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Q&A#135 Symbolism and Allegory

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Today's question: "What's the difference between symbolism and allegory?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what's the difference between symbolism and allegory? This is a difficult question to answer in part because those two terms are used in so many different senses that from one author to another, they don't have any constancy of meaning. What I want to do then is not to concentrate upon the terms themselves, but to think about some of the deeper issues that are at stake within the discussions surrounding them.

So when we talk about symbolism, we can use that term in a number of different ways. We can talk about, for instance, religious symbolism. The cross is a religious symbol.

What do we mean by that? When we see a cross, the cross represents not just a cross in terms of a shape, nor does it even just represent the cross on which Christ died as a

representation of that. It does that, but it also summons up all the truths and doctrines of the Christian faith. So you see a cross on the top of a church, or you see it as a religious symbol in some context.

When you see it, it summons up a set of beliefs, practices, convictions, realities, and relationships. And as a symbol, it's doing so much more than just denoting something. So if we thought about just denoting something, the symbol of the cross may denote the cross on which Christ died, but it does a great deal more than that.

By denoting that, it summons up all the other things, the realities and the truths that surround that. All of our language has a symbolic character to it. So for instance, if I were in the middle of a forest and I were alone for many weeks and hadn't encountered another living soul, and then I heard the sound of someone singing a song in English on the breeze, it would summon up for me not just the meaning of the words that they were speaking and those things that were explicitly denoted by that, but it would summon up for me the whole world in which that song belonged, a world that I had come from, a world that represented to me human companionship of belonging to a particular country and tradition, all these sorts of things.

And so all of our language represents a world and not just some object that is being pointed to in the world. Now, as kids, we grow up pointing at things, and that's often how our language is primarily gained, by pointing at objects in the world and giving them names. So I point and I say sofa, or I say cup, or I say table, whatever it is, I can point at these things in the world and with an explicit denotation by giving them a name, I can identify and pick out that reality.

Now, that's generally how we use language as a sign of something that is signified. And what is signified is the reality in the world and the language is the sign that the sounds that we make or the shapes that we draw on a piece of paper, whatever it is, the form that the sign takes, that sign is a sort of pointer at some object in the world. Now, language is a lot more complicated than that.

When we look at language a bit more carefully, we'll see that language is very much about action, and it does something, it performs something in the world, and it creates relationships, and it's founded upon entrance into a symbolic world. And when we talk about symbolism, symbolism foregrounds that aspect of language. Now, all of our communication has that symbolic dimension to it, but the more we move in the direction of symbolism, so we might think of language as having the pole of symbol and this pole of sign.

So, when we think about a sign, it's primarily just informational. It's pointing at some object in the world and it's relating that to us. When we think about symbol, it's more about entrance into a world, a realm of recognition, a realm of entrance into relationship with realities.

And so, language always functions on some point between those two poles. And the more we move in the direction of symbol, the more that we'll find that language starts to summon up a greater world. When we think about the cross, for instance, the cross can be a sign.

We can talk about the cross on which Christ died. But when you speak about the cross, you'll find all that symbolic baggage that's attached to it. It's very hard to just drop that and speak about a physical object as something detached from the whole world of meanings and significances and the broader realities that that summons to mind.

So, when we're talking about the cross, that moves very far in the direction of symbol. But when we're talking about the sofa, the sofa does not have quite the same degree of symbolism attached. Although the sofa does have some levels of symbolism, it has very weak symbolism compared to the cross.

When we're talking about symbolism, then, we can often oppose it to the literal meaning of something. The literal meaning is the direct denotation of some statement. So, if I say I destroyed someone, maybe I blew them up and they've absolutely been annihilated.

And that would maybe be the literal meaning of that statement as we use that expression, literal meaning in certain contexts. Now, there are other ways of using the expression, the literal meaning. The literal meaning can refer to the way that we usually use words.

And so, the literal meaning of the text is the text understood according to the ordinary way in which words are used. Now, the ordinary way in which words are used can include symbolism. It can include allegory on some occasions.

It can include a number of different things that would not be under the form of strict denotation. It can connote and symbolize greater realities. It can use metaphors and similes and other things like that, which are literary devices that are not strictly a direct denotation.

