Literal And Symbolic Interpretations Of The Bible

Most Bible verses should be taken literally. The word “literally” means “taking words according to their original Hebrew, Aramaic (Chaldee) and Greek meanings and applying to them the ordinary rules of Hebrew, Aramaic (Chaldee) and Greek grammar.”

Note, however, some parts of the Bible must be taken symbolically or figuratively. The word “figuratively” means “to apply a descriptive word or phrase to something to which it is not literally applicable”. “Figuratively” also refers to the figures of speech used in poetry.

Biblical examples of figures of speech are when Jesus called Himself “a door” or “a gate” (see John 10:9), “a true vine” (see John 15:1) and “a good shepherd” (see John 10:11). Symbolic language is also found in Matthew 9:13 when believers are called “the salt of the earth”.

Since figurative or symbolic language is usually more open to many interpretations than literal language, we must be very careful not to interpret verses which contain figurative language, contrary to other verses in the Scriptures on the same or related topics.

We must be careful which verses we interpret literally and which symbolically. The early Church theologian Origen (approx. 185-approx 254 A.D.) wrongly castrated himself on the basis of wrongly taking Jesus’ words in Matthew 9:43-47 literally instead of symbolically. He did this after battling with sexual temptations.

The Epistle of Barnabas

Codex Sinaiticus is a copy of the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament combined with the Greek New Testament. Codex Sinaiticus dates from the 300’s A.D. and includes the New Testament apocryphal books of the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. ¹ The Epistle of Barnabas contains 119 allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament. An allegory is a story which has a seemingly obvious or explicit meaning and a deeper hidden symbolic or figurative or spiritual meaning.

In Chapter 10 “Spiritual Significance of the Precepts of Moses Respecting Different Kinds of Food”, the Epistle of Barnabas teaches the following ridiculous symbolic or allegorical interpretations of parts of the Old Testament: “Now, wherefore did Moses say, ‘Thou shalt not eat the swine, nor the eagle, nor the hawk, nor the raven, nor any fish which is not possessed of scales?’ He embraced three doctrines in his mind (in doing so). Moreover, the Lord saith to them in Deuteronomy, ‘And I will establish my ordinances among this people.’ Is there then not a command of God that they should not eat (these things)? There is, but Moses spoke with a spiritual reference. For this reason he named the swine, as much as to say, ‘Thou shalt not join thyself to men who resemble swine.’ For when they live in pleasure, they forget their Lord; but when they come to want, they acknowledge the Lord. And (in like manner) the swine, when it has eaten, does not recognize its master; but when hungry it cries out, and on receiving food is quiet again. ‘Neither shalt thou eat,’ says he ‘the eagle, nor the hawk, nor the

kite, nor the raven.' 'Thou shalt not join thyself,' he means, 'to such men as know not how to procure food for themselves by labour and sweat, but seize on that of others in their iniquity, and although wearing an aspect of simplicity, are on the watch to plunder others.' So these birds, while they sit idle, inquire how they may devour the flesh of others, proving themselves pests (to all) by their wickedness. 'And thou shalt not eat,' he says, 'the lamprey, or the polypus, or the cuttlefish.' He means, 'Thou shalt not join thyself or be like to such men as are ungodly to the end, and are condemned to death.' In like manner as those fishes, above accursed, float in the deep, not swimming (on the surface) like the rest, but make their abode in the mud which lies at the bottom. Moreover, 'Thou shalt not,' he says, 'eat the hare.' Wherefore? 'Thou shalt not be a corrupter of boys, nor like unto such.' Because the hare multiplies, year by year, the places of its conception; for as many years as it lives so many it has. Moreover, 'Thou shalt not eat the hyena.' He means, 'Thou shalt not be an adulterer, nor a corrupter, nor be like to them that are such.' Wherefore? Because that animal annually changes its sex, and is at one time male, and at another female. Moreover, he has rightly detested the weasel. For he means, 'Thou shalt not be like to those whom we hear of as committing wickedness with the mouth, on account of their uncleanness; nor shalt thou be joined to those impure women who commit iniquity with the mouth. For this animal conceives by the mouth.'

