

Figurative Language

Much of the Bible is written in figurative language, so it is important to understand how to treat that language.

In books, newspapers, and conversation, we deal with figurative language left and right (like that), so it really is nothing new or mysterious. “The human mind is not, as philosophers would have you think, a debating hall, but a picture gallery.” (W.M. Dixon, quoted in Zuck, p. 143). Mickelsen says that for Jesus and the Old Testament prophets, imagery is “the language of life” (p. 181). Figurative language is helpful in most contexts, but especially when God the Holy Spirit is communicating spiritual truths in Scripture. Understanding the infinite Creator requires all the language skills available to us.

Figurative language is “simply a word or a sentence thrown into a peculiar form, different from its original or simplest meaning or use, such as ‘raining cats and dogs’” (Zuck, p. 143). Zuck lists several reasons for the use of figurative language to “express truth in vivid and interesting ways” (p. 144-145):

- To add color or vividness: “The Lord is my rock” (Psalm 18:2)
- To attract attention: “Watch out for the dogs” (Philippians 3:2)
- To make abstract ideas more concrete: “Underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27)
- To help us remember: “Like whitewashed tombs” (Matthew 23:27)
- To summarize an idea: “The Lord is my Shepherd” (Psalm 23:1)
- To make us think: “I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God” (Psalm 52:8)

A helpful interpretation question about a passage with figurative language might be, “Why did the author use this kind of language, and how does that help me understand what he was trying to communicate?”

Often the figurative language reflects the rural, agricultural environment, and we may need more information to understand the significance. “In order to understand any figure, one must of course first recognize the literal meaning and then, by reflecting on the relevant points of similarity, interpret the significance of the figure” (Mickelsen, p. 198). Sometimes a Bible dictionary or commentary can provide information to help understand an obscure image or figure of speech. Trying to imagine or visualize the imagery in the figure (a sheep, a coin, a tree) can be helpful in making the connection between the figure and the point being illustrated.

Zuck offers several guidelines for recognizing figurative language, language that is “out of character with the subject discussed, or contrary to fact, experience or observation” (p. 145). He suggests that we should take the literal meaning unless there is a good reason for a figurative interpretation, such as:

- Language that involves an impossibility: “I have made you as a pillar of iron” (Jeremiah 1:18)
- Language that is absurd: “The trees clap their hands” (Isaiah 55:12)
- Language that is followed by an explanation: “Those who fell asleep... the dead in Christ” (1Thessalonians 4:13,16)

Figurative vs. Literal?

Calling some language in Scripture figurative does not undermine the authority or inspiration of the Bible. “Literal” interpretation means interpreting according to what the author intended. Figurative language is often used to convey truth. Zuck suggests the terms “ordinary-literal” for language used in the normal sense, and “figurative-literal” for language that uses imagery or figures of speech to convey truth. That language may be a little cumbersome, but the concept is a helpful reminder. God can use a variety of forms to communicate His truth clearly and reliably.