A Dragon and a Door

As one example, take the dragon in one of the latter visions (Rev 20:2). Here John is telling us what sign he saw (a dragon) and what it signified (Satan the devil).

I'll throw in a couple of other examples for good measure. The golden bowls of incense in another vision signified the prayers of the saints (Rev 5:8). Again John is telling us what he saw, and what it meant. Likewise, seven golden lampstands seen in another vision stood for the seven churches (Rev 1:20). Jesus interpreted for John the meaning of what John saw.

Now we ask whether the signs in these examples were "taken literally" or "taken figuratively"?

If you answer "figuratively" then you are right up to a point, because the signs obviously do not signify themselves. A dragon did not signify a dragon, nor did a bowl signify a bowl, nor did a lampstand signify a lampstand.

Rather, the dragon signified Satan, the incense bowls signified prayers, and the lampstands signified churches. So the signs were "figurative" of something else.

Simple. Yes, but not quite that simple!

John tells us clearly how he came to write the book. "Jesus sent and signified [the revelation] to his bond servant John who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw" (Rev 1:1-2).

When John says that he saw a dragon (Rev 20:1-3) he meant literally that he saw a dragon in a vision.

As one more example, when John says that he saw "a door open in heaven" (Rev 4:1) he means that he "literally" looked and saw, and what he saw was a "literal" door.

We understand that that door represents Jesus who said "I am the door" (Jhn 10:9). In that sense the door is "taken figuratively".

However we also understand that John really did see a door. In that sense the door is "taken literally".

John's testimony is "literal" in that he did really see these visions and all the things in them that he describes. In this sense, we most certainly "take the book of Revelation literally".

Consider the Rainbow

Let's get out of the Book of Revelation for a moment, and look at a very clear and straightforward case. God told Noah that the rainbow is a sign of God's covenant never again to destroy all flesh with a flood (Gen 9:8-17).

Now you can see that every word of that is quite literal. There is no "figurative language" there. God is not "spiritualizing" the rainbow. Both the rainbow and the covenant are "literal" and one is a sign and reminder of the other.

So we have a "literal" rainbow, don't we? Yes, and the same rainbow is "figurative" isn't it? There is some subtle semantic quicksand here, and we should be careful to avoid it by not treating the terms "literal" and "figurative" as mutually exclusive.

The rainbow is "literal" because it is an actual rainbow in the sky. The rainbow is at the same time "figurative" because it signifies a covenant God made.

The book of Revelation is interpreted literally as the rainbow is. John "literally" saw and heard things in his visions, just as we "literally" see the rainbow in the sky.

The things John saw stood "figuratively" for facts revealed in the gospel, just as the rainbow stands "figuratively" for the covenant God revealed to Noah. The facts revealed in the gospel are "literally" believed by Christians, just as people "literally" believe the rainbow covenant.

This rainbow approach to Revelation cannot fairly be called "spiritualizing prophecy" or "not taking prophecy literally".

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