Moses then issued three doctrines concerning meats with a spiritual significance; but they received them according to fleshly desire, as if he had merely spoken of (literal) meats. David, however, comprehends the knowledge of the three doctrines, and speaks in like manner: 'Blessed is the man who hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly,' even as the fishes (referred to) go in darkness to the depths (of the sea); 'and hath not stood in the way of sinners,' even as those who profess to fear the Lord, but go astray like swine; 'and hath not sat in the seat of scorners,' even as those birds that lie in wait for prey. Take a full and firm grasp of this spiritual knowledge. But Moses says still farther, 'Ye shall eat every animal that is cloven-footed and ruminant.' What does he mean? (The ruminant animal denotes him) who, on receiving food, recognizes Him that nourishes him, and being satisfied by Him, is visibly made glad. Well spake (Moses), having respect to the commandment. What, then, does he mean? That we ought to join ourselves to those that fear the Lord, those who meditate in their heart on the commandment which they have received, those who both utter the judgments of the Lord and observe them, those who know that meditation is a work of gladness, and who ruminate upon the word of the Lord. But what means the cloven-footed? That the righteous man also walks in this world, yet looks forward to the holy state (to come). Behold how well Moses legislated. But how was it possible for them to understand or comprehend these things? We then, rightly understanding his commandments, explain them as the Lord intended. For this purpose He circumcised our ears and our hearts, that we might understand these things.”

In Chapter 9 “The Spiritual Meaning of Circumcision”, the Epistle of Barnabus teaches the following symbolic nonsense about circumcision: “Learn then, my children, concerning all things richly, that Abraham, the first who enjoined circumcision, looking forward in spirit to Jesus, practiced that rite, having received the mysteries of the three letters. For (the Scripture) saith, ‘And Abraham circumcised ten, and eight, and three hundred men of his household.’ What then, was the knowledge given to him in this? Learn the eighteen first, and then the three hundred. The ten and the eight are thus denoted – Ten by I, and Eight by H. You have (the initials of the name of) Jesus. And because the cross was to express the grace (of our redemption) by the letter T, he says also, ‘Three Hundred.’ He signifies, therefore, Jesus by two letters, and the cross by one. He knows this, who has put within us the engrafted gift of His doctrine. No one has been admitted by me to a more excellent piece of knowledge than this, but I know that ye are worthy.”

Clement popularised the pagan overemphasis on symbolism

In his Chapter 8 “The Use of the Symbolic Style by Poets and Philosophers”, the early church theologian Clement of Alexandria (approx. 150-approx. 215 A.D.) taught that the pagan
Egyptians, Greeks and others used symbolic styles of writing to communicate with each other. He quotes from a Pythagorean philosopher, Orpheus, the comic poets, the grammarian Didymus, Cleanthes the Stoic philosopher, Theognis, Plato and other ancient pagan authors who communicated using symbolic or figurative language.

Then in his Chapter 9 “Reasons for Veiling the Truth in Symbols”, Clement wrote: “It was not only the Pythagoreans and Plato then, that concealed many things; but the Epicureans too say that they have things that may not be uttered, and do not allow all to peruse those writings. The Stoics also say that by the first Zeno things were written which they do not readily allow disciples to read, without their first giving proof whether or not they are genuine philosophers. And the disciples of Aristotle say that some of their treatises are esoteric, and others common and exoteric. Further, those who instituted the mysteries, being philosophers, buried their doctrines in myths, so as not to be obvious to all. Did they then, by veiling human opinions, prevent the ignorant from handling them; and was it not more beneficial for the holy and blessed contemplation of realities to be concealed? But it was not only the tenets of the Barbarian philosophy, or the Pythagorean myths. But even those myths in Plato (in the Republic, that of Hero the Armenian; and in the Gorgias, that of Aeacus and Rhadamanthus; and in the Phaedo, that of Tartarus; and in the Protagoras, that of Prometheus and Epimetheus; and besides these, that of the war between the Atlantini and the Athenians in the Atlanticum) are to be expounded allegorically, not absolutely in all their expressions, but in those which express the general sense. And these we shall find indicated by symbols under the veil of allegory.”

