

LITERAL INTERPRETATION: THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

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Thirty years ago the well known W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, wrote a controversial book entitled *Why I Preach That the Bible is Literally True*.¹ The teaching that there is "literal" truth in Scripture has always raised the question of how one reads the Bible and has always had opposition. Countless people in present Western culture have affirmed that they "believe" the Bible, but "not literally." In a day when radical, relativistic, and postmodern subjectivism has convinced many that it is virtually impossible to read any text from any source with absolute surety, the idea of taking the Bible literally has become even more passé.

This development is in stark contrast to the traditional affirmation of evangelical scholars. Article XVIII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy produced by the International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) two decades ago states the following:

We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture.

We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship.²

That the signers of this document equated "literal" interpretation with the idea of "grammatico-historical exegesis" (to be defined later) is clear from Article XV of the statement issued by the follow-up conference of ICBI dedicated to hermeneutical issues:

We affirm the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text.

We deny the legitimacy of any approach to Scripture that attributes to it meaning which the literal sense does not support.³

However, in spite of efforts at clarification, there seems to be a growing uneasiness among many evangelicals that the entire enterprise in biblical interpretation is being clouded by various factors. The undesirable result is a Bible that is not quite the understandable book for use in the churches that it has been thought to be.⁴ With this in mind, this presentation will review the following areas: (1) the storied history of the use of the term literal as it applies to biblical interpretation, (2) the difficulties in coming to a definition of the concept of literal interpretation, (3) contemporary issues in the use of literal interpretation.

¹W. A. Criswell, *Why I Preach That the Bible Is Literally True* (Nashville: Broadman P, 1969). This book was written in the context of the debate over inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention.

²Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 497.

³Robert D. Preus and Earl D. Radmacher, eds., *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 884-85.

⁴For example, see Robert L. Thomas, "Current Hermeneutical Trends: Toward Explanation or Obfuscation?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (June 1996): 241-56.

A SURVEY OF THE HISTORY OF THE USE OF LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Literalists are often fond of reminding Bible students of Ezra's approach to reading and explaining the text which is given in Nehemiah 8:1-13, especially verse 8:⁵

"So, they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (KJV).⁶ Terry noted long ago that it is possible to "date the beginning of formal exposition of the Scriptures at the time of Ezra."⁷ Developments in Jewish circles after Ezra took a turn toward hyper-literalism or overemphasis on the letter of the law, a focus that brought the strong opposition of Christ Himself as shown in the Gospels.

However, interpretation in the early Church followed different tracks. A form of literal interpretation held sway for at least the first couple of centuries as evidenced by the strong chiliastic or premillennial tendencies that can be found.⁸ This view, based upon a rather literal or straight-forward reading of Old Testament promises, taught and continues to teach a literal, future kingdom on earth. Speaking of the hermeneutics of these early church fathers, Crutchfield notes the following:

Taken as a whole, the extant writings of the apostolic fathers make a very small collection. And the works available to us are neither systematic nor doctrinally specific. With regard to principles of hermeneutics, for example, there are no clear expressions of interpretive method. Some of these earliest fathers employed the allegorical approach a great deal, while others used it very little, if at all. Yet where prophecy is dealt with, there is a marked tendency toward literal interpretation. It was a tendency which, as in the Epistle of Barnabas, based future eschatological hope upon the reality of literally fulfilled prophecies of the past. Thus Papias looked forward with wide-eyed wonder to the unparalleled fertility of the coming kingdom. And Barnabas anticipated literal fulfillment of covenant promises.

While there is only brief notice of the importance of the literal interpretation of Bible prophecy in the writings of the apostolic fathers, the apologist Justin Martyr argued frequently and pointedly for the practice on the basis of the literal fulfillment of past prophecy. Irenaeus carried the principle even further by insisting that in the understanding of all of Scripture, not only prophecy, there is that which is "clear," and "plain," and "natural."⁹

Nonetheless, this consensus in prophetic matters (and the hermeneutic it reveals) did not remain prominent in the history of the Church.

The School of Alexandria in general and Origen in particular can be singled out as the fountain for the development of allegorical interpretation of the biblical text which, in the long run, moves the Church from a chiliastic predisposition to an amillennial framework.¹⁰ Robert Bernard represents the traditional understanding of Platonic (and even gnostic) influences upon the thinking of the Alexandrians when he notes:

⁵Paul Lee Tan, *Literal Interpretation of the Bible* (Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1978), 11.

