

INTERPRETING BIBLICAL IMAGERY

SYLLABUS, WINTER 2024, RTS

“I hadn’t yet realized that, imagining other worlds, you end up changing this one.” -Umberto Eco,
Baudolino

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION.

The bible is full of every kind of figurative language—from simple similes and metaphors, to puns, irony, idiom, dreams, parables, and of course typology. Figurative language is more than just artistic ornamentation; it's at the heart of divine revelation and language itself. While interpreting biblical figuration is often fraught with difficulty, the rewards are incredibly rich, not only for our understanding of the Bible, but also for preaching, teaching, and counseling.

Consider a simple example. 1 Thess. 5:2: “For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” That’s a pretty dangerous thing to say! That’s loaded language, and we can appreciate that comparing the Lord with a thief could open Paul up to all kinds of misunderstandings. And yet we all know what he means: “the Lord will come unexpectedly.” And yet again, when we paraphrase the meaning of the metaphor that way, it seems like something of its meaning has been lost; it’s sapped of its punch and power. What then are we to do? How do we teach, preach, and use the metaphorical language of the Bible appropriately? That’s a small example, but the issue of figurative language connects to every aspect of biblical interpretation. Consider the number of questions and controversies that intersect with our topic. When will the Lord return? How should we interpret the prophecies of the OT? Should the church conduct itself like Israel of old? What will heaven be like? How historically accurate are the historical books of the Old and New Testament? How does Hebrew poetry function? What are the parables really about? How literally should I apply the wisdom of Proverbs, or the law of Moses, or the teaching of Jesus (“It would be better to cut out your eye...”) ? Does Genesis 1-3 give us real history or is it merely myth? What about the flood? Israel’s conquest? The resurrection of Jesus?

This class will explain how figurative language works and describe methods for unpacking the depth of meaning embedded in it, paying special attention to the way in which figures are fulfilled in the revelation of Christ and how we can use this rich imagery in ministry. Such a study will, I trust, have significant payoff, not only in how we think about the Bible, but also in our theologizing, our pastoring and counseling, our teaching and preaching.

B. INSTRUCTOR

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C. CLASS SPECIFICS

- Class will meet January 8th - 11th. Students will be expected to attend all sessions.
- All course materials will be due **March 1st** at 11:59pm.
- We will use Canvas as our course hub for all assignments and communication, but please email me directly with questions.
- Students should begin reading the required reading as soon as possible, though there is no formal expectation that certain readings need to be completed before the start of class.

II. REQUIRED READING

The intensive nature of this class presents a challenge when it comes to reading. On the one hand it would obviously be useful to come to class *having already read* the material under discussion, but sometimes that is not possible. For those wanting to get ahead in the reading, I have starred the material that would be most helpful to have completed prior to class. There is also an anticipated topic schedule posted below, with relevant readings, for those wanting to maximize preparation.

Most readings will be posted on the course website. You should not need to purchase any books for this class, though I heartily recommend owning a copy of *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVP).

For all readings, “critical appreciation” is key. Many of the readings below come from outside our usual Reformed and confessional circles. Critique will be necessary, but also appropriation. Consider how the perspective offered is helpful, then address what needs correction, nuance, or reconsideration.

A. GENERAL ORIENTATION

*Silva, M. “Literal or Figurative” in *Has the Church Misread the Bible?: The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues*. Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1987. PAGES 44-61.

*Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. 1st edition. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1998. PAGES xiii-xxii.

B. METAPHOR THEORY AND METHOD

Reading note: start with Lakoff/Turner, then Kovecses.

Cotterell, Peter, and Max Turner. “Non-Literal Language.” In *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation*, 293–332. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1989.

Kovecses, Zoltan. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction, 2nd Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pages 1-62, 267-283 and 305-322.

*Lakoff, G., and M. Turner. *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989. PAGES 1-56.

C. SPECIFIC ISSUES IN BIBLICAL FIGURATION

Barr, D. L. "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis." *Int* 38 (1984): 39–50.

Blomberg, C. *Interpreting the Parables*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1990. Pages 29-69.

Brown, William P. *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*. 1 edition. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. Selections as posted.

Clowney, E. P. "Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures." *The Preacher and Preaching*. Edited by Samuel Logan. Phillipsburg, N.Y.: P & R Publishing, 2011.

Collins, J. J. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Pages 1-41, 256-278.

Eslinger, Richard L. *Narrative & Imagination: Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. Pages 141-175.

Sandy, D. Brent. *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic*. Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2002. Pages 58-102.

D. FREE READING

See description under "Assessment" below.

III. ASSESSMENT

A. DISCUSSION, CASE STUDIES, READING, AND ASSIGNMENTS (15%)

This course is highly dependent upon student discussion and participation. While there is no formalized "student presentations" required for the course, everyone should come prepared to critically engage the material.

