

CONCERNING ALLEGORIZING THE BIBLE

From the beginning of the church age reputable Bible teachers have recognized that many portions of the Scriptures, in addition to their literal meaning, also symbolize spiritual truths. Extracting the spiritual meaning from the literal words of the Bible is called allegorizing the Bible. Some people argue that it is wrong to allegorize any portion of the Bible that is not explicitly interpreted in the New Testament. Some go so far as to say that the Old Testament has no applicability to New Testament believers but was written only for the nation of Israel. These thoughts are mere human opinions of an unlearned and unrenewed mind and lead to serious errors that rob believers of the riches of the divine revelation in the Word of God.

We should not restrict how God communicates to man. Rather, we should receive God's speaking in whatever form it takes (Heb. 1:1; Matt. 13:9, 15; Rev. 2:7; Isa. 50:5; Acts 7:51). The Bible shows that God speaks to man by four principal means—through creation (Rom. 1:20), in Christ (Heb. 1:1-2), in the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21), and as the indwelling Spirit of reality (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 5:6). Now the Lord as the Spirit of reality has joined Himself to our spirit, making us one spirit with Him (2 Tim. 4:22; 1 Cor. 6:17). It is by the mingled spirit as a spirit of wisdom and revelation that we can know God's unveiling of Himself and His economy in His Word (Eph. 1:17-18).

The Bible as a Revelation of Jesus Christ, the Word of God

When the Lord met two of His disciples as they were journeying to Emmaus, the Gospel of Luke says, "Beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, He explained to them clearly in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27; cf., v. 44). Luke 24:47 shows that the entire Old Testament from Genesis, the first book of Moses, to Malachi, the last book of the prophets, concerns Christ. The New Testament begins and ends with the name Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1; Rev. 1:1; 22:20). Thus, the entire New Testament, as well as the entire Bible, is a revelation of Jesus Christ.

The apostles who wrote the New Testament Epistles saw that the New Testament realities are typified in the Old Testament. Writing about Sarah and her maidservant Hagar and their children Paul said, "These things are spoken allegorically" (Gal. 4:22-31). Of the history of Israel's journeys in the wilderness Paul wrote, "These things occurred as examples [lit. types] to us" (1 Cor. 10:6). Peter wrote that the water of baptism was the antitype of the flood waters of Noah's time (1 Pet. 3:20-21). There are many other examples, some of which, like Adam being a type of Christ (Romans 5:14), are offered without explanation. There is no ground in Scripture for the thought that only those Old Testament figures that are explicitly interpreted in the New Testament have allegorical significance.

The Way the Bible Is Written

The Bible is written in a marvelous way. Some words in the Bible are clear, direct teachings, but many are in the form of parables, of allegories, of pictures in words that are full of meaning. Those who argue that such things should not be interpreted cast aside the means by which God has chosen to communicate to man. Many portions of the Bible cannot be understood as anything other than figurative language.

Any thoughtful reader can realize that the poetry in the Song of Songs cannot be interpreted literally, yet it is nowhere explicitly interpreted in the New Testament. What wooer would tell the object of his affection, "Your neck is like the tower of David, built for an armory: a thousand bucklers hang on it, all the shields of the mighty men" (4:4)? If, however, we perceive that the book speaks of a fabulously rich king wooing a girl of lowly estate, we can begin to understand that the entire poem is an allegory of our Lord, as the lovely Bridegroom, seeking and wooing man to gain a bride (1:2, 5; cf. John 3:29). Without a proper interpretation this book would not profit us at all.

Not only the Old Testament but also the New Testament is full of figurative language. In the Gospels the Lord Jesus often spoke in parables, including the parables of the kingdom of the heavens in Matthew 13; the parables of the ten virgins and the ten talents in Matthew 25; and all of Luke 15, which reveals the love of the Triune God in saving sinners. In Matthew 25 the prudent virgins could enter the bridegroom's wedding feast because they had oil in their vessels as well as their lamps. No interpretation is given. Are we to believe that the Lord had no intention for us to understand His meaning?

Similarly, if we fear to touch the Bible's figurative language in the apostles' Epistles, we have no way to understand Paul's warning to build the church with gold, silver, and precious stones and not with wood, grass, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12-15). Revelation, a book of signs (Rev. 1:1), would be a closed book to us, and we would have no realization

concerning the meaning of the New Jerusalem as the consummation of God's work throughout the ages (21:2—22:5). We would in effect be those who take away from the Word of God (22:19).

