

**Literal Interpretation:
A Plea for Consensus**

OVERVIEW

What is the starting point for properly understanding and interpreting prophecy? There is often confusion and disagreement among Christians as to the best method of approaching the interpretation of biblical texts. In this essay the author affirms both the inerrancy of Scripture as well as its ability to be understood when interpreted plainly and consistently. The Bible is authoritative, and the meanings expressed in the texts are true and have reference to what is real unless the context indicates otherwise.

Introduction

To promote "literal interpretation" in a post-modern environment would be futile unless people were sympathetic to some traditional values and open to consider the arguments. One value is the necessity to retain a view of truth and objective reality. A literal system is based on this view of objective reality, yet the literal principle cannot ensure objective practice in interpretation. In fact, rather than supposing an objectivity, I desire to promote "literal" as a believer in Christ and as one blessed with the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit.

These two presuppositions will affect the objectivity of the thought process, but both faith and the illumination given by the Spirit are indispensable to reaching valid biblical interpretations.

Literal Interpretation

Literal interpretation formulates. -A system that takes what the Bible claims to be true of itself as a necessary framework for interpretation. Basic Reformation claims of *solus Scriptura*, *sola fide* and the perspicuity of Scripture frame a system of literal interpretation.

In addition to formulating this system, I acknowledge that there are other necessary influences on interpretation. An interpreter brings some preunderstandings that will influence the interpretation of individual texts. Irenaeus once described one as like placing together a grand mosaic, or like assembling Homeric verses into their correct and coherent plot structure. This influence involves a biblical theology of progressive revelation for the whole Bible. Further, it is necessary to reconstruct the historical references from a text to understand the world to which, and about which, the text speaks. While both a theology and a historical reconstruction may influence an interpretation of a text, they ought never override the commitments of a literal system.

While the task of gaining a consensus may seem futile and anachronistic to most, it may seem unnecessary for others. It is for these others that this essay is written, because, as Martin Marty has commented, "Literalists unite against their opponents, but they are far from unanimous on matters they regard as important."¹ The objective of this essay is to identify the necessary and sufficient concerns needed to formulate a system of literal interpretation. If

"literal interpretation" is included in a doctrinal statement, it is important that there is agreement on what is believed.

The introduction of "literal" must consider the most comprehensive use of the term to refer to a system of interpretation. That system will then entail two related senses of literal. **Literal is a commitment to understanding that the Bible's authority is embedded in the meanings expressed in the words of the text**

This first use of literal is a connotative sense, which reflects a shared belief about what the Bible claims to be true of itself; the Bible is God's Word written in human words.

Literal interpretation has traditionally been considered a staple in biblical studies, whether it was as the basic interpretation at Antioch or as a preliminary interpretation in an Alexandrian approach. These early and pre-critical approaches came under a fundamental challenge in the rise to prominence of historical criticism. Marty summarized the historical debate: "In England and America, at least, for over a century there have been intellectual defenses of biblical literalism. While Harper (Wm. Rainey Harper, 1892) and his kind were making Chicago, Yale, and Harvard advance stations for the 'scientific study of the Bible,' theologians at Princeton were turning that school into one of the bastions of a literalist approach to inerrant Scripture."² These Princetonians were concerned about the theological ramifications of critical interpretation, since they considered the Bible to be a special revelation of God. They concluded that the Bible in the original autographs was verbally and completely inspired, and thus authoritative. Those who considered this doctrine relevant, relied upon certain principles that explained interpretation. These principles are considered in the following summaries.

The Bible speaks with the authority of God. The Bible's authority resides in what God has to say about subjects, and what He has to say to various generations of His people.³ This affirmation of the Bible's testimony about itself has been duly noted and developed by biblical scholars.⁴

The authoritative speaking of a written document resides in the type of meanings expressed by the words of the text. Scholars in legal fields, such as Robert H. Bork,⁵ in literary fields, such as Leland Ryken,⁶ and in philosophical fields, such as E. D. Hirsch,⁷ have acknowledged the importance of the words of a text. Individual words must be taken seriously. Interpreters do not have the freedom to change wording without changing meaning. They do not have the right to disregard words, or even forms of letters, nor to manipulate the wording as critical scholars frequently do. Rather a text is read word by word, line upon line, as the reader gains a comprehension of the meaning expressed in a text.

The authoritative meanings are understood as messages expressed only if the words of a text are read in context. Words by themselves don't represent truths; messages expressed by words communicate truth or error.⁸

Thus words are read by themselves, and in relation to the immediate context, in an attempt to recognize the intended message. That message understood then summarizes, in the reader's mind, the type of meaning expressed in the text. And that message, validly understood by a reader, states the truth of the text.