How to prepare? Begin by *critically reading* as much of the assigned material as possible (noting, however, that this is an intensive format, and so you are not expected to be able to complete all the reading before class). The readings are designed to be a starting point for thought; they provide the questions, but not all the answers. The goal then is not just *understanding*, but *appropriation through appreciation, argumentation, and application*. Make sure you understand what you are reading (of course), but then (1) think through what is good about the reading and what you can learn from it, (2) give the reading the courtesy of argument—where is the author wrong, or what other things should they consider—and (3) ask yourself how your own patterns and practices need to change as a result of (1) and (2).

Each day (starting day 2) will also include one or more biblical "case studies" upon which you can apply the insights gained from the reading and lecture. Put the method to work by

engaging the biblical text with the tools you have acquired. Sketch out some preliminary thoughts and conclusions. Be imaginative and creative here—the point is not necessarily to “get it right,” but rather to grow in understanding and hermeneutical wisdom. You will be graded on your contribution to these discussions.

B. PAPER (50%)

You will be required to write an academic paper for this class, the goal of which is to practice applying the literary tools appropriated from lectures/readings/discussions to a concrete instance of biblical interpretation.

There are many different types of papers that accomplish such a goal. While an exegetical paper might seem the most straight-forward option (something like “What does Jesus mean when he compares God to “a thief in the night?”), there are many possibilities. You could tackle a systematic-theological problem (“Should Christians be waiting for a third temple to be built before the end comes?”), or discuss some contemporary issue arising out of figurative language (“What does it mean when a 21st Century American describes themselves as ‘a born again Christian?’”), or a concrete pastoral concern or practical matter (“How should contemporary families apply the biblical instruction not to ‘spare the rod?’”), a piece of pop-culture analysis (“Is Captain America a Christ figure?”), or even something more philosophical and hermeneutical (“To what extent is Umberto Eco right to argue that ‘a specific semiotics can aspire to a scientific status?’”). The only constraint is that **your paper must constructively and extensively apply figurative analysis to the matter it addresses**. Your paper can technically be about any subject, but it needs to address its subject matter by **using or critiquing the figurative methodologies explored in this class to biblical texts or theological issues**.

For those wanting further paper-writing advice, I have a blog series on the subject that starts here: <http://www.signandshadow.com/2017/11/02/how-to-write-a-seminary-paper-part-1-the-thesis/>

C. FREE READING (20%)

You are required to select about 600 pages of additional reading to complete for this class, of your own choosing. I have provided a suggested bibliography from which you may pull, or you may suggest your own additions. This is intended to be very open-ended in order to give you the opportunity to explore an issue you discovered in class (or wished you had discovered!).

You will need to turn in a “reading report” by the due date listed in the introductory section of the syllabus. This report should provide a brief “appreciatively critical” review/response to your readings. You should provide a paragraph or so on each of your selected readings (books will require more comment than articles).

The requirements are as follows:

- First and foremost, your review should be “appreciative.” You may not agree with the author, but you should engage their argument, accurately represent their viewpoint in your analysis, and seek to learn from their perspective in substantive and tangible ways.
- Secondly, your review should be “critical,” by which I mean “probative and investigative” (rather than “polemical and argumentative”). Your goal here is not to demolish but to critique and improve. What about the argument is praiseworthy? Are their flaws in the overall argument? How might those flaws be addressed? What was missing that can be added? What was lacking that could be improved? In cases where the author’s viewpoint is antithetical to a Christian worldview, feel free to critique but focus on how an orthodox position might “further” the author’s central concerns.
- 1500 word **limit** (+/-), standard academic formatting (cite your sources, use formal language, etc.).

D. CREATIVE MINISTRY APPLICATION PROJECT (15%)

Apply what you are learning by intentionally and substantively using it to serve the church in a manner suitable to the course. This is a fairly open-ended assignment and can be accomplished in several ways.

Given the nature of this course, students are encouraged to be creative and creational for this project. For example:

- Write a hymn or poem that might be sung in congregational worship or performed for a Christian audience.
- Create a painting or other work of art that communicates biblical truth or is otherwise edifying for a Christian audience.
- Write a parable or compose a short story that intends to express biblical truth, evoke religious thought, address a pastoral concern, etc. If this seems like a creative stretch, perhaps you have “discovered” a new Screwtape Letter, or you could “fictionalize” a pastoral case study you have encountered by turning it into a parable?

More traditional ways of completing the assignment include:

- Preach sermons, teach Sunday School classes, guide an inductive bible study, etc. related to the material of the class (yes, this can be the same text as your paper but [don’t preach your paper](#)).
- Create a list of stories or pictures from Scripture that might be readily used in pastoral counseling, making notes as to the type of person they might impact and the points you might derive from them.

Once you have completed your project, you will report out about it in a 500-1000 well-written document that addresses the following:

- What was your project? If it is possible to share the project itself (sermon audio, for example) please do so.

- To what extent did you draw on material from the class in your endeavors, and how was it helpful (or why was it not helpful)?
- How did it go?
- What did you learn? What would you like to do differently? What do you need to learn or study or meditate on or practice to do what you did better?

E. GRADING SCALE

95-100 A	87-89 B+	Etc.
93-94 A -	83-86 B	<60 F
	80-82 B-	

IV. READING/DISCUSSION SCHEDULE

An anticipated schedule will be posted on the course website.