Then in his Chapter 10 “The Opinion of the Apostles on Veiling the Mysteries of the Faith”, Clement quoted from many verses in the New Testament which refer to God’s mysteries and mentioned the following: “Again the prophet says: ‘And I will give thee treasures, concealed, dark, unseen; that they may know that I am the LORD.’ Similarly David sings: ‘For, lo, Thou hast loved truth; the obscure and hidden things of wisdom hast Thou showed me.’ ‘Day utters speech to day’ (what is clearly written), ‘and night to night proclaims knowledge’ (which is hidden in a mystic veil); ‘and there are no words or utterances whose voices shall not be heard’ by God, who said, ‘Shall one do what is secret, and I shall not see him?’…

Akin to this is what the holy Apostle Paul says, preserving the prophetic and truly ancient secret from which the teachings that were good were derived by the Greeks: ‘Howbeit we speak wisdom among them who are perfect; but not the wisdom of this world, or of the princes of this world, that come to nought; but we speak the wisdom of God hidden in a mystery.’ Then proceeding, he thus inculcates the caution against the divulging of his words to the multitude in the following terms: ‘And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual, but as to carnal, even to babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, not with meat: for ye were not yet able; neither are ye now able. For ye are yet carnal.’

If, then, ‘the milk’ is said by the apostle to belong to the babes, and ‘meat’ to be the food of the full-grown, milk will be understood to be catechetical instruction – the first food, as it were, of the soul. And meat is the mystic contemplation; for this is the flesh and the blood of the Word, that is, the comprehension of the divine power and essence. ‘Taste and see that the Lord is Christ,’ it is said. For so He imparts of Himself to those who partake of such food in a more spiritual manner, when now the soul nourishes itself, according to the truth-loving Plato. For the knowledge of the divine essence is the meat and drink of the divine Word.”

In his Chapter 8 “The Use of the Symbolic Style by Poets and Philosophers”, Clement wrote about what happened with Jacob’s sons Joseph and his brother. In this case, Clement gave

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3 Ibid.
5 Ibid, Chapter 10.
a ridiculous symbolic interpretation of Joseph’s coat: “Otherwise interpreted, the coat of many colors is lust, which takes its way into a yawning pit.”

Similarly in another writing, Clement foolishly interpreted passages in the Mosaic Covenant about fishes without scales, sows, eagles, hawks, and ravens according to the same types of excessive-use-of-symbolism interpretation principles used in the apocryphal writing “The Epistle of Barnabas” and in agreement with the symbolic and allegorical principles emphasised by many pagan ancient philosophers. Clement found supposed distinctions between different types of sins in Moses’ words on these creatures in Leviticus 11:1-47. Clement wrote: “David, too, and Moses before David, show the knowledge of the three precepts in the following words: ‘Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,’ as the fishes go down to the depths in darkness; for those which have not scales, which Moses prohibits touching, feed at the bottom of the sea. ‘Nor standeth in the way of sinners,’ as those who, while appearing to fear the Lord, commit sin, like the sow, for when hungry it cries, and when full knows not its owner. ‘Nor sitteth in the chair of pestilences,’ as birds ready for prey. And Moses enjoined not to eat the sow, nor the eagle, nor the hawk, nor the raven, nor any fish without scales. So far Barnabas…

The legislator seems to teach differently the interpretation of the three forms of sin – understanding by mute fishes sins of word, for there are times in which silence is better than speech, for silence has a safe recompense; sins of deed, by the rapacious and carnivorous birds. The sow delights in dirt and dung; and we ought not to have ‘a conscience’ that is ‘defiled.’”

Nowhere in the Bible does any author interpret Moses’ words in Leviticus 11:1-47 in such foolish symbolic ways.

Supposed hidden mystical meanings

Origen taught a number of unbiblical heresies. He taught that all human souls pre-existed prior to their conception in their mothers’ wombs. He said all humans and fallen angels will ultimately be saved by God. Also, he taught the Son of God was not equal with the Father but was eternally generated by Him. This latter idea was the seed of the Arian heresy which later decimated the Church.

Origen also introduced some foolish methods of interpreting the Bible into the Church. He taught each verse or passage of Scripture could be interpreted at three different levels. Here is a quote from Origen in relation to this: “The way, then, as it appears to us, in which we ought to deal with the Scriptures, and extract from them their meaning, is the following, which has been ascertained from the Scriptures themselves. By Solomon in the Proverbs we find some such rule as this enjoined respecting the divine doctrines of Scripture: ‘And do thou portray them in a threefold manner, in counsel and knowledge, to answer words of truth to them who propose them to thee.’ The individual ought, then, to portray the ideas of holy Scripture in a threefold manner upon his own soul; in order that the simple man may be edified by the ‘flesh’ as it were, of the Scripture, for so we name the obvious sense; while he who has ascended a certain way (may be edified) by the ‘soul’, as it were. The perfect man, again, and he who resembles those spoken of by the apostle, when he says, ‘We speak wisdom among them that are perfect, but not the wisdom of the world, nor of the rulers of this world, who come to nought; but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God hath ordained before the ages, unto our glory’, (may receive edification) from the spiritual law, which has a ‘shadow of