The importance of reading the words of a text in context, to understand the intended sense, has been stated by David Cooper. In his "Golden Rule of Interpretation," he states, "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... indicate clearly other- wise."⁹ Although the influence of the immediate context is introduced by Cooper as a qualification, it is a determining qualification, overriding

at times a plain sense. Thus I have chosen to introduce the determinative influence of context first as the controlling principle.

The determinative context is the immediate textual context because it directly influences word usage. Other contexts when relevant must be seen as providing a supporting influence. While the subject of "context" may seem easily defined, the grammatical, historical, literary, and theological factors are often difficult to recognize in their appropriate influence. Numerous contexts may come into consideration: parallel biblical passages; the human author's historical consciousness; Israel's cultural beliefs at the time of composition; antecedent canonical theology; social, cultural and communicative issues in the original communication; even contemporary problems and questions.¹⁰ All of these may have a supporting influence in a final decision about the appropriate sense of a word, or words, but the determinative influence must go to the immediate textual context. That context fashions a textual usage which may be clarified and amplified by other supporting contexts.

In an attempt to clarify the abstract issues in the discussion of a literal system of interpretation, Isaiah 9:1-7 will be explored. One issue among contemporary interpreters is the person of the promised king of the line of David. Does the text say that he is a God-man or merely a historic king who is subsequently revealed to be, in fact, a God-man.¹¹ The literal system gives top priority to the wording of the text in the near-context of the oracle (9:1-7), and then it considers Isaiah's broader context (as 7:14, Immanuel, 11:1-16, and so on).

The oracle announces a word of joy to the dark land of Galilee because an unidentified leader shall appear. This person brings joy because he is involved in an enlarged nation that wins release as from an oppressive invader.

Then this person is introduced as one born to shoulder the government of David's kingdom. As unexpected as light in the midst of darkness, so are the names of this ruler—each name expresses a qualification of the ultimate hope of the Davidic line: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

The question turns on the person of the one called "Mighty God." Does this name speak of the king as God? Contemporary scholars question whether seventh century Israel believed her Messiah would be a God-man. Delitzsch questions whether that subject is even addressed in the Old Testament.¹² In order to answer the question, the force of the wording of the text will be examined more closely, under the related senses of literal.

So this connotative use of literal first of all refers to a literal system of interpretation, derived from the fact that the Bible is God's Word expressed in human's words. The two following senses of "literal" depend upon deciding what a word has reference to and what sense the word ought to have in context.

Literal is a commitment that the meanings expressed in a biblical text are true and have reference to what is real unless the context indicates otherwise.

This commitment is based on the basic belief: the Bible is the Word of God and all that God says is true. This belief is about the type of statements found in the Bible, rather than the type of language, or language usage. "Any statement, literal or metaphorical, may be true or false, and its referent may be real or unreal."¹³ The belief in inerrancy implies that biblical statements are true and have reference to reality. There may be an exception, like statements you find in parables, which imagine an experience, as in Luke 15:11 (Mw), "There was a man who had two sons..." The truth there does not have reference to the reality of a father and his sons existing in history, but to an attitude among the Pharisees, as imaged in the eldest son. Likewise, there may be statements like that of the devil, "All this I will give..."

(Matthew 4:9 Mv), which may be a lie, and thus a reference to what is unreal. In each case, the near-context clarifies the type of statement expressed in the text.

While there are some exceptions (so clarified from the near- context), the Bible is the revelation of God, and so its statements are true in sense and real in reference. Thus historical narrative refers to past facts, prophetic discourses refer both to present and to future facts, and epistles refer to historical people and the factual workings of God in salvation.

The criticism raised is that "by deduction they argued that God, being God and thus inerrant, spoke through a necessarily merrant Bible, which they turned into a kind of fact-book."¹⁴ While the Bible is more than a fact-book, it is not less than that. A final answer to such a criticism would require an examination of the type of statement, text by text, and a demonstration of the probable historicity of each. A number of articles consider the issue of historicity.¹⁵ But with our present stage of knowledge, attempts at demonstration have not proven persuasive to all. Yet such a deduction is clearly preferred to critical opinions, such as that the final myth of Exodus is clearly not meant to be a literal version of events.¹⁶ In many such critical treatments, the myth is taken as true in some theological sense, but unreal historically. But what basis exists for any valid distinction, except for some personal preference?

