

PARABLES, FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Part IV

The Use of, the Extent of, the Purpose for...

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In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel had a dream and visions of his head upon his bed: then he wrote the dream, and told the sum of the matters.

Daniel spake and said, I saw in my vision by night, and, behold, the four winds of the heaven strove upon the great sea.

And four great beasts came up from the sea, diverse one from another (Dan. 7:1-3).

The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the seaside.

And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

And he spake many things unto them in parables... (Matt. 13:1-3a).

Figurative language is used extensively throughout Scripture — in types, parables, and elsewhere. But one is *never* left to his own imagination insofar as interpretation is concerned. Scripture itself always provides the interpretation, as in the interpretation of types, parables, or any other portion of Scripture.

Scripture is *always completely consistent* when it uses language in a figurative manner. There is *always uniformity throughout*. “Leaven,” for example, is always used the same way. A “moun-

tain,” the “sea,” “Egypt,” “Canaan,” etc. always represent the same things.

And the figurative expressions *never detract* from the literality of the subject matter under discussion, no more so than types or parables detract from the literality of that to which they relate. Things *very real* are depicted through the use of figurative expressions, *things just as literal as that seen in the Scriptures to which the expressions relate*.

Note that in the extensive use of figurative language — in accounts such as Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the “great image” in Dan. 2:31-35, Daniel’s vision of the “four great beasts” in Dan. 7:2-7, or the use of a “dragon,” “woman,” and “man child” in Rev. 12:1-5 to depict different things — the interpretation is *always* revealed other places in Scripture (*cf.* Dan. 2:36-45; 7:16ff; Rev. 12:6ff).

The whole of a matter can often be depicted and developed to a fuller extent, in concise form, through the use of pictorial, descriptive language. *God can use numbers and metaphors to state volumes in a very succinct manner, which is exactly what He does.*

Matthew 17:1-5 would present a good example of this because of the multi-faceted nature of the passage. In this section from Matthew’s gospel, figurative expressions appear in a type, with the whole event both reflecting back on the original type in the opening two chapters of Genesis and pointing to something very real out ahead.

It was after six days, on the seventh day, that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up into “an high mountain apart” and was “transfigured before them.”

The “high mountain” is used in the type in a figurative sense, a metaphorical sense, representing *a kingdom*, the coming *kingdom of Christ* (*cf.* Isa. 2:2-4; Dan. 2:31-45).

And the kingdom will appear, as in the type, after six days (after 6,000 years) on the seventh day (on the seventh 1,000-year period), which reflects back on and draws from the original type in Gen. 1:1-2:3.

The Olivet Discourse

Matthew 24:45-51 would present a good example of figurative language used in a parable, with the same figurative language used in another section in this discourse (nonparabolic) after the same fashion.

Note the use of “meat” in Matt. 24:45 and also in Heb. 5:12, 14. Both refer to the same thing, as does the use of “meat” after this fashion in any other portion of Scripture. “Meat,” used after this fashion, is always a reference to Biblical teachings, referring particularly to things surrounding Christ’s return and the establishment of His kingdom (*cf.* Matt. 24:46, 47; Heb. 5:10-14).

Then, note that the same thing is seen in Matt. 25:31-46:

A judgment of the unsaved, with eternal verities in view, could not possibly be the subject at hand in this passage of Scripture (*cf.* vv. 41, 46). Both the text and the context have to do with realizing or not realizing an inheritance in the kingdom, which would limit this judgment to *the saved alone*, having nothing to do with eternal verities.

Note Rom. 8:17: “And *if children*, then heirs...” “Sheep” and “goats” (vv. 32, 33), can only be understood contextually as a metaphorical way of describing two classes of saved individuals, similar to *the parable of the wheat and the tares* in Matt. 13:24-30. The unsaved and eternal verities simply cannot be in view in either passage. Rather, in both passages, *only the saved, with a view to an inheritance or non-inheritance in the kingdom, can be in view*. Compare that which the King states to those on His right hand (vv. 34-40) as opposed to that which He states to those on His left hand (vv. 41-46).

(The words “everlasting” and “eternal” in vv. 41, 46 are translations of the Greek word *aionios* and would, in the light of v. 34, have to be understood as “age-lasting,” not “eternal” as it has been translated in most versions of Scripture.

Neither the Hebrew of the Old Testament nor the Greek of the New Testament contains a word

for “eternal.” *Olam* is the word normally translated “eternal,” “everlasting,” or “perpetual” in English translations of the Old Testament, and *aion* [a noun] or *aionios* [the adjective form of *aion*] are the words translated “eternal” or “everlasting” in the New Testament [also there is *aidios*, an older form of *aionios*, used two times and meaning exactly the same as *aionios* (Rom. 1:20 and Jude 6)].

