

# Hermeneutics – Literal, Grammatical, Historical

“Literal is not opposed to spiritual but to figurative; spiritual is an antithesis on the one hand to material, and on the other to carnal (in a bad sense). The Literalist is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly literal being regarded as literal, and that which is manifestly figuratively being so regarded. The position of the Spiritualist is not that which is properly indicated by the term. He is one who holds that certain portions are to be normally interpreted; other portions are to be regarded as having a mystical sense. The terms properly expressive of the schools are normal and mystical.”

— E. R. Craven, ed., *The Revelation of John*, in Lange’s *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (1874; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 12:98.

“When you read the Bible assume God is speaking in normal language, common everyday communication. If it says man, it means man. If it says the man went somewhere, it means he went somewhere. If it says he built a house, it means he built a house. This is understanding Scripture in the literal sense of language. Scripture employs are similes, metaphors, hyperbole, and figurative language throughout. Even sarcasm is employed as a literary device. Those devices are used alongside normal, literal language to help illustrate or punctuate what Scripture is saying to the reader. There is seldom confusion in what God’s Word says or how it says it.”

— John MacArthur, *Should I Interpret the Bible Literally?*, Friday, November 7, 2014.

“Of all the rules, a literal interpretation is the crux. Yet it is very often misunderstood or misstated. Thus, when speaking of literal or normal interpretation, it is important to carefully clarify and define both what is not meant as well as what is meant. Literal interpretation does not refer to “wooden literalism,” that is, failing to take into account figures of speech and symbols that are common to all language and communication. For instance, if I were to tell someone that my dog “kicked the bucket,” no one familiar with the idiom would take that to mean that my dog actually used his leg to kick a plastic bucket. Everyone knows it’s a figurative way of saying that my dog died. Literal interpretation is not wooden literalism. It’s an umbrella term that encompasses both “plain literal” and “figurative literal” language.”

— Mark Hitchcock, *The End : A Complete Overview of Bible Prophecy and the End of Days*, (Carol Stream, Ill., Tyndale House Publishers, 2012), 52.

“Therefore, interpret prophecy literally unless the implicit or explicit teaching of the New Testament suggests typological interpretation.”

— Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 205.

“Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the Scripture hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. Neverthelater, the Scripture useth proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently.”

— William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (Parker ed., Doctrinal Treatises, 1928), 307 – 9.

“Whenever times of literal interpretation dominated, there has been an increase in biblical knowledge and spiritual awakening. Conversely, whenever non-literal interpretation dominated, there has been moral and spiritual decline, in addition to spiritual ignorance. Whenever non-literal interpretation dominates, ignorance of the truth of God’s Word prevails.”

— Ron J. Bigalke, *Historical Survey Of Biblical Interpretation*, *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 14, no. 42 (August 2010): 50.

“This [literal, grammatico-historical] method, as its adherents have explained times without number, leaves room for all the devices and nuances of language, including the use of figure, metaphor, simile, symbol, and even allegory.”

— Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 139.

"Just as in any proper interpretation of Old Testament history Joseph is always Joseph and not Christ, even so in prophecy Israel is always Israel and never the Church. This does not mean that the preacher may never take a prophecy concerning Israel and apply it to the Church. But he should always know what he is talking about, and make certain that his hearers know, so that there can be no possible confusion between the history and its typical application, or between a prophecy and any so-called "typical interpretation."

— Alva McClain, *The Nature and Interpretation of Prophecy*, 141.

"If we reject the literal method of interpretation as the universal rule for the interpretation of all prophecies, how are we to interpret them? Well, of course, there are many passages in prophecy that were meant to be taken literally. In fact a good working rule to follow is that the literal interpretation of the prophecy is to be accepted (a) unless the passages contain obviously figurative language, or (b) unless the New Testament gives authority for interpreting them in other than a literal sense, or (c) unless a literal interpretation would produce a contradiction with truths, principles, or factual statements contained in non-symbolic books of the New Testament. Another obvious rule to be followed is that the clearest New Testament passages in non-symbolic books are to be the norm for the interpretation of prophecy, rather than obscure or partial revelations contained in the Old Testament. In other words we should accept the clear and plain parts of Scripture as a basis for getting the true meaning of the more difficult parts of Scripture."