When faith rests in the Bible's testimony that God speaks, and when God's authorship influences a biblical text, like Isaiah 9:6-7, then the reality of a text's reference must be carefully considered. Two questions must be asked: is Isaiah 9:6-7 a literal or a metaphorical statement, and, then, to what reality does the statement refer?

The statement in question is a list of names (v. 6). The sense of some names may be metaphorical (referring to a king as counselor or father), but in this essay, one name is at issue. If the text refers to the king as "Mighty God," to what reality is the text referring? If the name "Mighty God" refers to a man, then the ontological reality remains a man in history, or in prophecy, and the statement is metaphorical. There is nothing in the text to indicate that a god-like man becomes in fact God. Ontologically, a divine person is uncreated and infinite, while a human person is created and finite. The two references are distinct. It is textually incompatible for the same text to refer to a mere human, in a historical context, and to a God-man in the context of Jesus' advent. The statement would thus be taken as equivocal; in a historical context, metaphorical; and in a prophetic context, literal. Thus the true reality to which the state-ment refers is lost.

The question of Isaiah's comprehension of what he says, or the historic audience's understanding of these words, is not the determining issue. A prophet is not the ultimate source of his message (2 Pet. 1:20-21). Rather, at issue in the type of statement is the use of the language in the context. What is the textual evidence that the term "Mighty God" should be understood in a literal sense rather than a metaphorical sense? This is the issue to be considered now.

Literal is an expectation that the words are meant to be understood and used in their primary, matter-of-fact sense unless the context indicates otherwise.

The expectation of a literal sense reflects an important belief in the composition of the Bible. The biblical authors did not speak in an enigmatic fashion, so that a statement carries two textually unrelated or contradictory meanings. This is another way of talking about the perspicuity of Scripture, in which a text in context has only one sense: probably the plain sense. The historical-critical method has been faulted by believers because of the critical presuppositions that provide a foundation for the method.¹⁷ In addition, the method raises

further suspicion if it supports the valid understanding of the same text in two textually unrelated senses: what it meant and what it means.

This expectation of a single, plain, or literal, sense is also based on the belief that the Bible is composed in human words. But a literal sense, while easily illustrated, is difficult to define. So Ramm or Cooper use words like "plain, primary, ordinary, usual, or normal," but in spite of the multiplied descriptions, each simply represents a literary maxim. The maxim represents a first attempt at recognizing the word's meaning, in which a word probably is used in an unmarked or plain sense. Thomas Ice has appropriately concluded: "Cooper does not use the phrase 'common sense,' as critics suggest, by appealing to an abstract theory of common understanding latent in humanity. Instead he defines it within a literary context."¹⁸ The reader of the text recognizes this plain sense as an initial expectation of the sense from a consideration of basic literacy. Yet each reader's basic literacy reflects the culture within which he has gained his literacy. This expectation opens the Bible to a layperson to read and study translations for himself. Such an expectation, with further education, can become a more sophisticated expectation of literal sense based on study of biblical vocabulary from lexical and semantic investigation. Still, the layperson, as any reader, must always test his expectation of a literal sense in view of the facts in the immediate context, and, as Cooper adds, "studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths."

The issue of a single, plain sense may be illustrated in the Isaiah 9:6 text. In the normal sense of language, our initial reading of the sense becomes the starting point in reading the oracle. In such a reading, "Mighty God" would name a divine person and "everlasting" would refer to a divine attribute. This initial reading is supported within the context of the text. The ultimate cause of this remarkable king is the "zeal of the Lord" (9:7), and the reign of this king will begin in history, "from that time on and forever" (9:7). The comprehensiveness of His government and peace knows no limits (9:7). This oracle could only be realized by a divine person if the language is taken at face value.

If, on the other hand, a historical king is what the text meant, then the name must be taken metaphorically. This has the support of a series of metaphors. In comparison to other sources of national direction, the king is a wonderful counselor. In comparing the nation to a family, the king is an everlasting father. In comparison to other human rulers with power, the king is like a mighty god. But was any king in Israel ever considered to be God, let alone the mighty God? Was any king ever worshiped in Jerusalem, as pagan kings had been worshiped? Does not the law prohibit such worship (Ex. 20:2-6)? So it is improbable that this name has the sense of a godlike king.

This exposes the untenable treatment that the historical-critical method often imposes on texts.¹⁹ As a result, the text of Isaiah 9:6 would be treated as supporting two senses for which there is only supposed historical support. When such a method validates textually unrelated meanings between what it meant and what it means, the objective truth and reality of the text is lost. Either the text means a divine-human person or it means a merely human person. And this determination must be made based on the immediate textual context.