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6 Ibid, Book 2, Chapter 15.
good things to come. ’ For as man consists of body, and soul and spirit, so in the same way does Scripture, which has been arranged to be given by God for the salvation of men.” 7

Origen taught that the obvious meanings of verses or passages of Scripture taken in context were only for fleshly Christians. He believed more spiritual and the most spiritual Christians can obtain hidden deeper wisdom from verses in the Scriptures which is not in agreement with their meanings in context. This he wrongly called “the spiritual law” or “shadow of good things to come”.

Origen was very popular among many early church leaders from the 200’s A.D. onwards. His dreadful approach to the Scriptures was one contributor to many of the later false teachings accepted by numerous church leaders in the Middle Ages. Many of these wrong teachings were based on finding hidden meanings in various verses or passages, these meanings being contrary to the context of these verses and to other verses on the same or related topics.

It is extremely dangerous finding hidden mystical meanings in verses or passages of Scripture which are contrary to the context and/or other verses or passages on the same or related topics. Many foolhardy souls have ventured into these dangerous areas like lambs going to the slaughter.

The Pharisee Josephus’ ridiculous symbolic interpretation

The temptation to make up ridiculous symbolic or figurative interpretations of the Scriptures has always been present among Israelites and Christians. Here is one example from the writings of the Pharisee Josephus: “for if anyone do but consider the fabric of the tabernacle, and take a view of the garments of the high priest, and of those vessels which we make use of in our sacred ministration, he will find…we are unjustly reproached by others: for if anyone do without prejudice, and with judgment, look upon these things, he will find they were every one made in way of imitation and representation of the universe. When Moses distinguished the tabernacle into three parts, and allowed two of them to the priests, as a place accessible and common, he denoted the land and the sea, these being of general access to all; but he set apart the third division for God, because heaven is inaccessible to men. And when he ordered twelve loaves to be set on the table, he denoted the year, as distinguished into so many months. By branching out the candlestick into seventy parts, he secretly intimated the Decani, or seventy divisions of the planets; and as to the seven lamps upon the candlesticks, they referred to the course of the planets, of which that is the number. The veils, too, which were composed of four things, they declared the four elements: for the fine linen was proper to signify the earth, because the flax grows out of the earth; the purple signified the sea, because that color is dyed by the blood of a sea shell fish; the blue is fit to signify the air; and the scarlet will naturally be an indication of fire. Now the vestment of the high priest being made of linen, signified the earth; the blue denoted the sky, being like lightning in its pomegranates, and in the noise of the bells resembling thunder. And for the ephod, it showed that God has made the universe of four (elements); and as for the gold interwoven, I suppose it related to the splendor by which all things are enlightened. He also appointed the breastplate to be placed in the middle of the ephod, to resemble the earth, for that has the very middle place of the world. And the girdle which encompassed the high priest round, signified the ocean, for that goes round about and includes the universe. Each of the sardonyxes declare to us the sun and the moon; those, I mean, that were in the nature of buttons on the high priest’s shoulders. And for the twelve stones, whether we understand by them the months, or whether we understand the like number of the signs of that circle which the Greeks call the Zodiac, we shall not be mistaken in their meaning. And for the mitre, which was of a blue color, it seems to me to mean heaven; for how otherwise could the name of God be inscribed

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7 Origen, “De Principiis”, Book 4, Chapter 1 “That the Scriptures are Divinely Inspired”, 11 (Translated from Greek).
upon it? That it was also illustrated with a crown, and that of gold also, is because of that splendor with which God is pleased.”

In the above, Josephus tries to convince Romans and Greeks that the writings of Moses are in agreement with the contemporary scientific and philosophical teachings of the latter two groups. Josephus says the twelve stones on the breastplate of the High Priests’ clothes relate to the foolish pagan astrological Zodiac. He also claims the four things of which the veils comprised were symbolic of the four elements. At that time, the Greeks and Romans believed the universe comprised of four elements earth, sea, sky and fire.

