

Is There Allegory in the Bible?

By
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Allegory is an integral part of the degrees of Freemasonry, which tend to be of a rather philosophical and even mystical nature as well as a religious one. In the ceremonial part of some of the Scottish Rite degrees, the drama sections are occasionally referred to as allegories.

Perhaps a thorough but fairly summary definition would be that allegory is an extended symbolic narrative in which some or all the elements of action, character, and setting illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson or truth.

Every Freemason discovers, regardless of the directions he has taken and to what extent he has gone in his Masonic journey, that much of the material in the degrees of both York Rite and Scottish Rite is based upon the *Holy Bible*, which Freemasons call the Great Light in Masonry. It is really no secret that a certain amount of textual material for the work of the craft is taken directly from it.

From a Masonic point of view at least, it may seem then that one could almost safely infer that there is a certain amount of allegory within the *Bible*. The great Masonic scholar Albert Pike wrote in his *Morals and Dogma* that allegories of scriptures contain profound truths. The renown English historian and Freemason, Walter L. Wilmshurst, wrote in his book, *The Meaning of Masonry*: "The method of all great religious and initiatory systems has been to teach their doctrine in the form of myth, legend, or allegory."

The extent of allegory in scripture

has, of course, been a matter of debate among religious leaders to varying degrees at various periods in history. The great Jewish scholar, Philo of Alexandria, used an allegorical method for biblical interpretation in the first century, as did Clement, a disciple and successor of Peter. Origen of Alexandria, a leading Christian theologian and philosopher of the second and third centuries, used a similar method of interpretation. They believed such symbolic interpretations actually made some of the more perplexing and recondite passages more meaningful. They and some other biblical scholars believed parts of the *Bible* have a dual meaning—a literal one and a deeper hidden meaning.

That system of biblical interpretation actually remained rather common through to the latter part of the medieval period. After the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, however, the reformers tended toward a more literal interpretation of scripture. Today, there are those who believe the entire *Bible* is to be taken literally, and those who say it teems with all forms of literary symbolism. The beliefs of most are likely dispersed between the two extremes.

Doubts about allegory being in the *Bible* could very well be dispelled by reading apostle Paul's explanation in the fourth chapter of his epistle to the Galatians. He skillfully sums up and interprets the seemingly bizarre story of the two sons of Abraham representing the two covenants—the bond and the free.

In the sixteenth chapter of Genesis, we read of the strange story of Sarah, Abraham's wife, persuading him to father a child (Ishmael) by her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, because she is too old to have a child of her own. In the next several chapters, time passes during which God establishes the covenant of circumcision, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah takes place, and God promises Abraham he will have a son Isaac by his wife Sarah, despite their extremely old age.

Let us now turn to Paul's commentary, preferably in the Authorized King James Version, in Galatians 4:22-26: "For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a free-woman, but he who was of the bond-woman was born after the flesh, but he of the freewoman was by promise.

Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children, but Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all."

So, Paul of Tarsus, considered by theologians to be the greatest preacher of all Christendom and author of thirteen canonical epistles, clearly writes that the story of Abraham's sons, one representing the bond, i.e. slaves to the flesh, the other the spiritually free, is an allegory.

Some translations, in that passage, use the word "figure" or "symbol," which of course, an allegory is. One of the shorter books of the Old Testament can surely help make the case for biblical allegory. The poetic Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs in some

translations, is interpreted entirely allegorically by Jewish spiritual leaders. Its eight chapters are comprised of six love songs exchanged between a man and a woman. If taken literally, at least some passages would almost have to be considered erotic, but Jews interpret them as symbolizing the love between God and Israel. Christians, by the same token, generally consider them symbolic of the love between Christ and His church. In the same manner, it also could be said that if the story about Abraham fathering a child by Hagar were taken literally, he would clearly be an adulterer, although some would go as far as to argue that this was before the giving of the *Ten Commandments*.

The creation story in the first chapter of Genesis has always been an interesting and controversial topic of discussion. Scientists say the earth is about four and a half billion years old, probably more. Biblical literalists believe it is about 6,000 years old, based on biblical genealogy. A familiar phrase of the Psalmist is: "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past" (Ps. 90:4). A fairly common interpretation, however, is that a day in the Creation story actually represents a much longer period of time.

An important point to be made here is that the order of creation in the biblical account basically matches that of some scientists, including Darwin. They believe the earth was originally covered entirely with water, and that vegetation was the first form of life. They agree that animal life began in the water and with the flying creatures, and later, animal life developed on land. Then later on, of course, came man. From this perspective, one could say that there is little dif-

ference between the scientific view of creation and the biblical account.

A few chapters later in Genesis, we have the narrative of Noah and the flood. Various ancient religions and civilizations, including the Greeks, Chinese, and American Indians, had their own versions of the great deluge brought about by a deity in order to punish disobedient peoples while saving the few faithful. Perhaps the one that best parallels the Genesis account is that of the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, written probably at least as early as 1900 B.C.