Conclusion

Martin Marty raises a final, important question: "What, if anything... does the literalist devotion to biblical inerrancy solve?"²⁰ The answer features two basic distinctives of the Reformation. The first frees the interpreter to operate consistently in faith toward God and what God says-sola fide. In distinction to a historical-critical method, in which everything to

be interpreted is submitted to doubt or skepticism, a literal system begins in accepting the Bible's own claims. Such an approach represents the fairness that any author would desire, in which a sympathetic hearing would precede any critical judgments.

The second distinctive features the authority resident in *sola Scriptura*. The words of a text, understood in context, determine the type of meaning expressed in the Bible. As such, Scripture determines the meaning in distinction to some other person or context being treated as the determining authority.

The type of meaning involves the single sense of the message expressed in a text. This commitment prevents the words from being historically or culturally conditioned, so that, as in Isaiah 9:6, one truth is seen in a historical context and a different truth is seen in a prophetic context. At issue is the loss of truth expressed in a text and the corresponding reference to reality. And that loss is too great to sacrifice for a supposed historical or cultural necessity.

Yet these definitions of literal interpretation, while necessary to preserve the interpretation of the truth taught in the Bible, are not sufficient to solve all the debates over interpretations. This insufficiency is because the definitions are neither innate to common sense nor complete in considering all the issues related to valid interpretation. On one side, it does not rest in Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, which is based "on the belief that reasonable people could intuit moral absolutes"²¹ If such an intuition would provide a consensus about what determines the meaning, then the difficult choices of interpretation, as illustrated in Isaiah 9:6, would at least have an agreement on the basis for making these choices.

On the other side, the literal system is not a complete consideration of all the relevant issues related to interpretation; therefore, there should not be an unrealistic expectation that agreement in interpretations will be reached in literal interpretation of individual texts and particularly of problem texts. But the literal system does cast an appropriate framework within which validation can be considered in the examination of alternate interpretations of a text. Valid interpretations rely upon reason working with the wording of texts subject to the power of the Holy Spirit, and they rely on belief in an objective world of God's creation and the objective reality of God.

¹ Martin B. Marty, "Literalism" in *Bible Review*, vol. x, no. 2, April 1994:42-43.

² *Ibid.* 42. See further James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978): 191-207.

³ David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 14-31.

⁴ Wayne Grudem "Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture" in *Scripture and Truth*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 19-64,

⁵ Robert H. Bork, *The Tempting of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1990).

⁶ Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987).

⁷ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973).

⁸ John S. Feinberg, "Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, eds. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 1-50; and Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

⁹ David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), 11. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*.

¹¹ This particular problem is chosen to illustrate the importance of certain Old Testament prophecies. While there is typological prophecy, there is also direct, predictive prophecy. To read them as historical types when in fact they are predictions is to lose the truth of the passage.

¹² Franz Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1871), 64-78.

¹³ O. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), 131.

¹⁴ Marty, 42.

¹⁵ D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); and Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). A number of articles discuss historicity. Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

¹⁶ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, "Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, 1-48.

¹⁸ Thomas D. Ice, "Dispensational Hermeneutics" in *Issues in Hermeneutics*, eds. Willis and Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 35.

¹⁹ This untenable treatment of the text is illustrated in a conversation between an imagined critic and reader: A reader of Isaiah 9:6 wonders aloud about the meaning of the text: "Who is this king?" The critic responds, "In Isaiah's time, it meant Solomon, the Son of David." In a follow-up question: "Did it only mean Solomon?" "Well, yes, Solomon was the historic king that matched the words of the text most closely. This is what it meant. "But then the times changed and Jesus was born. And with the events surrounding his birth, new facts appeared and the words took on a new and different meaning." Then the reader became even more confused. "How can it mean both Solomon and Christ? Which does the text mean? Does it mean Solomon or Christ?" The critic then seeks to explain. "Solomon is a type of Christ." But the reader then puzzled over what the type might be. "Solomon is 'mighty god' in the sense that he is powerful like God among other kings. "Christ is Mighty God in the sense that He is God, Himself." So the one sense is not a type of the other sense but involves two textually distinct senses. And the same words are treated as though they were an equivocal statement. The reader then wonders if there is any way out of our problem. There is! The same sense is meant in both the historic and in the prophetic reading. In the historic reading it meant more than any historic king and so held out prophetic hope for the future. In the futuristic reading, the language matches Christ and Christ alone in its full force. Christ is the One about whom Isaiah spoke and that in a single sense.

²⁰ Marty, 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*