of Tabernacles.

The identification and interpretation of Types has varied from one extreme which sees too much as typical and reads all sorts of fancies into the Scriptures and the other rationalistic extreme which denies them altogether. Some have opted to accept only those types that are so designated by Scripture as valid, others distinguish between Innate (declared) and Inferred (justifiable) Types. Not everything that bears an analogy to a spiritual truth should be identified as a Type. And care must always be taken to not read too much into the minute details of a Type, as this is where speculation often goes far astray.

### **Principles for the interpretation of Types:**

1. Guard against the mistake of regarding something that is evil in itself as a type of that which is good and pure.
2. The Old Testament Types were at the same time, symbols and Types; because they were, first of all symbols expressive of spiritual truth. So begin by settling what moral or spiritual truth was conveyed to the Israelites, then proceed to how it was realized on a higher plane in the New Testament. To reverse the process leads to much arbitrary and fanciful interpretation.
3. Having learned the truth from the Old, turn to the New for the insight into what was typified.
4. Types have but one radical meaning, so the interpreter is not at liberty to multiply its significations - bearing in mind that some types may have more than one fulfillment in New Testament realities.
- 5) The Type represents truth on a lower plane than the Antitype, from the carnal to the spiritual, from external to internal, from present to future. It is truth veiled and then revealed.

(Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation, pp 146 - 147)

### **Symbols**

Symbolism is a part of any culture and language. Where thoughts are abstract or conceptional, symbols are used to convey them. A symbol in scripture could be described as a fact that teaches a moral or spiritual truth. It is an image or sign of something else. It has basically two elements: the conceptual idea and the image which represents that idea. Symbols may refer to things past, present or future. They usually come out of the common everyday things of life of a particular culture, the geography, flora and fauna, customs, etc. *"Unless we make strenuous efforts to understand the early framework, culture and thought patterns, we may grossly misinterpret what these ancient writings are saying."* (Michelsen, p.105) It is because symbolism is so closely tied to a particular culture that we often have difficulty in understanding a particular symbol, its significance being lost with the passage of that culture.

Symbols are found in various forms as well: they may be **persons** - like Elijah or Moses. They may be **objects** like the rainbow, the bronze serpent, the golden calves, the ark, the tabernacle and its furnishings, a lamb, a lion, etc. **Names** are used as symbols- often being very significant in the Old Testament. **Actions** may be symbolic - Israel's deliverance from Egypt, the humiliation of David, Jacob's wrestling with the Lord (cf. Gen 32, Hos.12:2-4) The feeding of the 5,000, etc. It should be noted that many of Jesus' miracles were symbolic, they represented the coming blessings of the kingdom and Jesus' redemptive work.

Numbers, colors, and metals are symbolic in Scripture. We must be cautioned however to be careful in assigning symbolic values to them. Certainly the number seven is of symbolic importance in Scripture and in particular in Daniel and Revelation. The colors of the materials used in the Tabernacle seem to have significance, but too often, the interpretation of them is more fancy than reality. Scholars have debated extensively about the significance of numerology or of colors. It is best to be cautious, resting on those symbols which are interpreted as such by the Bible, and using restraint in those that aren't.

Ramm gives some guidelines in interpreting symbolism. He suggests we start with the foundation of those which are interpreted as our foundation. As with types, where the New Testament testifies clearly to the proper interpretation we may have confidence. If the symbol is not interpreted he suggests we should investigate the context thoroughly for insights into the interpretation, use a concordance for other usage and consider carefully the nature of the symbol. For example Salt is a symbol because of its preservative qualities, a lion is a symbol because of its power and ferocity, pigs are a symbol of filthiness, etc.) Some symbols require the light of archaeology and comparative studies. It is best to be silent rather than to speculate.

## Symbolism in apocalyptic books

At the same time, by its nature, symbolism must be handled carefully and cautiously, especially in the books which are concerned with apocalyptic and eschatological truths: Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation. *"Of the forms of prophecy, the apocalyptic form is the most difficult to handle. Apocalyptic literature is characterized by a high degree of symbolic imagery that is sometimes interpreted for us and sometimes left uninterpreted. It is very easy to get bewildered with Daniel's symbols and the drama of the New Testament Apocalypse."* (Sproul, Knowing Scripture, p.99)

Ramm generalizes with this principle: *"Careful investigation must be made of the meaning of the terms in the original, of their derivations etymologically or culturally and a close examination of their associations to see what natural symbolism might be."* (Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p. 238.)