So, when I talk about destroying someone, maybe I just bested him in an argument. That doesn't mean that I've blown him up or anything like that, literally destroying him. But it means, I mean, we can talk about literally destroying someone and we mean just defeating him in an argument.

So, our words do not have the clear sense that we might want in this particular discussion, particularly when we come to terms like literal. When we're thinking then about symbolism, it can often be opposed to the literal sense of the text, which is the ostensive pointing of the text towards some reality in the world. So, the literal meaning of a particular text is its surface meaning, the ordinary meaning of these words and the way that it points to some reality in the world or references something, or it's referent as

it's defined according to an ordinary mode of speech.

When we talk about the symbolic meaning as opposed to that, it's a meaning that can move beyond that, that's some connotation that it might have, or it might have some level of meaning which goes beyond the surface meaning. It's referring to some other reality in an indirect fashion. And so, those different forms of pointing are important.

The first form of pointing that we often talk about as literal is a more direct pointing, whereas symbolic can be more indirect pointing. Now, we can also talk about symbolism within the world. We talked about the cross earlier.

There are other forms of natural symbols. Water is a natural symbol and water is taken up within Christian symbolism such as baptism. The water of the rain is something that gives life to crops.

It's a source of life. We might think about the water of the ocean as something that's associated with the deep and death and terror and chaos and these sorts of things. We might think about the water of the river as something again associated with life, irrigation.

We might think about the water as something that connects things together, that things are bound together within the medium of water. We might think about water as a liminal space, a space between things, a space that isn't well defined. It's a sort of placelessness between realms.

So, you cross the river to get into a new realm. We might think about water as associated with cleansing. Water is something that it can clean us and as a result, it can have symbolic meanings associated with forgiveness and expiation and other things like that.

It washes us clean and it removes taint and anything that might cause some sort of offense or bring some uncleanness or impurity that might draw God's wrath against us. So, it can take that sense as well. And all of these things are connected with the natural symbolism of water.

Water as it plays its role in human life invites a lot of different connotations that derive from that more general interaction with water. So, when we wash and clean ourselves, the act of cleaning ourselves is a very natural symbolism for moral impurity and the removal of that. So, there are natural forms of symbolism and these are not things that are arbitrary and forced upon reality.

They arise quite naturally out of reality and much of the symbolism of human life derives from the experience of the body. We might think about things that are higher up are things that are associated with higher values. I mean, we use that language of higher values.

We might think about things that are elevated, transcendent, things that are sublime in some sense. These are things that we associate with up. There are other things that we associate with down, with death.

We might think about things being weighty, the gravity of the world. All these sorts of things are natural forms of symbolism and they arise from the body and our experience of the body. We can think about other aspects of bodily symbolism.

So, 10 is associated with completeness because we have 10 fingers and thumbs and we have 10 toes and it's part of the completeness of the body. We might think of 5 as the symbol of strength because it's the one hand, it's a fist. We might think about other forms of symbolism associated with the body.

The pairing of ears and eyes and things like that, of hands and feet, that there's a pairing to the body and the way that sight and hearing and smelling and tasting, all these things work in different ways that provide us with natural symbolism for the world. So, there is a level in which symbolism arises quite naturally out of the ordinary process of life. There are also ways in which symbolism functions within texts.

So, when we're reading the biblical text, we'll often see that there are symbolic realities within it. So, the crossing of a river, for instance, often marks not just a physical boundary but a spiritual boundary and it can be spoken of in ways that highlights that, that the boundary between Israel and Egypt is the Red Sea. The crossing of that boundary and the drowning of the Egyptians and passing through on dry land is not just a physical crossing, it's a crossing with spiritual significance and so there's a symbolism attached to that.

There's a symbolism associated with the Red Sea and birth or we might think about the event of Christ being baptised in the Jordan. That's attended with symbolism associated with the flood, the dove descending upon Christ. It's associated with the symbolism of the entrance into the land, of cleansing from leprosy, of all these different sorts of symbolism that are naturally bound up within that and that's as a result of Israel's history.

There's a natural symbolism connected with water, washing, cleansing, union, these sorts of things and then there's a symbolism that arises from Israel's story. The symbolism of entrance into the land, of deliverance, of re-entrance in, re-entering God's presence, the symbolism of being united to the people, the symbolism of being anointed, the symbolism of being the new creation arising out of the water, all of these things come from the biblical text itself and the world that it has created and so symbolism is that which summons up a world particularly. Whereas the sign more directly points at just one object within a world, symbolism is like something that summons up the entirety of a world.