Types, shadows and symbols in the Old Testament

The New Testament shows some things in the Old Testament are types or shadows or signs or symbols or figures of various New Testament revelations of truth. There are a number of Greek words in the New Testament which refer to this. These are:

(a) “tupos” meaning type (Romans 5:14).
(b) “skia” meaning shadow (Colossians 2:17, Hebrews 8:5 and 10:1).
(d) “antitupos” meaning the event or person or circumstance corresponding to the type (Hebrews 9:24 and 1 Peter 3:21).
(e) “parable” meaning figure (Hebrews 9:9).
(f) “hapodeigma” meaning copy (Hebrews 8:5 and 9:23).

The above verses prove it is God’s will for certain parts of the Old Testament to be interpreted in symbolic or figurative ways. For example, we see in Romans 5:14 that in some (but obviously not all) ways Adam was a symbolic type of Jesus Christ: “…Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.” In John 3:14, Jesus said the lifting up of the bronze snake in the desert was symbolic of His own death in some respects: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

In Galatians 4:22-26, Paul provides another example of a symbolic interpretation of Old Testament historical events: “For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar – for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children – but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.”

Hebrews 3:1-10:18 contains figurative or symbolic interpretations of Old Testament teachings and events.

Some later Old Testament authors said that certain things spoken of by earlier Old Testament authors were types or symbols of other things. For example, parts of Isaiah Chapters 51 to 52 use some of the events in the Book of Exodus as symbols. Psalm 95:8-9 contains another symbolic interpretation of events occurring earlier in the Old Testament.

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Symbolic interpretations of Scripture are also called typological methods of interpretation.

**Keys for interpreting Old Testament types and symbols correctly**

a) The Bible is a book that is mostly meant to be interpreted literally. As stated earlier, as Jesus revealed in Matthew 4:5-7, no interpretation – literal or symbolic – of a particular verse or passage will be correct if it disagrees with other verses in the Bible on the same topic. The history of the Church has been littered with ridiculous symbolic interpretations of Old Testament events or teachings. Because of these things, we must be very careful how we handle seeming types, shadows or symbols in the Scriptures.

b) We can only be certain something is a type or symbol in the Old Testament if the New Testament or some other part of the Old Testament specifically clearly states it is a type. If we have not found such Biblical confirmation for our speculated types, I believe it is better we keep our unproven speculation to ourselves. Note most of the types listed in the New Testament are used only to illustrate points of doctrine that are already stated in non-symbolic literal language in other places in the New Testament.

c) Just because a particular thing in the Old Testament is said in the New Testament or another part of the Old Testament to be type or symbol of something else in some ways, does not mean it is in all ways. For instance, just because in John 3:14 Jesus said His death was similar in some respects to the lifting up of the bronze serpent by Moses in the wilderness does not mean all the associated events in Numbers 21:4-9 had any typological significance. It is therefore important when studying types to note the differences between the circumstances surrounding the type in its Old Testament setting from the statements about the type in the New Testament or other parts of the Old Testament in order to avoid an overly imaginative abuse of the relevant verses.

d) We also must remind ourselves that the Biblical authors had special revelation to write the Books of Scripture, but none of us has the same divine mandate or warrant. Therefore, when the Biblical authors named types or shadows or symbols, they did this inspired by God. We can never claim such infallible inspiration for our supposed revelations of types and symbols. If we claim inapplicability for our revelations of types and refuse to have them judged by other verses of the Scripture on the same topic, we are sinning against God and His Word. Being a Pentecostal, I am well aware of the wrong tendency of some Pentecostal preachers to claim virtual infallibility for their “revelations” of what the Scriptures mean and to make implied threats of judgement against any Christians who do not accept what they say.

e) Hebrews 8:5, 9:9, 9:23-24 and 10:1-4 reveal that various ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Covenant and Law were copies, types, figures and shadows of various vital truths. These verses give general details about which ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law are being discussed. Because all the relevant types are not specifically named, this leaves it open for Bible teachers to debate about which specific aspects of the ceremonial Law are type, shadows and figures. I personally prefer to be extremely cautious when considering such types and shadows. I would only teach something in the Mosaic Law is a type if this is confirmed literally
in verses in the New or Old Testament. For example, 1 Corinthians 5:7 teaches the Passover festival was a shadow or figure of Jesus’ death and Hebrews 10:1-4 shows the animal sacrifices of the Law were shadows of Christ's death. Hebrews 8:5 reveals the ministry of the Israelite High Priests was a shadow of the Christ's High Priestly ministry. I prefer to avoid finding types and shadows in the Mosaic Law which are not literally said elsewhere in the Bible to be types.

f) When referring to types, shadows, figures and copies, I am not meaning examples. It is right to find examples in other parts of the Bible of truths taught elsewhere in the Scriptures. For example, it is right to use Balaam as an example of someone destroying their walk with God through greed. It is good to use Samson and David as examples of the dangers of sexual immorality. Such examples are illustrations. They are not types or shadows or figures.

