

In Praise of Biblical Language

By [Kenneth Francis](#) (September 2018)



Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise, Marc Chagall, 1961

There is nothing quite like metaphors or symbolism to bring a book to life, especially when used as a literary device in poetry or fiction. However, many adults are metaphorically challenged, while younger children can be confused by homonyms (same-sounding words with different meanings) and metonymy (figure of speech with something associated with something else).

A child hearing radio reports of *guerrilla* warfare, can conjure up images of heavily armed, silverback apes with AK-47s searching the jungle for the enemy. And how many young children who grew up in the 1960s/'70s thought Scotland Yard was a small backyard with a shed, somewhere in Highlands, where policemen wearing kilts would meet for tea and biscuits? Or to hear someone say, 'he has *catholic* tastes in literature (broad, varied) and think of him as a religious man.'

But the language in the Bible is where most people who don't study Scripture go from being challenged to almost becoming illiterate. One example is a story from Genesis. For many atheists, the Garden of Eden is a soft target to mock Christianity, by saying it is literally about a naked man and woman, tempted by a talking snake, to eat a forbidden apple from a tree. However, the majority of theologians have a more sophisticated view of the poetic, figurative language in the Bible. Although they ultimately believe in the authenticity of the Genesis account, they also believe metaphor is used to communicate truth in the story, as well as symbolism (we'll come back to this later).

Another example of atheists *and* early Church fathers' confusion of biblical language is the story of Galileo, who was a devout Christian. During that time in the early-17th century, *members* of the then-Church interpreted the Bible on a geocentric system, which derived from Aristotle and Ptolemy. This influenced the theology of the early-Church fathers and was, during that period, the world view of the scientific establishment. But they failed to see that this view clashed with the teachings of the Bible, some of which are poetic in style, infused with metaphors, metonymy, similes, symbolism, etc.

Galileo was trying to show the Church members that the heliocentric system was more in line with how the universe works, as opposed to geocentrism, and not what Aristotle taught. However, Galileo was imprisoned for heresy but later pardoned by the Church, whose previous members took some of the biblical text literally, and not poetically. The Bible is not a science book, thus it describes things phenomenologically and poetically. And let's face it: during sunrise or sunset, no one describes such a beautiful experience as an earth tilt.

And there is much truth and meaning in symbolism and metaphor. If we take the example in recent times when dilettantes in the media and chattering classes perpetually mined metaphors in a famous poem called *The Second Coming* by William Butler Yeats (1856-1939). The opening lines to the poem are as follows:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned . . .*

This poem was written a few decades after the philosopher Fredrich Nietzsche declared 'God is Dead' (we know he didn't mean God is literally dead, as he didn't believe in such an entity). In light of that phrase, the 'falcon' can be interpreted as Mankind turning its back (not literally, of course) on the 'falconer', God: '*Things fall apart/The centre cannot hold*': objective morality collapses, as humans lose

their moral compass; *'Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world/The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/The ceremony of innocence is drowned'*: moral chaos follows the death of God (The Great Wars, the decadence of the West, and conflicts in the East). Nietzsche said it first: by killing God, we unchain the earth from the sun and wipe away the horizon with a sponge. As for Yeats' poem: no one can deny, despite poetic language, that the metaphors in his masterpiece are eerily prophetic.

To return to Adam and Eve, the same can be said about the metaphors and symbolism in this story: the 'apple' on the tree is a metaphor for omnipotence, something only God can possess; the serpent is a symbol of evil or metaphor for the devil (literally, there is no 'talking snake' written about in Genesis 3:1; it seems like many atheists use the smear comparing it to the talking snake in Disney's *Jungle Book*