

Article of the Month
October, 2021

Water as a Symbol

God uses symbols closely-allied to the way man uses them. Understanding God's symbols would be nearly impossible if it were otherwise. Symbols must make sense to the informed and spirit-led reader.

When man uses "water" as a symbol, it usually represents cleansing or refreshment — the proverbial "cup of cold water." When the Bible uses "water" symbolically, it is virtually the same. What is it that cleanses the mind and gives refreshment to the soul? It is TRUTH. (We could substitute other synonyms such as knowledge or information.) In Scripture, water is the symbol for truth, but we will need to DEDUCE this symbolic usage.

SOMETIMES the Scriptures are very helpful in that they define symbols for us. At other times, we must define them by their usage and their inherent meanings. Unfortunately, the Scriptures do not define "water" (singular) for us — except by usage. But, they DO define "waters" (plural) for us. This dichotomy is likely the case because the symbol of "water" is more obvious to us because mankind uses "water" as a symbol. Scripture did not need to define a symbol already used by men. The symbol of "waters" (plural), however, is not so obvious. Men rarely use "waters" as a symbol. Scripture, however, DOES use "waters" (plural) symbolically frequently. Hence we NEED a clear Scriptural definition for "waters." Thus, in Revelation 17:15, we find: "The waters (plural) which you saw...ARE peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues." The Bible helped us out with an obscure symbolism by defining it for us.

This short article is not designed as a comprehensive study on the subject, but rather as a summary statement in order to pique the curiosity of the serious student of Scripture. An exhaustive study of the word will prove convincing and fruitful. But it will require a large investment of time since "water" fills many columns (particularly in its Old Testament usage) in the Strong's concordance.

SCRIPTURAL USES FOR DEDUCING THE MEANING

It might initially be helpful to note that a literal usage CAN ALSO BE FIGURATIVE. An example is shown in Matthew 3:11. In this text, John the Baptist explains that he baptizes "with WATER for repentance." Clearly, "water" here is quite literal. But John is also using it in the figurative sense of a repentance which CLEANSSES. When we are aware of the point of John's baptism, we realize that John was trying to bring errant Jews back to the TRUTHS of the Jewish Law — not just to their acknowledgment of

them, but also to their practice of them. It is akin to Jesus' statement that "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." Jesus is pointing out that truth (like water) frees or cleanses us from the bondages that held us in a slavery.

The following texts (N.T.) all give us some perspective on the use of "water" as a symbol. (An understanding of prophetic interpretation is necessary before we understand the full impact of some of these verses).

Mark 14:13 & Luke 22:10

When Jesus is instructing his disciples to prepare for the passover supper (which was typical), he uses varying symbolisms in order to give us as Christian students beautiful details regarding prophecy. In these verses, the disciples were instructed to follow a man bearing a pitcher of water into the house he enters. This was a symbol for us of following a Divinely-appointed instructor (Jesus) who has a vessel designed to dispense (pitcher = Scripture)) the truths (water) that will lead them into a new "house" (the covenant of the Gospel Age.)

Using this text as a first example is not necessarily helpful! It relies upon great facility with Scriptural typical usages. Other texts (following) will help to re-enforce the symbol in less difficult contexts.

Luke 16:24

This is part of a parable in which Jesus depicts the TRANSFER of favor away from Israel (The Rich Man) to the Gentiles (the beggar, Lazarus) as the Jewish Age ends. It is akin to following the man into the house he enters in the above text. The Gentiles would be led to the "house" of the new age while the Jewish Law arrangement was being sent to oblivion ("hell"). The Jewish national oblivion since the first advent is a "torment" to Jews which they cannot explain — hence the request that the water (truth) be used to "cool off my tongue." [Someone in literal flames of torment would hardly ask for water in only one drop upon the tongue!] The water symbolizes INFORMATION — some needed clarification TRUTH to explain to the Rich Man why Israel has been abandoned to national destruction and Gentiles were replacing them in God's dealings.

John 3:5

This is a famous text. "Unless one is begotten of water and the Spirit, he cannot ENTER the kingdom of God." The symbolic nature is self-evident. Water doesn't beget! To be begotten of the Spirit is a reference to the beginning of the "New Creature" which God begins in the lives of Jesus' consecrated disciples. But to be "begotten of water" is, indeed, a weird statement! It here refers to the fact that without new and timely

TRUTH, one cannot possibly become a disciple -- enter the embryo Kingdom of God. Begetting, of course, means a beginning. Hence NEW TRUTH must begin the Christian's walk. That truth then leads to growth by the Holy Spirit which dwells in that disciple's heart and mind.

