

## BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #75:

### HOW DO WE IDENTIFY FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLE?

By John Temples

A question often asked by Bible readers is this: what authority do preachers have for saying certain parts of Scripture are figurative or symbolic? In particular, what about the “war in heaven” in Revelation 12? Why is that “war” regarded by some (including me) as figurative of earthly events and not an actual angelic war fought in heaven? (See Biblical Insights #41.)

ANSWER: Preachers and Bible scholars do not just randomly or arbitrarily assign “literal” or “figurative” labels to certain Bible passages or expressions (at least they don’t if they are “handling aright the word of truth”--dealing fairly and logically with the text). Aside from common sense, there are standard rules for identifying figurative language. These rules apply to any written text, not just the Bible.

Let’s start with some definitions. According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, “literal” means “taking words in their usual or primary sense without metaphor or allegory, free from exaggeration or distortion.” Figurative language, on the other hand, is “a mode of expression in which words are used out of their literal sense to suggest a picture or image, or for other special effect.”

Take the word “door.” When you hear or see that word, an image of a literal door (wooden or other) comes into your mind. And the word “door” is used in Scripture in that very sense (the literal sense). An example is Proverbs 26:14—“As a door turns on its hinges, so does the lazy man on his bed.” But what about John 10:9, where Jesus said, “I am the Door”? When you read this, you instinctively and immediately recognize the word “door” as being used metaphorically, outside its normal meaning. That’s an easy one. But other passages require a bit more thought and analysis. Hence, the formal rules. Here are the main ones (and remember, these rules apply to any written material, not just the Bible):

**RULE #1:** *Nothing should be regarded as figurative unless the context or the general tone of the text demands it.* Or more simply stated, literal is the rule, figurative is the exception. So as you read, when you encounter the word “door,” you assume it means a literal, physical door unless there’s a compelling reason to interpret it symbolically. (“I am the Door” is a pretty compelling reason.) One Internet writer stated it succinctly this way: “Use the literal sense unless there is some good reason not to.... Use the figurative sense when the context demands

it.” An important example of this rule is the issue of the “days” of creation in Genesis 1. Were they literal 24-hour days or were they figurative days of perhaps millions of years each (as evolutionists teach, and some Christians believe)? The rule is, you assume them to be literal 24-hour days unless compelled by the context to see them as symbolic days. Not only does the context give no hint of anything other than a literal usage, it contains statements strongly affirmative of a normal day (such as “evening and morning...day and night...first day/second day”).

**RULE #2: *Commands in general are literal.*** Such commands as go, teach, believe, repent, look, and sing leave very little room for symbolic interpretation. (Although there are some exceptions, such as “fight the good fight of faith” and “let your light shine”; but these exceptions are easily recognized.)

**RULE #3: *An expression is figurative if the literal meaning involves an impossibility or an absurdity.*** “That final exam was a bear.” “My brain is fried.” “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.” We readily recognize these as figurative. How about “you are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13)? It’s impossible to read those words literally. How about “stars falling from heaven” and “mountains and islands moving out of their place” (Revelation 6:13-14)? Given the laws of this material universe, we are forced to say this is figurative language. A study of the writings of the Old Testament prophets will show that “stars” sometimes symbolized earthly rulers or dignitaries, and “mountains” sometimes meant governments or seats of authority. Examples: Genesis 37:9, Numbers 24:17, Isaiah 13:10 (spoken of the fall of the government of Babylon), Psalms 48:1, Isaiah 2:2-3, Isaiah 56:7, Jeremiah 51:25 (speaking of the government of Babylon). Another example of this rule: Matthew 26:26, where Jesus gave the disciples bread and said, “This is My body.” He had to mean “this bread represents My body.” “Yoked” in 2 Corinthians 6:14 cannot involve a literal yoke, because it speaks of being “unequally yoked together with unbelievers,” which is absurd.

**RULE #4: *Language is figurative if it encourages actions that are wrong or prohibits actions that are good.*** “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you” (Matthew 5:29). “I robbed other churches, taking wages from them to minister to you” (2 Corinthians 11:8). “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). Perhaps the ultimate example of this rule is found in John 6:53—“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.’”

*RULE #5: Language is figurative when it is so identified.* Elijah said of Baal, “he is a god” (1 Kings 18:27), but the text says that in doing so he was “mocking” the prophets of Baal. John 2:19-21 says, “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Then the Jews said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ *But He was speaking of the temple of His body.*” In Matthew 16:6, Jesus warned His disciples to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” The word “leaven” can have either a literal or figurative meaning. Did Jesus mean they should not buy baking supplies from a Pharisee? Verse 12 clears it all up: “Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

*RULE #6: Language is figurative if a literal reading creates a contradiction or conflict with other plain passages dealing with the same subject.* Being inspired, the Bible does not contradict itself. So if a literal view of one passage contradicts another plain Bible statement or principle, then the passage must be figurative. Example: in John 11:26, Jesus said, “Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.” Yet, both human experience and Scripture say otherwise. Hebrews 9:27 plainly declares, “It is appointed for men to die.” To take the word “die” in both texts as literal creates a conflict. The explanation is that the Hebrews text is speaking of literal physical death, the statement of Jesus in John of spiritual or eternal death.

