

HERMENEUTICS

Dr. Don Hender

The Science of Interpretation.

The Literal Sense of Interpretation: This is a true and honest method. It is based on the understanding that the – words of Scripture can be trusted. It is assumed that God intends His revelation to be understood. Divine revelation must be written based upon regular rules of human communication. To “interpret” means to explain the original sense of a speaker or writer. To interpret “literally” means to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to normal and customary usages of language. It is customary to determine the accepted rules of grammar as well as the factual historical and cultural data of Biblical times. Therefore the literal method of interpretation is also called the Grammatico-Historical Method. The presence of figurative language in Scripture does not militate against literal interpretation. Since the literal interpretation properly accepts that which is normal and customary in language, literal interpreters are not hindered by that which is figurative. There is no need to change to a different method of interpretation, e.g. spiritualising or using an allegorical method of interpretation: Although Scripture contains figurative language, the interpreter must be careful not to identify as a figure, that which is intended to be actual, especially in Bible Prophecy e.g. “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Psalm 122:6). This is a request concerning the welfare of the earthly city of Jerusalem, not to be taken figuratively as a command to pray for the Christian Church!

The literal method is sometimes accused of missing the spiritual content of Scripture in its interpretation. Spiritual truths when revealed are revealed as the written Word of God. Literal interpretation of that which is written brings out these truths. God chooses to convey spiritual truths principles through the way of normal earthly language. Scripture revelation must be interpreted according to normal earthly grammar and language. Literal interpretation should be according to the normal human comprehension. Literal interpreters believe that Scripture is able to convey all that God wants us to know, perfectly adequately. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, “The secret things belong to the Lord but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever”. Perhaps we should consider what non-literalists mean by ‘spiritual’. They regard Scripture parts to have secret meanings, or symbolism and mystical thought attached to its meaning and not to be considered literal at all. Therefore they have a basic presupposition which leads them to interpret only spiritually, allegorically, or even mystically. Actually the reverse seems more factual and we are to receive it that way. In suggesting that Scripture cannot say what it should mean in a straightforward way and needing a hidden sense, requiring spiritualization, implies an irreverent view of the Word of God, in fact.

The literal method of interpretation is concerned with only interpretation and not with application. The first interest is – what does the Bible actually say? Then application may be made, from the interpretation.

There are certain aspects of Scripture which appear as types and symbols, which would possess a wider and deeper meaning, e.g. Satan can be seen in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. These, however, do not introduce a mystical element or different sense into the Bible. The interpretation of types and symbols spring from a literal basis of interpretative method. The literal method can include both actual and figurative, the earthly and the heavenly. A substitute word for literal could be ‘plain, or proper, natural or normal’. However the word ‘literal’ best explains what is really intended.

John Walvoord views literal interpretation as a consistent, general approach to the interpretation of any portion of Scripture. He says, “Premillennialists insist that one general rule of interpretation should be applied to all areas of theology and that prophecy does not require spiritualization any more than any other aspects of truth. History is history, not allegory. Facts are facts. Prophesied future events are just what they are prophesied.” Walvoord calls for a normative approach to the interpretation of the Bible within the perspective of a general hermeneutic.



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Scripture is sufficiently clear in context to express what God promised to do. Secondly, Scripture is sufficiently complete in context to establish valid expectations of the future acts of God. Biblical revelation is verbal communication that is capable of expressing the truth clearly, perhaps in a broad outline or in a selected description, focussing on a particular issue which God wishes to declare in some detail.

A text is usually clear enough in context to state a truth concerning what God has done, or said, or wants to say concerning the future perhaps and therefore intends to act in His appointed time. At the same time the text is sufficiently complete to establish validity as the Word of God, in the expectancy of the action of God, perhaps history to us now, or still could be in our future history, yet to come to pass.

Thus we underline the value of a literal interpretation as the valid hermeneutic. One word of warning however, and that is to realise the danger of interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament. There are many truths from the Old Testament which are still unfulfilled and are to be understood as to be quite separate from New Testament truth and is not necessarily linked with New Testament truth, e.g. there are many statements concerning the detailed future of Israel and Jerusalem, which are not at all detailed in the New Testament, several of which are in Isaiah, e.g. chapter 33: 20 & 21, "Look upon Zion, the city of solemnities, thine eyes shall see Jerusalem' a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down... but there the glorious Lord will be to us a place of broad rivers and streams (peace), wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass by" (no warship, no more war). Similarly Isaiah 46:13, "I bring near my righteousness" (for Israel); "it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry; and I will place salvation in Zion, for Israel my Glory".

The above study demonstrates and preserves the integrity of a literal contextual interpretation of Scripture. **When a literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense or it may become nonsense!**

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Recommended Reading:

"A Case for Premillennialism: A new Consensus", by Donald Campbell and Jeffrey Townsend. (Moody Press 1992).

"The Interpretation of Prophecy", by Paul Lee Tan. Chapter 1 in particular. (Bible Communications Inc. Dallas, Texas USA. 1993).

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