The passage of Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 is considered by biblical scholars to be an explicit allegory about old age. It ends, "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (vs. 7).

Perhaps at this point, it should be pointed out that the *Bible* was written more as a book of moral and spiritual guidance than one of history, although it has much history in it. In fact, archaeological discoveries in recent decades have turned up evidence of biblical history, but there are biblical scholars who believe that some biblical historical events and personages are used in allegorical illustrations, and that, by the way, the story of Abraham's progeny which Paul cites, is an example. The messages and lessons of scripture are more important than its historical accuracy. Much of the Old Testament is a history of the Jewish people, but it is also a long narrative, illustrating the rewards of doing God's will and the punishment for doing wrong.

The portable Tabernacle the Israelites had as they wandered in the desert and Solomon's Temple, considered to be the spiritual home of all Freemasons, are both splendid examples of allegorical

symbolism. The materials, architecture, various parts, including the veils and their respective colors, and the various utensils are all symbolic of some principle, some law or precept pertaining to the building of human character and spiritual and mental development. Solomon's Temple is a symbol of the soul and spirit of man. In the New Testament then, we are given perhaps a simpler more straightforward and personal perspective of the metaphorical idea of the human body as a temple of God. Perhaps Paul stated it best in the third chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth within you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are" (vss. 16,17). This passage is of considerable importance in Freemasonry.

There are a number of lesser examples of passages in the Old Testament that could be considered allegorical, such as the trees seeking a king in the ninth chapter of the book of Judges verses 8-15 and that of the dwelling together of the wolf and the lamb in the eleventh chapter of Isaiah which prophesies the coming of a Messiah.

Jesus' use of parables, most of which are very allegorical, is along the same idea as the allegorical passages in the Old Testament. He used such fictional stories to illustrate something about the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, a moral precept, or some other message. The parable in the beginning of the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John in which Jesus says, "I am the vine and you are the branches," is one of the more beautiful examples.

As ridiculous as it might seem to point

it out, Jesus surely does not mean he is actually a vine. In the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Mark, Jesus reveals a clue as to why parables and other forms of figurative language are used to teach spiritual truths when he says, "Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables."

The book of the Revelation to Saint John the Divine undeniably contains a great deal of imagery, some of which is rather grotesque or even frightful. John describes what is to come from visions and revelations during which he perceived dragons and other hideous beasts as well as angels and scrolls. *Bible* scholars and theologians generally agree that there is a considerable degree of symbolism in Revelation, but disagree on the interpretation of much of that last book of the *Bible*.

A word of caution might be in order for *Bible* readers regarding a couple matters concerning interpretation in the New Testament. One involves the antichrist. Although this appellation is mentioned only by Saint John the Evangelist in two of his three epistles, some interpretations have associated it with the false prophets or false Christs or the beasts in Revelation or some highly sinister world leader described on the History Channel. Who or what the antichrist or those beasts represent will surely continue to be a debatable subject for some time to come.

The antichrist is a case of a word being mentioned in Scripture that has been given several different interpretations. Conversely, "the Rapture," which is mentioned nowhere in the *Bible*, is a designation devised from various bibli-

cal passages. It is often associated with the "End of Days" or the second coming of Christ. Many of those who believe in "the Rapture" say it is partly described in the fourth chapter of Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians where he writes that those saved will be "caught up together... in the clouds to meet with the Lord."

There are various viewpoints among Christian denominations and theologians as to just what "the Rapture" is and when and how it is to take place.

Many of the apocryphal writings, of which there is an abundance, appear to contain a great deal of figurative and cryptic language, some of which is rather bizarre. These works include both Jewish and Christian apocryphal books as well as those of the Gnostics. Such imagery is quite possibly one reason some of these writings were not ultimately included in the *Bible*. In fact, the Revelation of John was nearly rejected by the early church fathers who compiled it.

Rev. Joseph Fort Newton was a clergyman and Freemason during the first half of the twentieth century who wrote extensively about Masonry. In an essay included in the introductory section of the Temple Illustrated Edition of the *King James Bible*, which is distributed to candidates in Scottish Rite bodies, he wrote that the *Bible* is "so rich in symbolism."

From all this then, as Freemasons, can we deny there is at least some allegory, as well as other forms of symbolic figurative writing in the *Holy Bible*? No doubt there will be differences of interpretation in some biblical passages for a long time to come. Perhaps the day will come when all will be unveiled, and all scriptural messages will be understood by all who would seek to understand.

Until such a time would come, and despite the difficulties of the more recondite parts of the *Bible*, all Masons and all believers should read it regularly. Do not just read it. Absorb it! Live it! Make it the center of your life, for it is the source of all wisdom, the greatest work of man, the most important book

ever bestowed upon humanity.

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