John 4:10-15

This encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman clearly uses WATER as a symbol. She asked for literal water. Jesus offered symbolic water — something to refresh her entire soul, not her literal thirst. Jesus calls the truths he is offering “Living Water.” What a wonderful description of what truth is! It is information which leads to life.

John 7:38

Jesus here quotes (possibly from the end of Isaiah 58:11) to make the same point he made to the Samaritan woman. His disciples would become wells of truth (water) from which others can drink.

Ephesians 5:26

This is quite possibly the most definitive text as far as defining symbolic “water” is concerned. It reads:

“He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.”

We see CLEANSING by the **SYMBOLIC WATER** of the Word (Scripture). “Thy Word is Truth” Jesus proclaimed. Thus the **TRUTH** of Scripture (the Word) **IS** the **WATER** which cleanses.

Hebrews 10:22

This verse is a close second to Ephesians in helping our confidence in our definition. Paul says we have our hearts sprinkled. THAT clearly is NOT literal! He adds that we have “our bodies washed.” THAT, obviously, COULD be literal, but would here make NO SENSE. Our “bodies” (our fleshly vessels which NEED to have Godlike actions) are, according to Paul, “washed with pure water.” A Christian could take thousands of baths to no effect! But the “pure water” of the Word, the TRUTH, will accomplish the needed life-sanctification here symbolized by “our bodies washed.”

Revelation 12:15

This symbolized account regarding the time of the French Revolution and “The Age of Enlightenment” tells us that Satan, in an attempt to DROWN (figuratively) the true Church, thought it “wise” to let the world see what a commotion TRUTH could cause. Thus Satan (who likes to show himself as an “angel of light [TRUTH]),” pours out WATER (truth) as a river. It is “out of his mouth” BECAUSE it is a message, not literal water. His scheme failed! New truths only enhanced mankind's desire for more truths -- and the world has, ever since, been gaining liberties because of truth.

Revelation 21:6

Jesus is symbolizing the TRUTH which will give life to all during his kingdom. He symbolizes that body of truth by the term “WATER of life” — even as he did with the Samaritan woman.

Revelation 22:17

This reflects the thought of 21:6. The offer to the world, thirsty for the truths needed to sustain life forever, is “the WATER of life without cost.”

OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament has a LONG listing of verses which deal with water — both in its literal and its symbolic meanings. But we will only make passing reference to O.T. texts here.

In Deuteronomy 8:15, Moses reminds Israel that God brought water out of the rock. This is manifestly a literal statement. But the Apostle Paul (I Corinthians 10:4) SPIRITUALIZES it — turns it into a symbol of the truths Israel received from the leadership of Messiah in his pre-human existence through Moses. In Paul's message, WATER becomes REFRESHING TRUTHS that lead Israel through the wilderness.

Psalms 110 could well be called “The Melchizedek Psalm.” Among other things, it shows that Melchizedek, who began as an INDIVIDUAL, becomes an ENTIRE PRIESTHOOD — an “order of Melchizedek” (verse 4). The final verse of the Psalm shows the success of this group (THE Christ, head and body). Success is shown by the lifting up of the head. Jesus made use of this symbol when he told his disciples that when they would see certain signs, they should “look up and LIFT UP YOUR HEADS, for your deliverance draweth nigh.” The courage needed for success in deliverance is pictured by the lifting

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of the head. But, relating to “water,” the Psalm shows that this success comes from their DRINKING FROM THE BROOK BY THE WAY. In other words, the success and

confidence (head-lifting) of the Church comes from the TRUTHS symbolized by the WATERS provided along their way.

Psalm 42:1 uses water to symbolize refreshment. “As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for Thee, O God.” The deer pants for literal water, but we pant for the refreshment of fellowship (the knowledge & exchange) with God.

MISCELLANEOUS CONCEPTS

Water, of course, can be solid as well as liquid. The Lord utilizes this peculiarity to show that TRUTH can be HARD and destructive if it is in the form of hail. Thus, in Revelation 16:21, 100-pound hailstones (hard and very destructive truths) are shown to be a factor in the last plague which destroys the old order prior to the establishment of the Kingdom. Water is still truth — but NOT refreshing at that point! We all know from experiences that truth can sting!

SUMMARY

Scriptural usage determines the definition of many symbols. “Water” is one of those symbols. It is common in both Old and New Testaments, but its definition is determined by context and by common usage. Not understanding it as a symbol leaves the reader devoid of many blessings. Surely, nearly every reader of Holy Writ KNOWS that something more than literalism is implied in many places. Many readers quite automatically supply the true meaning because it is so close to the way mankind in general uses the symbolism.

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