

God and Science

Symbols And Their Importance

John Doorly

Symbols Change and Rise—A Calculus: A Process of Reasoning—The Use, of Numerical Symbolism in the Bible—The Prophetic Achievement—The Divine System in the Bible—The New Approach

SYMBOLS ARE NATURAL

It is a strange fact that if one talks to the average individual about symbols, he is apt to conclude that one is referring to something that is far removed from daily experience; he believes that symbolism is a subject considered only by the highly educated or the religionist. He does not realize that he himself is using symbols every minute of his life. A symbol is, in fact, simply something that is used to represent something else. The very words we speak are symbols. Our alphabet is wholly a matter of signs or symbols. If one goes into a shop to make a purchase, one has to represent or symbolize what one needs by means of words; moreover, one has to use the symbol called money in order to buy it. Mathematics, music, engineering, architecture, all employ symbols, such as numbers, notes, blueprints, and scale models, in order to be universally understood.

No vast subject can be considered intelligently without the use of symbols. This is particularly true with regard to the nature of the Infinite, whom men call God. Perhaps no subject has been symbolized in so many different ways as that of God's true nature. It must be evident to anyone who thinks for a moment that the infinite One could not be understood or defined as a whole, for infinity could never be included in anything, but must include all within itself. Consequently, the only way that the Infinite can ever be thought about and defined is through manifold symbols. — Webster defines "symbol," in part, as follows:

1. a sign by which one knows or infers a thing.
2. That which stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, esp., a visible sign of something invisible, as an idea, a quality...

The Oxford Dictionary defines "symbol" as....

2. Something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else ...esp. a material object representing or taken to represent something immaterial or abstract.
3. A written character or mark used to represent something; a letter, figure, or sign conventionally standing for some object, process, etc.

It must therefore be obvious that it is impossible to approach any great subject without the use of symbols.

During the ages symbols of every kind have become increasingly definite and intelligent and more in accord with the demands of advancing human thought. As we now live in the scientific era, there should be no hesitation whatever about considering the possibility of symbolizing the real nature of God scientifically as well as through sentiment.

SYMBOLS CHANGE AND RISE

Two important points must here be borne in mind, One is that the coming generation will only take seriously the presentation of any vital subject which is interpreted through symbols that are ordered, exact, and understandable, whilst also expressing the deepest sentiment and culture. In fact, today as never before, intelligent and specific symbols are *essential* to the thoughtful consideration of religious as well as of scientific matters. The second point is that it must be recognized that symbols are but representations, and that thought must gradually rise above symbols to the cultivated understanding of the subject itself, where inspired thought reflects the very essence and nature of the subject. It has been well said that "as we rise, the symbols disappear."

Let us also remember that a symbol is not a rigid, unchanging concept. For instance, a small boy is taught that a single brick represents "one," and that when another brick is placed with it, they represent "two." Then he begins to apply these symbols to other objects besides bricks. Later that boy's concept of "one" is no longer represented by an object but by the figure "1," and his concept of "two" is represented by the figure "2". At a further stage he starts to compute through these symbols, and when he comes to algebra he may even use such symbols as "x" and "y" to represent the aforesaid "1" and "2." So, although fundamental fact remains permanent, symbols constantly change and rise.

Similarly, the concept of God and the symbols to represent that concept have progressively changed in human history. Almost everything of which human thought can conceive has been used at some time or other as a symbol to interpret God. In past ages the nature of God has been represented not only by such things as the sun, the moon, and the stars, but by animals and effigies of various kinds. The Hebrew nation at one point, began to symbolize God with some degree of definiteness as Jahweh or Jehovah, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses later identified Jehovah as the God of Israel, and symbolized Him as I AM That I AM. About three hundred years after Moses, the Hebrew prophets began to identify God as the God of all men, and to see that He manifests Himself universally through a Christ or divine idea. Jesus called God "Father," and used the symbols of "Spirit" and "Truth" to describe His true nature. The apostle John conveyed especially the sense of God as Love. Christianity has symbolized God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Even in our age God is still symbolized by religious bodies in manifold ways.

A CALCULUS: A PROCESS OF REASONING

This is a scientific age, and therefore symbols, to be acceptable to the thinker of today, must necessarily be ordered, definite, and exact. In the science of mathematics, of what fixed value would the number 5 be if in the basic order of counting it occasionally came before the number 4, and sometimes after? Moreover, of what value would the digits in mathematics be unless they could be combined and used in computation in an ordered calculus of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division?