It's a part that really summons up the whole and so when Christ is baptised in the Jordan that does not just involve a physical washing of his body, it involves the summoning to mind of the entirety of the Old Testament narrative in some way. The creation and the land arising out of the water, the story of the flood, the story of Israel's entrance into the promised land in the Exodus, the story of the exchange between Moses and Joshua at the banks of the Jordan or Elijah and Elisha at the banks of the Jordan, all of these stories come to mind through Christ's entrance into the Jordan River and so symbolism is that summoning up of a world and the sign is something that's more direct and limited in its pointing. When we're baptised that's a symbol that summons up a reality and it also forms recognition and relationship.

When we think about the celebration of a marriage there are things like the wedding ring that symbolise the union and the exchange of rings is a symbolic action that forms something. As a symbolic action this isn't just using language to point at something in the world saying look this is a picture of our love, it's doing more than that. In the exchange of rings there is a forming of a bond, it's part of the means by which that bond is established in the first place.

Through symbolic actions a real bond is forged and so symbolism is a realm in which we exist that connects things together. When we think about texts then the symbolic meaning of many of the biblical texts relates to the way in which it summons up the larger world of the biblical text, the larger world of Israel's life and the larger world of the church and Christ and all these other realities of God's activity in the world, God's creative rule over his creation, all these sorts of things are summoned up by certain texts. So when we're reading through the Old Testament and we're reading through the New Testament we'll see a number of events that summon up the world to a greater extent than others.

When you're reading for instance the story of the Transfiguration, the Transfiguration summons up the story of the various theophanies of the Old Testament as God appears to his people, the theophany on the Mount of Mount Sinai or the theophany that you have in as Moses sees the three people coming towards him and meets with the Lord at that point or we might think of a number of the other theophanies that we have within scripture, the theophany in Isaiah 6. All of these are examples of theophanies and then in Christ we see the identity of the God who was revealed in those events being disclosed. So Christ is the one who was seen on Mount Sinai, Christ is the one who was seen by Isaiah in the temple, Christ is the one who was seen by Ezekiel in chapter 1 and putting that together the event of Transfiguration summons up the larger story. So it doesn't just point to something that just to a particular event that happened, it summons up the larger narrative and the musical dynamic of that.

We might think of it also as the Transfiguration being associated with the Exodus and Sinai. It summons up the story of Sinai, the story of the tabernacle, the plan of the

tabernacle being given on the mountain and Peter's saying shall we build three tabernacles. It's associating those two stories and so it brings that to mind.

Now there are other occasions in scripture where we will see a story that functions on a couple of different levels. A story that's like the story of Jonah can be read on the surface level, the story of the prophet who does not obey God the first time and is sent the second time and a story that symbolises various realities and brings to mind a broader fabric of the biblical narrative. So when we read the story of Jonah that way as I discussed in a recent podcast it is something that can bring to mind the story of the flood.

Jonah is the dove that is sent out twice and the ark is associated with Nineveh and then the fish and the gourd are both symbols of Nineveh in different ways and the Assyrians. Now it takes a while to put those things together but there's an indirect form of pointing. So it's not the direct form of pointing where it says Jonah was swallowed, where we might talk about Israel is taken into captivity by the Assyrians.

Rather Jonah being swallowed by the big fish is a symbol of that reality and so it's an indirect way of pointing to that reality but by pointing to that reality indirectly it connects it with a larger fabric of truth that would not be connected to it were it just directly pointed to in a way that extracted that particular reality from all the other realities that surround it. Rather by pointing at it indirectly it enables us to have a whole framework of biblical truth and understanding that surround it. Now let's get to the issue of allegory.

When we talk about allegory what we usually mean by allegory is a way of telling a story that points to realities beyond it and some examples of allegory we might think of are a story as a sort of extended metaphor. We might think about Pilgrim's Progress or the Chronicles of Narnia. Aslan is Jesus.

Now that's an allegorical meaning. It's a story that's pointing more directly. It's pointing to something outside of the story.