*RULE #7: Identification of figurative language requires consideration of the context (the text surrounding or relating to a questionable expression).* You can never look at a single word in isolation in the Bible and say “this word is literal” or “this word is figurative.” You must look at how the word is being used in any given setting. (Remember our discussion of the word “door.”) How much “context” do you have to look at to identify a figure of speech? However much is necessary!

*RULE #8: Some figurative language is known simply by instinct or common sense.* We don’t need a special “rule” for such statements as 1 Corinthians 3:2—“I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able.” And Hebrews 12:1—“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

*RULE #9: Not really a rule, but just an important thing to remember: a single Bible passage can contain both literal and figurative elements.*

## A PRIME EXAMPLE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: “WAR IN HEAVEN”?

Revelation 12:7-9 says, “And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.”

In my Insights article, I said, “The traditional view of most scholars is that this text describes a rebellion by Satan, a heavenly angel, and the subsequent casting out of him and his minions (fellow rebellious angels) by God.... It is my view that this passage has nothing to do with Satan’s origin; rather, it is describing in figurative language the struggle between the church and the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries.”

So why do I say this account is figurative and not literal? Rules 3, 6, and 7 come into play here.

Rule 3 says an expression is figurative if the literal meaning involves an impossibility or an absurdity; rule 6 states that language is figurative if a literal reading creates a contradiction or conflict with other plain passages dealing with the same subject; rule 7 tells us to respect the context. The idea of a literal war in heaven, fought by angels right under God’s nose, is absurd. You can start reading in Genesis and read through Revelation 11 before you ever encounter the term or the idea of “war in heaven.” The whole tone and tenor of Scripture portray heaven as a place of eternal serenity, stability, peace, and absolute submission to God by all its inhabitants. If there could be literal war in heaven, it would not be heaven! In the model prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), Jesus taught us to pray that God’s will be done on earth “as it is in heaven.” The implication is that God’s will is done perfectly in heaven and always has been. If there ever was an actual rebellion and war in heaven, or even the possibility of such in the future, Jesus’s words ring hollow.

Consider also the absurdity of a seven-headed, ten-horned literal dragon being anywhere, much less in heaven. In the same chapter, you read of a pregnant woman clothed with the sun who is persecuted by the dragon and flees into the wilderness. Are there pregnant women in heaven? Are there “wilderness” areas in heaven? The last verse of the previous chapter (11:19) describes lightning, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and hailstorms(!) in heaven. Who can believe these are literal?

Many commentators interpret the woman clothed with the sun as the pure church of Christ, before it was corrupted by apostasy; and the “war” as the campaign on

earth by Satan to destroy the church by means of Roman military might in the first three centuries. I believe this to be the correct view.

But, one might say, what about the phrase “in heaven”? It says the war took place there. You must remember that the entire series of visions John saw took place “in heaven.” In Revelation 4:1, he (John) was instructed by an angel to “come up here” and the future of the church would be revealed through a series of pictorial scenes or visions. The movie was playing “in heaven,” but all the action was taking place on earth!

Another thing to note about “heaven” is that the word is often used in Scripture to symbolize any lofty position of power over earthly affairs. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul says “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” Surely Paul did not mean that there are “rulers of darkness” and “spiritual hosts of wickedness” in God’s heaven! He simply meant that Satan and evil rulers occupy positions of great power, prominence, and authority on earth. Adam Clarke, Methodist scholar, commenting on Revelation 12:7, says “As heaven means here the throne of the Roman Empire, the war in heaven consequently alludes to the breaking out of civil commotions among the governors of this empire.” John T. Hinds, in the *Gospel Advocate* commentary, says of verse 7, “The words describe what John saw in the picture; they symbolically represent the efforts to destroy the true church.... Hence, the visible war refers to the conflict between pagan Rome and the church.”

Like almost every other book in the world, and like our everyday speech, the Bible contains a mixture of literal and figurative expressions. It behooves us as Bible students to know how to recognize each, lest we err in understanding and go astray. The Bible, and every part of the Bible, conveys TRUTH; but that truth is couched sometimes in literal language, sometimes in symbolic language. Learn to discern! –John Temples

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LINKS FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY:

<http://www.theseeker.org/cgi-bin/bulletin/show.pl?Mike%20Riley/Rules%20For%20Understanding%20Figurative%20Language>

<https://www.biblethought.net/figurative-language.html>

<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/694-how-do-i-distinguish-the-literal-from-the-figurative>

<https://www.wednesdayintheword.com/biblestudy101-figurativelanguage/>