In some contexts, the Greek word “tupos” means “example” (see 1 Corinthians 10:6, 10:11, Philippians 3:17, 1 Thessalonians 1:7, 2 Thessalonians 3:9, 1 Timothy 4:12, Titus 2:7 and 1 Peter 5:3). But note in Romans 5:14, “tupos” is used in the different sense of a symbolic type of Christ.

g) Also note there is much symbolic and figurative language in the Scriptures which are found in God-given prophecies. In this present section, I am not referring to these as types, shadows, copies or figures of Biblical truths. We can only speculate what prophetic types or symbols mean until the specific things which they predict, occur.

h) Dr Barry Chant made the following satirical but sensible comments about unbalanced symbolic interpretations of the framework of God’s Tabernacle: “Marvellous ingenuity has been expended to invent a spiritual symbolism for the boards, sockets, rings and bars. Deep lessons are drawn from the fact that the wood was acacia, that it came from trees which first had to be cut down, then cut up, then polished, then plated with gold! Then how could anyone miss the significance of the silver sockets that were driven into the sand, and that there were two of them for each frame, and that the frames were locked together, ‘shoulder to shoulder’, standing brave and tall against the desert storms? Did you not realize that these sockets were in the desert yet they were not of it, and that they separated the boards, which had once (as trees) been rooted in the sand, from the sand? And what a wealth of revelation can be extracted from the number of the frames, and from their dimensions, and from the rings and bars which held them together. And even then we have hardly begun to explore the possibilities! Now I am not saying that such a use of tabernacle typology is wrong only that it has little Biblical authority. It depends more on imagination than revelation.” 9

The main errors found among those who use symbolic or typological interpretations of Old Testament verses involves creating types or symbols which are not specifically mentioned in the New Testament or in other parts of the Old Testament and which are contrary to other verses in the Bible on the same topic.

**Symbolic misinterpretations of Song of Songs**

Some can argue, “But is not the Song of Songs a type or figure of God or Christ and His bride? No other part of the Bible confirms the Song of Songs is this type or figure. So this

shows we should teach types which are not specifically said elsewhere in the Bible to be types.” My response to this is that because there is no verse in the Bible which specifically and unambiguously says that the Song of Songs is a type of God or Christ and His bride, it is very questionable teaching that it is.

In Ephesians 5:25 and 30-32, Paul says that the relationship between a husband and wife symbolises the relationship between Christ and the Church. In 2 Corinthians 11:2, Paul states that believers in Christ are symbolically chaste virgins who have been betrothed to Christ. But in these verses and in his other New Testament Letters, Paul did not refer to the Song of Songs.

In their “Encountering the Old Testament”, Bill Arnold and Bryan Beyer say, “Song of Songs is a simply stated celebration of love shared between young lovers created in God’s image...Song of Songs pays homage to the wonder and majesty of monogamous sexual love, when that love is intensely pursued with honor and faithfulness. Many interpreters throughout history have been uncomfortable with such explicit material. Some, both Jewish and Christian, have taken either a typological or allegorical approach.”

Arnold and Beyer then describe the typological interpretation in which Song of Songs is regarded as a historical type with a New Testament parallel, illustrating God’s intimate covenant relationship with His people. Arnold and Beyer then record that some Jewish commentators have regarded the Song of Songs as a non-historical allegory of the love between Yahweh and Israel and some Christian commentators have viewed Song of Songs as a non-historical allegory of the love between Christ and the Church. But as Arnold and Beyer conclude: “But it is doubtful if this is the intended message of Song of Songs. It seems best to take the book at face value, inasmuch as no evidence indicates the book is symbolic.”