Olam, *aion*, and *aionios* all have to do with “a long period of time,” which, if the context permits, can refer to “eternity” [e.g., the *aionios* God in Rom. 16:26]. But the words standing alone, apart from a context, *cannot* be understood as “eternal.” *Context* is the all-important factor to ascertain the length of time in view when these words are used.

Aion and *aionios* are usually thought of and used numerous times in the New Testament in the sense of “an age.” And a usage of this nature is even brought over into English. For example, the English word “aeon [or ‘eon’]” is derived from the Greek word *aion*.

The only way in which the Greek text can express “eternal” apart from textual considerations is through a use of *aion* in the plural [e.g., Luke 1:33; Heb. 13:8, referring to “the ages,” *i.e.*, ages without end, which would comprise eternity] or a double use of *aion*, in the plural and articular both times [e.g., Rev. 1:6; 4:9, 10, referring to “the ages of the ages,” again, ages without end].

And the use of *aionios* in Matt. 25:41, 46 [the adjective form of the noun, *aion*, meaning exactly the same], referring to an inverse of that seen in verse thirty-four [failing to realize an inheritance in the kingdom] can only be understood as “age-lasting.” It can only be understood in connection with *the outcome of a judgment of unfaithful saved Gentiles coming out of the Tribulation.*)

The extensive use of “metaphors” in sections of Scripture such as Matthew chapters thirteen, twenty-four, and twenty-five *must be recognized*. Note, for example, “meat” in both Matt. 24:45 (previously discussed) and Matt. 25:35, 42, all part of the same discourse.

The use of “meat” is clearly metaphorical in chapter twenty four [referring to that which is spiritual, the Word of God], when dealing with the

judgment of a servant; and the servant rendering an account at the time of his Lord’s return is with a view to *regality* (realizing or not realizing a position with Christ in the kingdom [cf. Luke 12:42-48]). Why should the matter be viewed after any different fashion in chapter twenty-five when also dealing with a judgment of individuals at the time of the Lord’s return, with a view to inheritance in the kingdom (exactly the same as the regality previously seen in chapter twenty-four, though stated in a different manner)?

Understanding the preceding after this fashion (which, in reality, is the only contextually correct way to view this section of Scripture) will, again, show that *only saved individuals* can possibly be in view throughout Matt. 25:31-46. Both those depicted by the “sheep” and the “goats” are seen as being in a position to dispense “meat,” “drink.” Unsaved man cannot occupy a position of this nature.

There is no such thing in Scripture as a judgment of unsaved Gentiles at the end of Man’s Day, prior to the Millennium. Rather, the Millennium itself will form their judgment in this respect, for the Millennium will simply be 1,000 years of a righteous judgment, when Christ and His co-heirs will rule the nations with a rod of iron.

The Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation, throughout, uses numbers and metaphors perhaps more extensively than any other section of Scripture of comparable length. And much of the misinterpretation and mishandling of this book is due, in no small part, to man mishandling the numerical and metaphorical aspect of the book.

The Book of Revelation is about *God bringing His Word to a close through opening up and completely removing any remaining veil surrounding His Son*. And note how this is done in this book. It is done through *an extensive use of particularly numbers and metaphors*.

There are “seven Churches,” with an “angel” over each Church; and this (the number *seven*)

shows *a completion concerning God’s angelic ministry in the Churches during the dispensation*, with the seven Churches showing *the complete Church, all Christians* (chs. 1-3). There are “seven seals,” “seven trumpets,” and “seven vials” of wrath, showing *Divine perfection* (the number *three*) within *God’s complete judgment* (the number *seven*) upon Israel and the Gentile nations (chs. 6-11, 15, 16).

There are four horsemen, which cover *the complete panorama of the matter* (four, the number of the earth [ch. 6]). There are *mountains, islands, a Beast, a harlot woman, Babylon, the sun, the moon, the stars* — just to name a few — all used in metaphorical senses (chs. 1, 6, 12, 13, 16-18). And God’s use of language in this respect must not only be recognized at this point in Scripture but elsewhere as well (note particularly the Book of Daniel in this same respect).

God’s Use of Language

If a person does recognize God’s use of language in this respect, he can interpret aright, following the manner in which God has structured and given His Word to man; if a person does not do so, he will invariably find himself lost in a sea of misinterpretation.

Whether types, parables, figurative language, or any other method which God has used in His revelation to man, a person is *never* left in the dark or to his own imagination in interpreting and understanding the passages. God has provided other Scripture to cast light upon, help explain, that which He has revealed through different methods at different times, through different individuals.

The whole of Biblical study is, in one respect, really that simply. Simply pay attention to how God has structured and given His Word, along with that which the Word states. And, with a proper foundation, you won’t go wrong.

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