Sproul points out that *"One important key to interpreting these images is to seek the general meaning of such images in the Bible itself .... Most of the images of the book of revelation are found elsewhere in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament."* (Sproul, p.99)

The Book of Revelation and the Book of Daniel both have an elaborate and extensive use of symbolism. There have been four basic approaches to these books and their symbolism. Critical Scholars have taken the Preterist view, which views the books in terms of their significance as an eschatological expression of hope in the despair of their world situation, and compare these books with the apocryphal apocalyptic books of the inter-testamental period such as Enoch, The Assumption of Moses, the Apocalypse of Ezra. The liberal critical bias, of course, discounts any prophetic elements (fulfillment's) and views merely as expressions of hope that God would apocalyptically interrupt history with the coming of the end,

Another approach has been the Historical view which views the Revelation as *"a symbolic prophecy of the entire history of the church down to the return of Christ. The numerous symbols of the book designate various historical movements and events in the western world and the Christian church."* (Ladd, Revelation p. 11) The solution to the meaning of the symbols has been sought, not in the times of the writer of Revelation, but in the myriad of persons and events of the centuries of church history since. The beast is the papacy and the false prophet is the Roman church, etc.

A third approach is the Idealist view. It removes the problem of finding any historical fulfillment to symbolism of the Revelation by viewing it as a symbolic portrayal of the spiritual cosmic conflict in heaven between Satan and God.

The fourth approach is the futurist approach which interprets Revelation as a prophecy of future events depicted in symbolic terms) which will lead up to the end of the world. (Dispensational approaches such as Hal Lindsey's are one form of this.) This view point is divided between the dispensational position, and the non-dispensational position which does not try to distinguish between restored Israel and the Church - the debate between them certainly can not be resolved here - however both view the purpose of the book as that of describing the consummation of God's redemptive purposes.

Ladd suggests that perhaps the best approach is one that combines elements of the Preterist and Futurist positions, without the latter's critical biases. This view sees it as a prophetic description of coming events with the purpose to encourage a church facing persecution and trial. In revealing the hope we have in Christ who will return and overthrow Satan, and establish His kingdom forever, the believers of the early church, and believers today as well, are encouraged to endure the trials that precede.

Ladd says: "*The prophets had two loci in prophetic perspective- the events of the present and immediate future and the ultimate eschatological event. These two are held in a dynamic tension often without chronological distinction, for the main purpose of prophecy is not to give a program or chart of the future, but to let the light of eschatological consummation fall on the present.*" (Ladd, p. 13) He points out that this approach is consistent with the nature of apocalyptic literature and the use of symbolism in the prophets and the nature and purpose of prophecy itself.

Thus our interpretation of the symbolism of the Revelation should look to the significance and meaning of these symbols to the original readers. Their understanding would be shaped by the Scriptures of the early church, in particular those of the Old Testament prophets and Daniel is prominent as a source of the symbolism of the Revelation.

Revelation describes its purpose in its first paragraph. (Verses 1-7) The vision of the coming Lord is a quotation from Daniel 7. Its purpose is to give the disclosure of the truth which Christ is imparting to us, to show what must shortly come to pass. It is a predictive prophecy. It is looking forwards. These things are beginning (vs. 3) ("Shortly" - let us remember the prophets are often not really interested in chronological matters) It is a revelation - an "apokalypsis" the revealing of truths only God can know.

It is similar to the Apocalyptic writings mentioned earlier. "*These books are similar in their claims to be revelations of events unknown to men, in their use of visions and dreams, in their common use of symbolism which is often bizarre and fantastic, in their common concern about the end of the world and the coming of God's kingdom, and in their common adherence to an "apocalyptic", i.e. cosmic catastrophic type of eschatology.*" (Ladd, p. 20). However there are striking differences: Revelation is saturated with references to the Old Testament, rather than references to other apocalyptic writings. It was not pseudonymous, claiming authorship by some great figure from Israel's past. It lacks the speculative interest in calculating the end times found in the others and the visions have the stamp of reality in contrast to the fantastic narration in the others. "*If apocalyptic may be termed literary meditation on prophetic themes, Revelation is genuine prophecy, a prophecy which uses apocalyptic motifs and forms insofar and only insofar, as they are legitimate explications of Old Testament prophetic themes and are germane to its own thoroughly Christ-centered proclamation.*" Franzmann, (The Word of the Lord Grows, p. 272).

It is imperative upon us to get behind the symbolism and speculation to the main teaching of these books and their purpose - which is to give us hope and confidence in the darkness of our world that God's purposes are progressing to completion: "*Behold he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen.*" (Rev 1:7)