

Symbolism/Imagery

What symbolism is:

A symbol represents something else (not strictly literal)

The characteristics of one thing are transferred/applied to explain/illustrate something else

Makes abstract known by something concrete

Explains something unknown by something that is known

A symbol says much with few words

A symbol paints a verbal picture

A symbol informs our minds and moves our emotions and imaginations

A symbol is usually multidimensional-

Many facets of a symbol

Many connections to that which is symbolized

Communicates the whole of a reality, not just one aspect

A symbol shows relationship and interrelatedness of concepts in ways a description cannot

A symbol is built on similarities

The symbol usually has some similarities/common characteristics with that which is symbolized

However, they are never equated- the symbol is not to be taken literally

Our understanding of symbolism and particular images/symbols must be approached in light of the author's intended point/meaning in using the particular symbol

In other words, it is not about what we are able to imaginatively draw out of a particular symbol, it is about what we can reasonably understand the author intended to communicate via the particular symbol/image

Types of Symbolism

1. Personification-

describing an inanimate object or abstract idea as if it had human characteristics.

e.g. Prov. 8:1, Psa. 98:8

Something 'subhuman' is 'brought up' to human level

2. Anthropomorphism-

literally "form of a human"

speak of God (or the spiritual/angelic/etc.) as if He had human characteristics

e.g. Psa. 34:15, Gen. 22:12

Something 'above humanity' is 'brought down' to human level

Caution must be exercised with anthropomorphism

because, even though it is true that God has 'hands', 'eyes', 'emotions', etc., He does not have hands, eyes, emotions, etc. **in the same way** that humans have all these things.

3. Hyperbole-

exaggeration

purposely, obviously exaggerating something to magnify the extent and highlight some aspect.

e.g. 2 Sam. 1:23

4. Simile-

a blatant, obvious comparison, using "like" or "as"

e.g. Psa. 36:6

5. Metaphor-

similar to simile, metaphor makes a comparison

metaphor is a more subtle comparison, stating that

something 'is' something else, not just "like" something else

a metaphor is a less obvious and blatant comparison than a simile, but it therefore has more immediacy and impact

e.g. Zeph. 3:3

Understanding Symbolism

1. Determine which type of symbolism is being used
2. Understand the referent- research the symbol itself to find what an ancient Israelite would have understood when they heard that symbol.
 - Use Bible Dictionaries/Handbooks
 - Use Bible Encyclopedias
 - Do Not** use Bible CommentariesRealize that Some symbols are fixed, some are fluid
3. Understand the similarities between the symbol and what is symbolized
4. Understand the differences
5. Involve imagination and emotion- ask what would have been the imaginative and emotional impact on the people who first heard this symbol
6. Ask what is the point? This is usually a combination of the similarities and the emotional/imaginative impact.