

Figuring Out the Figurative

How do we know when Scripture is actually representing reality and when it merely describes reality? The issue here is figurative language. We're all familiar with figures of speech. We use them all the time: "I guess I'll have to face the music." "He was bored to tears." "Don't let the cat out of the bag."

The biblical writers and characters were no different. They laced their material with vivid images, and peculiar ways of speaking. David says that the person who follows God's Word will be like a tree, but the wicked are like chaff (Psalm 1:3-4). Jesus called Herod a fox (Luke 13:32), and James and John the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17).

These things make for interesting reading, but what do they mean? How are we to interpret them in our Bible study process? How do we know when to read the Bible literally and when to read it figuratively? Let's make sure we understand the difference between "literal" and "figurative."

When we speak of "literal interpretation," we mean taking the language in its normal sense, accepting it a face value as if the writer is communicating in ways that people normally communicate. As one person has put it, "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense." So, according to this principle, when Jesus tells us to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Luke 20:25), we don't need to look for some hidden meaning or elaborate interpretation. It's quite plain that He is telling us to pay our taxes. On the other hand, when He calls Herod a Fox, He obviously is not saying that the man is a roving carnivore. He's speaking figuratively, comparing Herod to that sly, dog-like creature.

What happens when the "plain sense" does not make common sense? Are there any rules that govern when we should interpret odd expressions figuratively and when we should take them literally? I'm afraid there are no foolproof means for that, but listed below are 10 principles that will keep us out of the worst kind of trouble:

1. **Use the literal sense unless there is some good reason not to.** In reading the Bible, we have to assume that the writers were normal, rational people who communicated in the same basic ways that we do.
2. **Use the figurative sense when the passage tells you to do so.** Some passages tell you up front that they involve figurative imagery. For instance, whenever you come across a dream or vision, you can expect to find symbolic language because that's the language of dreams.
3. **Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning is impossible or absurd.** This is where we need some sanctified common sense. When God wants to tell us something, He tells us. He often uses symbolism to make His points, yet He expects us to read them as symbols, not absurdities.
4. **Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning would involve something immoral.** In John 6:53-55, Jesus confounded certain Jews who opposed Him with these words: - Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My

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flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. - That's a rather strange way of talking, to say the least.

- Was He suggesting that His followers become cannibals? No, that would have been a repulsive violation of the Old Testament law and none of His listeners took it that way, but they were puzzled by His words to be sure. But they recognized that the Lord was speaking figuratively.

5. **Use the figurative sense if the expression is an obvious figure of speech.** The biblical text often signals its use of figures of speech. Similes, for instance, use the words *like or as to* make comparisons. “[The Lord] makes Lebanon skip *like a calf*” (Psalm 29:6, italics added).
 - Scripture uses other figures of speech that make sense only when reading figuratively. When Paul quotes Hosea, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55), He is using a form called apostrophe, addressing a thing as if it were a person.
6. **Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the context and scope of the passage.** Revelation 5:1-5 describes a fascinating scene before the throne of God. We read about “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.” Is the writer talking about a literal beast? Obviously not, as that would make no sense if the context, but a bit of comparative study shows that He is using a title given to the Messiah.
7. **Use figurative if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the general character and style of the book.** This is an extension of what we just looked at. Remember, the context of any verse is the paragraph.
 - This principle applies especially to two types of literature: the prophetic, which often makes sense if only read figuratively; and the poetic, which employs imaginative language as a matter of routine.
 - For instance, the Psalmist says, “In the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy” (Psalm 63:7). That does not mean God has feathers, but He does protect His children with the same watchful concern as a mother eagle for her nestlings.
8. **Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the plan and purpose of the author.** Again, context is crucial. It's a case of the ugly duckling, it doesn't fit and something is out of place.
9. **Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation involves a contradiction of other scripture.** The great interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. The Bible is unified in its message. Although it sometimes presents us with paradox, it never confounds us with contradiction. For instance, Paul warns against the dangers of wealth (1 Timothy 6:17-19), but he never says that the wealthy are categorically excluded from the kingdom.
10. **Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation would involve a contradiction in doctrine.** We need to be consistent in our Interpretation of Scripture and in the systems of belief that we build using Scripture.