It follows logically that, once having decided on definite symbols to illustrate ideas in any subject, one must then be able to put these symbols into what is known as a *calculus*, or a process of reasoning by symbols, for the purposes of intelligent computation. The word "calculus" is derived from the Latin "calculus," a pebble, a stone used in reckoning, and hence a reckoning. Webster defines "calculus," in part, as "A method of computation; process of reasoning by the use of symbols."

The idea of definite symbols of reality operating in a calculus of specific thought, such as Leibniz always hoped to find, frequently seems abstract to the older generation, whereas the younger people, who are today being educated on a more scientific basis, regard such a thing as quite natural. As we have seen, however, man uses symbols of some sort in almost every detail of his experience, and with these symbols he *reasons*. Thus, whether he knows it or not, he is always using a calculus of general human thought. The only difference is that in scientific matters the symbols and their calculus are ordered and definite, whilst in general experience they are somewhat vague, and are the outcome of tradition, habit, association, etc.

To summarize: a symbol is merely a representation, or something that expresses something else. A symbol may be ordered and definite, or it may be just the outcome of general human thought. A calculus is a process of reasoning by the use of symbols, and this calculus in scientific matters is exact and ordered, whilst in ordinary human experience it is more or less vague.

THE USE OF NUMERICAL SYMBOLISM IN THE BIBLE

The Bible, from cover to cover, is a record of developing spiritual thought and experience, symbolized by objects, by nations and tribes, by sentiment, idea, number, and indeed in countless ways. Moreover, the Scriptures illustrate that these symbols operate in a definite calculus of inspired thought. The fact that this record is mingled with traditional Jewish history, folklore, and mythology in no way affects its fundamental value.

Is it sufficient, then, to try to gain a right understanding of the teachings of the Bible merely by considering the symbols derived from sentiment and object, whilst ignoring the specific and ordered symbols through idea and number, simply because thought is influenced by traditional beliefs? The youth of to-day will not accept the teaching of the Bible at all unless it can be presented intelligently, scientifically, and practically,

as well as from an ethical point of view, and those who are regarded as leaders of religious thought would do well to face this fact.

Before we consider number as a very important example of exact symbolism in the Bible, let us remember that mathematical symbols are regarded as the most accurate in human thought. Maurice Maeterhcnck, in *The Life of Space*, writes:— Mathematics merely translates what we cannot as yet say, what as yet we are unable even to think.

The significance of number as a means of symbolizing metaphysical values is today being widely recognized. Lance L. Whyte, in a recent broadcast on the work of Whitehead and Russell, stated:— Mathematical philosophy has dispersed old prejudices and provided a fresh and uniquely powerful intellectual technique which still awaits its appropriate scientific application. It is for another generation to use that technique to establish the fundamental principles of a new age.

At this point it should be stated that the author is in no way a numerologist, nor does he believe in numerology. It is undoubtedly true, however, that the writers of the Bible used certain definite numbers to symbolize the operation of spiritual fact in an exact way, just as they used the “mustard seed” or “the secret place of the most High” to symbolize spiritual fact in a pictorial and familiar way. The best known authorities on the Bible designate certain numbers as being regarded by the Hebrews as “sacred numbers.”

It is believed that even before the time of the Hebrews men had accepted specific numerical symbols to illustrate essential thought. The number “one,” for instance, had been accepted as a symbol of the one great First Cause, for no matter how many deities were worshipped, there was generally in the thoughts of men some acknowledgment of one supreme First Cause. Sir Charles Marston, in his book *The Bible Comes Alive*, states that “the evidence of observed facts postulates Monotheism, or the worship of one God, as the original religion of both the civilized, and the primitive, Races of mankind.”

Many thinkers agree that the Chaldeans realized that in earthly experience chance ruled and little could be depended upon, and so they turned for guidance to the ordered things of the heavenly system. To establish an even more definite sense of these things, they symbolized them mathematically. For instance, the number “three” as a symbol of spiritual things was derived from the sun, the moon, and the stars. Pythagoras stressed the importance of this symbol in his elucidation of the triangle, one of the basic mathematical figures. The “three” has certainly dominated all religious thought; Christianity adopted the symbol to signify the Trinity,—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Thus “three” has come to represent the threefold essential nature of God.

Another mathematical symbol of vital importance was the number “four,” the significance of which was derived from the four points of the compass—north, east, south, and west. The Chaldeans were to a great extent nomads, and naturally,

in a land where travel was slow and difficult, everything depended on the sense of direction. The number first therefore, came to signify in spiritual matters four cardinal points of divine calculation and direction.