Typifying the problems which result from inventing our own Old Testament types and symbols and typifying the influence of unbiblical Stoic and Neo Platonist ascetic attitudes to sex, in his writing “Concerning Virgins – to Marcellina, his sister” the early church leader Bishop Ambrose of Milan (approx. 340-397 A.D.) interpreted the female lover in the Song of Songs to be a symbolic representation of younger and older Christian females who devote themselves to a life of virginity and avoiding sex in marriage. Ambrose quotes from Song of Songs 1:2 which states: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love are better than wine…” and from Song of Songs 1:3-4 as supposed proof that Christian females who devote themselves to Christ and to permanent virginity for the rest of their lives will enter the chamber of God their Heavenly Spouse and King. Throughout the whole of his writing “Concerning Virgins – to Marcellina, his sister”, Bishop Ambrose glorifies permanent virginity as the highest ideal state for female Christians.

In Chapter 3 of Book 2, Ambrose quotes from the foolish unbiblical apocryphal “Acts of Paul and Thecla” as an authority for the idea that God approves of Christians being virgins more than them getting married.

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11 Ibid.
13 Ibid, 42.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, Book 2, Chapter 3, 19.
Ambrose states that Christian females should follow the example of Thecla who refused to marry the man to whom she was engaged so that she could avoid having sexual intercourse and losing her virginity. Ambrose wrote: “Let then...Thecla teach you how to be offered, for she, avoiding nuptial intercourse, and condemned through her husband’s rage, changed even the disposition of wild beasts by their reverence for virginity.” 16 Ambrose here shows he believed the religious fable or myth found in the “Acts of Paul and Thecla” (Chapter 9:1-17) which claimed that after pagans threw Thecla in a place where there were lions, bears and other animals, God miraculously changed the attitudes of a lion which ran at her and He supernaturally protected her from bulls and other animals.

Ambrose said: “Virginity has in itself so much that is admirable that even lions admire it.” 17 He also insisted that the Apostle Paul taught Thecla to have these attitudes to marriage and permanent virginity. 18 Not once did Ambrose say that any aspect of the fabled apocryphal “Acts of Paul and Thecla” was unbiblical. He treated the book as though it was a part of the Scriptures or almost as authoritative as the Scriptures.

In his Letter 41, Ambrose teaches that the relationship between Christ and the Church is symbolised by the male and female lovers in Song of Songs. 19 In Chapters 7, 8 and 9 of Book 1 of his writing “Concerning Virgins – to Marcellina, his sister”, Bishop Ambrose quotes from Psalm 45:2 and 9-11 and from verses from the Song of Songs to try to prove his unbiblical teachings about marriage and permanent virginity. Ambrose wrote: “First of all, in that which those who purpose to marry desire above all things, that they may boast of the beauty of their husband, they must of necessity confess that they are inferior to virgins, to Whom alone it is suitable to say: ‘Thou art fairer than the children of men, grace is poured on Thy lips.’ Who is that Spouse? One not given to common indulgences, not proud of possessing riches, but He Whose throne is for ever and ever. The king’s daughters share in His honor: ‘At Thy right hand stood the queen in a vesture of gold, clothed with variety of virtues. Hearken, them, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear, and forget thine own people and thy fath er’s house; for the king hath desired thy beauty, for He is thy God.’

And observe what a kingdom the Holy Spirit by the witness of the divine Scriptures has assigned to thee – gold and beauty; gold, either because thou art the bride of the Eternal King, or because having an unconquered mind, thou art not taken captive by the allurements of pleasures but rulest over them like a queen. Gold again, because as that metal is more precious when tried by fire, so the appearance of the virginal body, consecrated to the Divine Spirit, gains an increase of its own comeliness, for who can imagine a loveliness greater than the beauty of her who is loved by the King, approved by the judge, dedicated to the Lord, consecrated to God; ever a bride, ever unmarried, so that neither does love suffer an ending, nor modesty loss...

‘The smell of thy garments,’ says He, ‘is above all spices.’ And again: ‘And the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.’ See what progress thou seest forth, O Virgin. Thy first odor is above all spices, which were used upon the burying of the Savior, and the fragrance arises from the mortified motions of the body, and the perishing of the delights of the members. Thy second odor, like the odor of Lebanon, exhalés the incorruption of the Lord’s body, the flower of virginal chastity.” 20

In the above, Ambrose:

16 Ibid, Chapter 3, 20.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid, 21.
19 Ambrose, Letter 41, 18.
20 Ambrose, “Concerning Virgins – to Marcellina, his sister”, Book 1, Chapter 7, 36.
a) wrongly uses Psalm 45:2 and 9-11 to argue that permanent virginity is better in God’s eyes than being married.