— Floyd Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, in *Amillennialism Today*, ed. William E. Cox (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1966), 24–25, 53–54.

"... when an interpreter leaves literal interpretation, he also leaves the guidelines and restraints of history and grammar. There is truth to the idea that when one spiritualizes the Scriptures the interpreter becomes the final authority instead of Scripture itself."

— Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 110.

"When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

— David L. Cooper, *The God of Israel*, 3.

"To interpret Scripture literally is not to be committed to a "wooden literalism," nor to a "letterism," nor to a neglect of the nuances that defy any "mechanical" understanding of language. Rather, it is to commit oneself to a starting point and that starting point is to understand a document the best one can in the context of the normal, usual, customary, tradition range of designation which includes "tacit" understanding."

— Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 102.

"Therefore, without prejudging the nature of Holy Scripture one way or another (whether there is a deeper or profounder meaning expressed typologically, allegorically, mythologically, or existentially), we must start our interpretation of Holy Scripture from the stance of literal or philological interpretation."

— Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 104.

"The program of the literal interpretation of Scripture does not overlook the figures of speech, the symbols, the types, the allegories that as a matter of fact are to be found in Holy Scripture. It is not a blind letterism nor a wooden literalism as is so often the accusation."

— Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 105.

"A basic requirement for the understanding of these documents is their grammatico-historical interpretation or exegesis—bringing out of the text the meaning the writers intended to convey and which their readers were expected to gather from it."

— F.F. Bruce, *Interpretation of the Bible*, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 565.

"The general parameters of this [dispensational] theological method include a stratified process that collates and analyzes data first at the exegetical level to form a biblical theology which then serves as the basis for systematic theology.... Once

the human authorial meaning is determined, then that meaning becomes fixed in time and does not change. The reader then examines how a later author uses that historically conditioned meaning in subsequent writings. Since the OT provides the foundational building block for NT theology, the traditional dispensationalist argues that the OT literal interpretation must be preserved in light of later progressive revelation."

— Mappes and House, *A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism*, 12-13.

"To justify a spiritualizing approach on the basis of the book's many symbols misses a significant distinction between the way God gave the revelation to John and the way readers should interpret that Revelation."

— Robert L. Thomas, *A Classical Dispensational View of Revelation*, in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 181.

"This means that we take the prophet to mean exactly what he says— "literalistically" (except in cases of obvious and declared metaphor)— though the fulfillment of what he says may greatly transcend both what he knows and the terms he uses."

— E.F. Kevan, *The Covenants and the Interpretation of the Old Testament*, *EvQ* 26 (1954): 24.

"In interpreting visions, symbols and signs in apocalyptic literature, one is seldom left to his own ingenuity to discover the truth. In most instances an examination of the context or comparison with a parallel biblical passage provides the Scripture's own interpretation of the visions and symbols employed."

— J. Dwight Pentecost, *Daniel*, in *BKCOT* (Victor Books, 1997), editors, John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, 1323.

"The biblical text has only one meaning, it's literal meaning, and this is to be found by means of grammatical-historical study. If the author intended a typical significance it will be clear in the text. And if we see a typical significance not perceived by the original author it must be consistent with the literal meaning. Typology is not an exegesis or interpretation of a text but a study of relationships between events, persons and institutions recorded in biblical texts."

— David L. Baker, *Typology and the Christian Use of the Old Testament*, *SJT* 29 (April 1976): 146-148.

"One of the most attractive features of dispensationalism is that it is a method of interpreting Scripture that appears to be logical, tidy, and all-encompassing."