Then there was the symbol “seven,” which originated from the seven heavenly bodies as recognized at that period. To the people of that time the seven great bodies of the solar system represented the completeness of the heavenly system, and therefore this number was used later to illustrate the sense of divine completeness and perfection.

The symbol “twelve” was adopted from the twelve signs of the Zodiac, which were at one time regarded as influencing and controlling the affairs of men, and thus “twelve” became the symbol of government and of the proof of divine fact.

It is believed that all these symbols were originally derived from the three great mathematical figures,—the sphere, the triangle, and the square,—indicating the numbers 1, 3, and 4; for 7, 10, and 12 can be arrived at by adding or multiplying the numbers 1, 3, and 4.

THE PROPHETIC ACHIEVEMENT

It is well for us to face the fact here that the story of the right idea of God and its appearing to men did not start with the Bible, as has been so generally believed. E. Griffith-Jones writes in Peake’s Commentary on the Bible:—

In the first place, *we must once and for all set aside the pre-critical view of the Bible as an isolated and complete book.* Before the dawn of criticism, scholars and commentators dealt with it as though it were the pure result of an immediate and unrelated revelation. It was like Melchizedek, “without father and without mother,” owing nothing to any previous literature, and having no affinity with the sacred books of other nations. We now know that, however unique it may be in its contents and method, it was the deposit of a complex series of religious movements, dating from very ancient times. It is no longer possible to trace its indebtedness to all the specific sources; but it is certain that the religious life and faith of which it is the exponent was a stream that drew its waters from a vast watershed of spiritual history and experience. We can follow some of its tributaries far back into previous ages.

Is it not a matter of great moment that the Hebrew prophets, recognizing the importance to past generations of these mathematical symbols, wisely accepted them as pertinent symbols for all time, and then lifted them above the realm of paganism and astrology on to the lane of monotheism? Moreover, they accomplished something far more far-reaching than this, for they used these mathematical symbols 1, 3, 4, 7, 10, and 12,—all signifying great spiritual and scientific facts,—not only individually, but also collectively, to symbolize a perfect system of idealism whereby the ideas of reality and divinity could be made intelligently available to all men in all ages.

Consider then the deep significance of such a perfect and exact system of revelation, especially if it can be proved that it was known and accepted by the prophets and also by Christ Jesus and his immediate followers. In the Book of Revelation, which forms the climax of the Bible, John certainly illustrates this divine system in the most prolific and definite manner; indeed, without an understanding of its mathematical symbols, depicting countless spiritual facts and their use in human experience, the Book of Revelation could only be, for the most part, an enigma.

THE DIVINE SYSTEM IN THE BIBLE

Before we consider any further the question of whether these specific numbers were combined by the prophets to form a complete system whereby to symbolize the ideas of God, it would be well to determine exactly what constitutes a system, and here is a dictionary definition:— A set or assemblage of things connected, associated, or interdependent, so as to form a complex unity; a whole composed of parts in orderly arrangement according to some scheme or plan;... (Oxford)

From this definition it is evident that a system is the ordered and exact arrangement of elements, and includes nothing that is disconnected or fragmentary.

When Jesus declared, “ye shall know the truth,” he was surely aware of an infinite system of spiritual ideas forever operating in a divine infinite calculus, through the understanding of which all men can avail themselves of a scientific and spiritual process for knowing.

God. What could be more natural than this, and what more inspiring to the earnest seeker after the definite understanding of God?

The author is convinced, therefore, after many years of deep study of the Bible, that in its message may be found a perfect, spiritual, and scientific system of symbols whereby men can interpret and elucidate the infinite ideas of reality,—that is, of God and of the spiritual universe. This metaphysical system permeating the Bible is illustrated not only by numberless objects and multiform spiritual sentiment, but also by exact and specific symbols, of which the mathematical seem to be the most pronounced. Moreover, this system reveals an absolute and exact calculus of spiritual thought and idea.

THE NEW APPROACH

If these conclusions are true, then the whole approach to the Bible and to religion assumes a dignity and certainty which must undoubtedly place them on an entirely new basis,—a basis in line with the questioning scientific age in which we live. Conventional religious thought, or thought that can only regard science as related to material things, may reject these conclusions; but if they are true and fundamental, they must eventually gain a hearing from unbiased thinkers who are not afraid of spiritual and scientific progress.

Because humanity has not so far associated religion and the approach to God

with exact Science, and has therefore not recognized this association in the Bible, that in no way proves that such a relation does not exist. The era of physical science, the outcome of advancing human thought, is now forcing this issue of scientific religion to the surface; and it can only be met through intelligent and fearless analysis and by the acceptance of conclusions arrived at through progressive spiritual and scientific vision.