b) falsely implies that those who are married have been in Ambrose’s words “taken captive by the allurements of pleasures…” This typifies Ambrose’s pagan Stoic and Neo-Platonist attitudes to God-given pleasures.

c) invented a ridiculous figurative interpretation of Song of Songs 4:10, suggesting the odor of spices mentioned in this verse was a symbol of the spices which were used on Jesus’ body after death.

d) made up an equally foolish interpretation of “the fragrance of Lebanon” in Song of Songs 4:11, saying it was a symbol of “the incorruption of the Lord’s body, the flower of virginal chastity.” So by using a ridiculous type of symbolic method for interpreting this verse, Ambrose ends up teaching the importance of being permanently a virgin — something which is contrary to the whole book of the Song of Songs taken in context.

Then in Chapter 8 of Book 2, Ambrose takes the words about honeycomb in Song of Songs 4:11 and 5:1 to mean that the bees in the Song of Songs are symbolic of virgins: “Let, then, your work be as a honeycomb, for virginity is fit to be compared to bees, so laborious is it, so modest, so continent. The bee feeds on dew, it knows no marriage couch, it makes honey. The virgin’s dew is the divine word, for the words of God descend like the dew. The virgin’s modesty is unstained nature. The virgin’s produce is the fruit of the lips, without bitterness, abounding in sweetness.”

21 The above is another example of symbolic interpretations gone crazy.

Song of Songs 4:11 relates to the God-inspired spiritual, emotional and sexual love expressed when a husband kisses his wife and not to the small minority of Christians who choose not to be married: “Your lips, O my spouse, drip as the honeycomb; honey and milk are under your tongue; and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.”

In the Song of Songs, there are numerous references to sexual contact between the male and female lovers. But by an absurd use of symbolism Ambrose distorts this into a supposed veneration of permanent virginity and a glorification of Christians who avoid marriage and sex in marriage.

Some editions of The King James Version of the Bible added the questionable interpretative headings such as “The mutual love of Christ and His Church” and “The Church professeth her faith in Christ” to its translation of the Song of Songs.

There is not one verse in the Old or New Testaments which specifically show us we can interpret the Song of Songs symbolically as a type or allegory.

**Pagan Stoic allegorical interpretations infiltrated Judaism**

In his writing “On Creation”, the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria (approx. 20 B.C.-40 A.D.) used a Stoic allegorical or symbolic interpretation of the Old Testament to justify his pagan Stoic ascetic unbiblical attitudes to pleasure and his pagan Greek attitude to males being like the human reason and females being like the human sensations or feelings, when he wrote: “And it is on this account that Moses appears to me in the particular laws also which he issued in the respect to animals, deciding what were proper to be eaten, and what were not, to have given especial
praise to the animal called the serpent fighter. This is a reptile with jointed legs above its feet, by which it is able to leap and to raise itself on high, in the same manner as the tribe of locusts. For the serpent fighter appears to me to be no other than temperance expressed under a symbolic figure, waging an interminable and unrelenting warfare against intemperance and pleasure…

But its juggleries and deceits pleasure does not venture to bring directly to the man but first offers them to the woman, and by her means to the man; acting in a very natural and sagacious manner. For in human beings the mind occupies the rank of the man, and the sensations that of the woman. And pleasure joins itself to and associates itself with the sensations first of all, and then by their means cajoles also the mind, which is the dominant part. For, after each of the senses have been subjected to the charms of pleasure, and has learnt to delight in what is offered to it, the sight being fascinated by varieties of colours and shapes, the hearing by harmonious sounds, the taste by the sweetness of flowers, and the smell by the delicious fragrance of the odours which are brought before it, these all having received these offerings, like handmaids, bring them to the mind as their master, leading with them persuasion as an advocate, to warn it against rejecting any of them whatever. And the mind being immediately caught by the bait, becomes a subject instead of a ruler, and a slave instead of a master, and an exile instead of a citizen, and a mortal instead of an immortal. For we must altogether not be ignorant that pleasure, being like a courtesan or mistress, is eager to meet with a lover, and seeks for panders in order by their means to catch a lover.”

The above example typifies how easy it is to invent false doctrines by finding symbolic interpretations contrary to the verses’ surrounding context and to other verses in the Bible on the same topic.

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