

The First Foundation: Consistent Literal Interpretation

by Thomas Ice

Consistent literal interpretation is essential to properly understanding what God is saying in the Bible. Yet some believe that consistent literal interpretation is either impossible or impractical. One critic believes it to be a "presumption" that "is unreasonable" and "an impossible ideal."¹ In spite of false characterization, what do we mean by consistent literal interpretation?

A DEFINITION OF LITERAL INTERPRETATION

The dictionary defines literal as "belonging to letters." Further, it says literal interpretation involves an approach "based on the actual words in their ordinary meaning, . . . not going beyond the facts."² "Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language."³ How is this done? It can only be accomplished through an interpretation of the written text which includes consideration of the grammatical (according to the rules of grammar), historical (consistent with the historical setting of the passage), contextual (in accord with its context) method of interpretation. This is what literalists mean by consistently literal interpretation.

GRAMMATICAL, HISTORICAL, CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

Grammatical

The grammatical aspect of literal interpretation considers the impact that grammar plays on a passage. This means that a student of the text should correctly analyze the grammatical relationships of words, phrases, and sentences to one another. Literal interpreter Dr. Roy Zuck writes,

When we speak of interpreting the Bible grammatically, we are referring to the process of seeking to determine its meaning by ascertaining four things: (a) the meaning of words (lexicology), (b) the form of words (morphology), (c) the function of words (parts of speech), and (d) the relationships of words (syntax).⁴

Dr. Zuck has been teaching biblical interpretation for many years at Dallas Seminary and I believe his recent book *Basic Bible Interpretation* is the best place to start for anyone interested in learning how to interpret the Bible. Dr. Zuck gives further amplification of the four areas he noted above:

In the meaning of words (lexicology), we are concerned with (a) etymology-how words are derived and developed, (b) usage-how words are used by the same and other authors, (c) synonyms and antonyms-how similar and opposite words are used, and (d) context-how words are used in various contexts.

In discussing the form of words (morphology) we are looking at how words are structured and how that

affects their meaning. For example the word eat means something different from ate, though the same letters are used. The word part changes meaning when the letter s is added to it to make the word parts. The function of words (parts of speech) considers what the various forms do. These include attention to subjects, verbs, objects, nouns, and others, as will be discussed later. The relationships of words (syntax) are the way words are related or put together to form phrases, clauses, and sentences.⁵

The grammatical aspect of literal interpretation lets us know that any interpretation conflicting with grammar is invalid.

Historical

Proper interpretation of the Bible means that the historical context must be taken into account. This aspect means that one must consider the historical setting and circumstances in which the books of the Bible were written. Dr. Paul Tan explains:

The proper concept of the historical in Bible interpretation is to view the Scriptures as written during given ages and cultures. Applications may then be drawn which are relevant to our times. For instance, the subject of meat offered to idols can only be interpreted from the historical and cultural setting of New Testament times. Principles to be drawn are relevant to us today.⁶

Contextual

"A passage taken out of context is a pretext." This slogan is certainly true! Yet, one of the most common mistakes made by those who are found to have misinterpreted a passage in the Bible is that of taking a verse out of its Divinely ordered context. Even though a sentence may be taken from the Bible, it is not the Word of God if it is placed into a context which changes the meaning from that which God intended in its original context. Dr. Zuck says:

The context in which a given Scripture passage is written influences how that passage is to be understood. Context includes several things:

the verse(s) immediately before and after a passage the paragraph and book in which the verses occur the dispensation in which it was written the message of the entire Bible the historical-cultural environment of that time when it was written.⁷

A widely used example of a verse taken out of context is 2 Chronicles 7:14: "and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray . . ." Usually this is quoted as an explanation for why America is in decline. Because "My people" are addressed, it is said that the success of a nation is dependent upon the obedience of Christians to the Lord. Thus God blesses or curses a nation in accordance with Christian obedience. Then 2 Chronicles 7:14 is cited as a formula for national restoration because the passage says to "humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from

their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

I believe that this is an illustration of a passage taken out of context because of the following contextual factors:

"My people" are said in 2 Chronicles 6:24 to be "Israel" as is also indicated by the flow of the historical context.

Solomon is preparing to dedicate the just completed Temple and 7:14 is God's renewal of the Mosaic Covenant under which Israel and only Israel operates.

Since this passage involves Israel and not the church it is improper to speculatively relate it to present day American Christianity. Proper contextual interpretation would allow for the general observation that God delights in a humble and obedient people, but obedience and pray should be offered according to His plan for the church.