— Carl E. Olson, *Will Catholics Be "Left Behind"? A Catholic Critique of The Rapture and Today's Prophecy Preachers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 242.

"We all agree that most literature, including the Bible, is usually meant to be understood according to the literal construction of the words which are used. Even in common speech with one another, we assume the other person is to be taken literally unless it is perfectly obvious that he is using a metaphor, or is allegorizing, or is in some other way alerting us to the fact that the usual meaning of words is not in play at the moment. Then, and then only, will we interpret other than literally. All interpreters do that. The same is true with respect to the Bible. Most of what it says is to be construed, everybody admits, "literally." There are certain parts of it which everyone, including the dispensationalist, admits are not to be construed literally."

— John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1991), 78-79.

"We should not accuse the dispensationalists of being absolute literalists nor should they accuse non-dispensationalists of being absolute spiritualizers. We all are literalists up to a certain point. At the point where we differ, there is a tendency for the dispensationalists to be literalistic where the non-dispensationalist tends to interpret the Bible figuratively. But to say on the basis of that limited divergence of interpretation that the two schools represent fundamentally different approaches is not warranted."

— John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1991), 80.

"Luther rejected the traditional "spiritual" meanings or fourfold interpretation of Scripture and moved toward a single literal meaning of the text, except where a spiritual interpretation was clearly intended by the author. His historical appreciation of the OT was a central factor in Reformation Theology. However, the question of its literal sense in relation to the NT remained a legitimate one. Luther followed Lefèvre d'Étaples and argued that the writers of the OT were aware of the coming Christ. The unity of Scripture, found in Christ, meant that the OT tended to be read by Luther through the gospel, its historical sense shaded to foreshadowings of Christ and his church. Finally, the antithesis that Luther drew

between law and gospel tended to further the diversity that Luther found in the two Testaments as he feared introducing a new law under the guise of the gospel, a characteristic he found in both Rome and the emerging radical and Reformed movements.”

— Rodney Petersen, Continuity and Discontinuity: The Debate Throughout Church History, in John Feinberg's, Continuity and Discontinuity (Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.): Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments. 0 ed., e-book (Crossway, 1988), 26.

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“Parameters of Meaning – Rule 1: Stick to the plain sense of the words in a passage whenever possible, always observing figures of speech

Parameters of Meaning – Rule 2: Induction and deduction are inescapably linked (via retrodiction or ‘abduction’), but induction is always prior to deduction. Never ask “But what about?” questions till you know what the text actually says!

Parameters of Meaning – Rule 3: Avoid importing foreign hermeneutical grids which dictate beforehand how one is going to interpret a passage. This distorts exegesis.

Parameters of Meaning – Rule 4: Any Biblical interpretation must accord with those Scriptures which reveal the correspondence between what God says and what God does. This is especially true when one is given a correspondence between what God says to Himself and what He then does. The wording of the Biblical Covenants are prime examples of this rule. Thus, no interpretation can be admitted which opposes these covenants.

Parameters of Meaning – Rule 5: Do not contrast the plain-sense with a supposedly deeper “spiritual” sense. This implies God doesn’t mean what He says and is thus equivocal in His very nature; which in turn incurs heavy penalties philosophically.

Parameters of Meaning – Rule 6: Beware of basing an interpretation on the shifting sands of a supposed “genre”; especially “apocalyptic.” Make sure the interpretive decision is well grounded.

Parameters of Meaning – Rule 7: Never draw theological conclusions that are based upon typology. Types are too uncertain and debatable for doctrines to be formulated with them.

Parameters of Meaning – Rule 8: Never ground a teaching on disputed, ambiguous or debated texts (e.g. Matt. 10:23). At best they may serve to support a given position. Doctrines should come from the strongest possible connections between text and teaching.”

Website Reference: <https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2015/08/03/the-parameters-of-meaning-rule-7/>