Interpreting the Bible's Figurative Language

The Lord told us that His words are spirit and life (John 6:63). Paul said that he spoke in words taught by the Spirit and that only spiritual men could understand them (1 Cor. 2:12-14). He also wrote that the meaning of the Old Testament is veiled unless a person turns his heart to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is today the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:14-17; cf. 4:5). Such words show the crucial role of the Spirit in unveiling a person to the spiritual realities behind the words on the printed pages of the Bible, which reality is ultimately the Christ of glory Himself (3:18).

In addition, certain principles, three of which will be mentioned here, should be observed when interpreting the Bible's figurative language. First, precedence should be given to the Bible's plain words; that is, interpretation of figurative language should be in line with and never contradict the Bible's explicit teaching.

Second, the Bible should be interpreted by the Bible, not by vain imaginations. No passage should be read in isolation but should be interpreted in light of the Bible as a whole. The divine truths are presented "here a little, there a little" (Isa. 28:10). We must compare what is found in the account in Genesis 2—the tree of life, a river, three precious materials, Eve as the counterpart of Adam—with what is found in Revelation 21 and 22—the tree of life, the river of water of life, three precious materials, and the New Jerusalem as the bride, the wife of the Lamb. Similarly, we must trace the lampstand from its first appearance in Exodus 25 through Zechariah 4 to Revelation 1.

Third, proper interpretation is always based on the central revelation of the Bible, which is God's eternal economy with Christ as its centrality and universality (1 Tim. 1:3-4; Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:15-20). In the New Testament, Christ is God's unique gift to man (John 3:15-16). This is why the apostles could interpret the blessings God gave to Israel, such as the Passover (Exo. 12:3, 11; 1 Cor. 5:7), the manna (Exo. 16:14-18; John 6:48-50), the water from the smitten rock (Exo. 17:6; John 19:34; 1 Cor. 10:4), the offerings (Lev. 1-5; Heb. 10:10-14), and the good land (Gen. 13:14-17; Exo. 3:8; Num. 34:13; Gal. 3:14; Col. 1:12), as pictures of Christ. Moreover, the tabernacle and the temple are pictures of the dwelling place of God (Exo. 25:8-9; 1 Kings 6:1-2) as Christ individually (John 1:14; 2:19, 21), as the church corporately (Eph. 2:21-22), and as the New Jerusalem ultimately (Rev. 21:3, 22). To neglect the rich details in the Old Testament concerning these matters is to neglect God's speaking. Why would God inspire Moses to record detailed descriptions of manna in the Old Testament and how it was to be gathered and prepared for eating if not to give us insight into how to take Christ as our food that we might live by Him (John 6:57)? Why would God spend six chapters (Exo. 25—30) to give Moses a vision encompassing the tabernacle, its furnishings, and the garments of the priests and repeatedly charge him to "see that you make them according to their pattern, which was shown to you in the mountain" (Exo. 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8) if not to instruct us concerning how to build His spiritual habitation (Heb. 8:5; 9:8-9)?

The entire history of Israel centered on the good land that God gave them to possess and live in and on which His temple and Jerusalem, the center of His administration, were built. The good land was rich in many aspects (Deut. 8:7-10). When God's people were carried into captivity, it was the place toward which they were to pray and to which they were to return (1 Kings 8:30-34; Dan. 6:10; 9:2). As New Testament believers we are to walk in, live in, and possess the unsearchably rich Christ (Col. 2:6; 1 John 4:13; Phil. 3:8; Eph. 3:8), who is the foundation of God's building and the center of God's administration (1 Cor. 3:11; Rev. 5:6). Should we not look to the picture in the Old Testament concerning how to possess, walk in, and live in Christ as our good land for the building of God's habitation and His kingdom? Who dares to say that what is recorded there is not God's speaking to the church today?

Conclusion

The application of these interpretational principles is abundantly evident in the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. As lifelong students of the Bible, they distilled the best of twenty centuries of Christian ministry and teaching, including a rich legacy of interpreting the Bible's figurative language, and they mined the Word of God to gain a broad and thorough understanding of the divine revelation. We would be foolish if we did not similarly avail ourselves of their decades of labor to enter into the depths of the Scriptures. The testimony of the Bible is unequivocal: "All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable" (2 Tim. 3:16). May we be those who treasure the unveiling of our unsearchably rich Christ in the holy Word and seek out God's speaking in all its pages.

Further reading: Roger Good, "The Divine and Mystical in Figurative Language," *Affirmation & Critique* XVII:2 (Fall 2002), 67-73.