It's pointing to something indirectly in a sort of symbolic way but that symbolism tends to be operating in a different way from the symbolism that we might find internal to a story. So when you're reading the story of the Old Testament there are ways in which you can encounter there are many symbols within the story. So if you're thinking about the story of Joseph which we've been thinking about lately the symbol of the cup and the silver cup is a symbol of Joseph.

That symbol is something that represents and brings to mind Joseph and all the other things that are associated with him but that's a symbol that's operating within the story itself whereas much allegory is generally pointing to some reality outside the story. Some moral or some political or some event, some political reality or some set of events or something else like that. So if we're reading Pilgrim's Progress, Pilgrim's Progress is

pointing to the Christian life.

Now it's doing so in a way that brings many of those features of the Christian life within the story itself. Many of them are operating there but there are certain figures that are encountered along the way, worldly wise men and characters like that, who are persons representing vices or virtues. We might think about faithful and other characters like that within the story that these are characters that represent virtues.

They're not just individuals. They stand for something. They symbolise something and so it's a form of symbolism but often it's something that is taking a story that has a surface meaning but it's very clearly written in a way to point beyond that surface meaning to something else.

So when you're reading the Chronicles of Narnia you get it when you realise that this is referring to Christian truths. Talking about allegory then, we also can distinguish between a text that has a natural allegorical meaning where in one sense the allegory is the literal meaning of the text, the text operating in the way the language was supposed to, that this is a text written in that particular genre. It's a text that is written in a way that's intended to convey an allegorical meaning.

If you're reading Pilgrim's Progress you could argue that the literal meaning of that is the allegorical meaning. That's the natural meaning that you're supposed to derive from it considering the ways that genres work, considering the way that language works. It's the way that that text was always supposed to be read.

Whereas if you're reading many allegorical interpretations of scripture you will not find that. Many allegorical interpretations of scripture are taking a text with a surface meaning and even symbolism within the text and what they're doing is reading a meaning into the text. So even if you're reading something like Gregory of Nyssa's and Life of Moses there are many points in which he's trying to read the story of the exodus as an allegory of individual salvation.

Now there are ways in which you can certainly draw analogies and there are ways in which the events of individual salvation are summoned up in the larger world which is introduced in the world of the exodus and deliverance from Egypt. And there are ways in which the New Testament helps us to trace the connection between the surface meaning of the text, the symbolism of the text and the life that we have as we're delivered from slavery to Satan and brought into the kingdom of Christ. As we're brought through the red sea as it were of death as Christ tears open the red sea so that we might walk through on dry land and the pharaoh of sin and Satan that's pursuing us may be drowned within those waters.

And so there are ways in which we can move from the natural surface meaning of the text to a deeper symbolic reading of the text which summons up the bigger world of

biblical meanings and the connotations that those events can have and then connects that to our lives. However when you read many interpretations that are allegorical there is a short circuiting of that process. There's a jump straight from the text to our lives or more generally a reading back into the text certain Christian truths or philosophical ideas or Christian virtues that are imposed upon the text without any true wrestling with the immediate meaning of the text and the way that the language of the text is functioning itself.

My concern has always been to read the text very carefully on its own terms and so when you hear my interpretations of scripture what I hope you'll notice is that I'm looking more closely at the text because it's from the text itself that the deeper symbolic patterns emerge and through those symbolic patterns we can see the deeper connections to our lives and reality and that is something that takes patience it's not the direct jump from one point to another but it enables us to read these texts as our own. And so there's a certain discipline that's taking place here that enables us to recognize that there is a sense in which these texts could be referred to as allegorical as referring to some as being metaphors for a reality that is distinct from the immediate surface reality that's being spoken of. There are ways in which we can read fittingly the story of the exodus as Gregory did as an allegory of the Christian life.

As you read through the New Testament you'll see it being used that way on various occasions but what you need to do is exercise the discipline of moving carefully from point A to point B rather than just airlifting from one point to another and so that discipline is what I think is maybe the key difference between a certain form of symbolism that explores the dynamics of symbolism extensively and then recognizes the ways in which those symbols relate to our broader life and the allegorization which jumps straight from A to B without taking that necessary itinerary between the two. I hope this is of some help if you have found this helpful please tell people about it. This podcast and these videos depend upon word of mouth.

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