FIGURES OF SPEECH

Literal interpretation recognizes that a word or phrase can be used either plainly (denotative) or figuratively (connotative). As in our own conversations today, the Bible may use plain speech, such as "He died yesterday" (denotative use of language). Or the same thing may be said in a more colorful way, "He kicked the bucket yesterday" (connotative use of language). An important point to be noted is that even though we may use a figure of speech to refer to someone's death, we are using that figure to refer to an event that literally happened. Some interpreters are mistaken to think that just because a figure of speech may be used to describe an event (i.e., Jonah's experience in the belly of the great fish in Jonah 2), that the event was not literal. Such is not the case. A "Golden Rule of Interpretation" has been developed to help us discern whether or not a figure of speech was intended by an author:

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.⁸

Literalists understand that a figure of speech is employed by Isaiah teaching that the Adamic curse upon nature will be reversed in the millennium when he says, "And all the trees of the field will clap their hands" (Isa. 55:12d). This figure is discerned by specific factors in the context in which it was written, all dealing with the removal of the curse upon nature at this future time. Even though figurative language is employed, it will literally happen in history.

LITERAL VERSES LITERAL

Dr. Elliott Johnson of Dallas Seminary has noted that much of the confusion over literal interpretation can be removed when one properly understands the two primary ways the term has been used down through church history: "(1) the clear, plain sense of a word or phrase as over against a figurative use, and (2) a system that views the text as providing the basis of the true interpretation."⁹ Thus, literalists, by and large, have used the term literal to refer to their system of interpretation (the consistent use of the grammatical-historical system; Johnson's #2), and once inside that system, literal refers to whether or not a specific word or phrase is used in its context in a figurative or literal sense (Johnson's #1).

Johnson's second use of literal (i.e., systematic literalism) is simply the grammatical-historical system

consistently used. The grammatical-historical system was revived by the Reformers. It was set against the spiritual (spiritualized) or deeper meaning of the text that was a common approach during the Middle Ages. The literal meaning was used simply as a springboard to a deeper ("spiritual") meaning, which was viewed as more desirable. A classic spiritualized interpretation would for example, see the four rivers of Genesis 2-the Pishon, Havilah, Tigris and Euphrates-as representing the human body, soul, spirit and mind. Coming from such a system, the Reformers saw the need to get back to the literal or textual meaning of the Bible. For instance, Martin Luther wanted to debate John Eck from the text of the Bible.

The system of literal interpretation is the grammatical-historical or textual approach to interpretation. Use of literalism in this sense could be called "macroliteralism." Within macroliteralism, the consistent use of the grammatical-historical system yields the interpretative conclusion, for example, that Israel always and only refers to national Israel. The church will not be substituted for Israel if the grammatical-historical system of interpretation is consistently used because there are no indicator in the text of Scripture that such is the case. Therefore, one must bring an idea from outside the text by saying that the passage really means something that it does not actually say. This kind of replacement approach is a mild form of spiritualized, or allegorical, interpretation. So when speaking of those who do replace Israel with the church as not taking the Bible literally and spiritualizing the text, it is true, since such a belief is contrary to a macroliteral interpretation.

Consistently literal interpreters, within the framework of the grammatical-historical system, do discuss whether or not a word, phrase, or the literary genre of a biblical book is a figure of speech (connotative) or is to be taken literally/plainly (denotative). This is Johnson's first use of literal which could be called "microliteralism." Thus, within microliteralism, there may be discussion by literalists as to whether or not a given word or phrase is being used as a figure of speech, based on the context of a given passage. Some passages are quite naturally clearer than others and a consensus among interpreters develops, whereas other passages may find literal interpreters divided as to whether or not they should be taken as a figure of speech. However, this is more a problem of application than of method.

Reconstructionist Ken Gentry, in his attack on consistent literal interpretation, argues that "consistent literalism is unreasonable."¹⁰ One of the ways he attempts to prove his point is by arguing that, since literalists take some words and phrases as figures of speech, they are not consistently literal.¹¹ He asserts that, "the dispensational claim to 'consistent literalism' is frustrating due to its inconsistent employment."¹² Gentry seeks to discredit literalism by giving examples of literalists who interpret certain passages as containing figures of speech, citing this as inconsistent with the system of literal interpretation. According to Gentry, the literalist has to abandon literal interpretation when he realizes that Jesus refers figuratively to Himself as a door in John 10:9.¹³ Gentry is not defining literal interpretation the way literalists do. Therefore, his conclusions about literal interpretation are misguided because he commonly mixes the two senses described by Johnson. When speaking of the macroliteralism, he uses an example from microliteralism, and vice versa, therefore appearing to have shown an inconsistency in literal interpretation. In reality, the examples cited fall within the framework of how literalists have defined what they mean by literal interpretation.

CONCLUSION

God's Word is to be understood through literal interpretation. It is an important foundation stone

supporting the Pre-Trib Rapture, because when the Bible is consistently interpreted literally, from Genesis to Revelation, the Pre-Trib position is hard to avoid. W

Endnotes

1 Kenneth Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), pp. 148, 146.

2 Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged, Second Edition, p. 1055.

3 Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Assurance Publishers, 1974), p. 29.

4 Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1991), p. 100.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 100-01. 6 Tan, *Interpretation of Prophecy*, p. 103.

7 Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 77.

8 David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library: Graphically Illustrated*, (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), p. 11.

9 Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 9.

10 Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 148.

11 For examples of his approach see Gentry, pp. 153-58.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 153. 13 *Ibid.*, p. 148.