⁶The NASB translation follows the rabbinical view that Ezra and the leaders were *translating* rather than *explaining* (although *explaining* is given as a marginal note). The idea of explanation is emphasized in the NIV text with the idea of translating in the margin. Both Derek Kidner (*Ezra & Nehemiah* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979], 106) and C. F. Keil (*Commentary on the Old Testament* [reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 3:230) argue against the idea of translation on the basis of linguistic and contextual considerations.

⁷Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 604.

⁸Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1953), 17-33.

⁹Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Early Church Fathers and the Foundations of Dispensationalism Part VI—The Conclusion: Evaluating Early Dispensational Concepts," *The Conservative Theological Journal* 3 (August 1999):184.

¹⁰John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 45. Walvoord exemplifies the attitude of many dispensationalists toward Origen and the rise of allegorical interpretation.

For the Alexandrians the combination of Platonism and Stoicism formed a framework for interpreting the Scriptures. Platonism presented this world as a shadow of reality differing entirely from what is experienced by human senses. One had to go beyond what was seen to the unseen, spiritual reality. Yet there had to be a bridge between the two worlds. The first interpreter of Scripture to enter into this worldview was Philo (30 B.C.—A.D. 40), a Jew who had a profound influence upon the later Christian Alexandrians, especially Clement and Origen. For Philo, as for the Greek interpreters before him, that bridge could be found in an inspired text. For such interpreters, inspiration meant the infusion of meaning which differed at times as radically from the literal meaning as the true world differed from this world of shadows. The inspired text was the bridge in which the true reality was expressed symbolically; human beings had to ascend from what was accessible to their senses to what was accessible only to the highest levels of their intellect—the true reality, entirely spiritual, eternal, unchanging. From Stoicism, the Alexandrians gained the confidence that the message encoded in the symbols of Scripture was coherent, rational, and accessible through non-literal interpretation of the text.¹¹

While other analyses of Origen view him as having pastoral and theological concerns at the core of his approach rather than merely philosophical interests,¹² this basic assessment of the Alexandrian outlook is correct.¹³

However, the context of the use of allegorical interpretation in Origen must be clearly spelled out. Origen did not usually deny the literal sense of the biblical text but used it as a vehicle to get at other “higher” meanings within a scheme of three levels of interpretation.¹⁴

The first level is *literal interpretation*, which is usually seen in terms of the historical details of the text. Origen believed that this level was “useful for simple believers, the implication being that truly mature Christians will be able to see beyond the literal.”¹⁵ The second level is the *moral sense* of the passage, which comes close to identifying a principle for application that is not far removed from how such practical concerns are discussed in modern readings of the Bible. The third and highest level is the *spiritual or allegorical meaning* of the passage which seeks after some shadow or hidden truth (compared to the literal level). This level of meaning actually gives the highest form of application to church and individual while showing a sense of spiritual insight that demonstrates that one has moved toward personal maturity. One famous example of how Origen deals with the text allegorically is outlined this way:

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) the man who journeys to Jericho and is left half dead is humanity in its sin and corruption; the priest represents the law, and the Levite, the prophets; the oil used by the Samaritan, who is Christ, is mercy; the inn signifies the church, and the innkeeper, the apostles. The two denarii signify various possibilities, including the two Testaments.¹⁶

As such ways of reading the Bible increased, there arose those in opposition, primarily represented by the School at Antioch, who wanted to maintain an emphasis on the literal rendering of the text, especially in the area of historicity. Their concerns, shared by evangelicals today, are aptly described by Hall:

¹¹Robert W. Bernard, “The Hermeneutics of the Early Church Fathers” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, ed. Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 62.

¹²Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 167ff.

¹³See Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 132-55 and Moisés Silva, “Has the Church Misread the Bible?” in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 44-61. The latter work was originally published as a separate volume in 1987.

¹⁴Michael D. Stallard, “The Influence of Alexandria on the Early Textual Tradition of the Gospel of Luke” (Dallas, TX: Unpublished STM Thesis at Dallas Theological Seminary, April, 1984), 33-35.

¹⁵Silva, “Church Misread,” 51.

¹⁶Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 170.

The allegorical methodology popular at Alexandria was not without its critics among the church fathers, and rightly so, for the extended use of allegory is hermeneutical dynamite. At best, the use of allegorical interpretation requires great care and control. Clearly articulated rules governing its use and detecting its abuse are absolutely necessary. Without these safeguards exegetes can easily wrap their imaginations around the biblical text, importing into the text whatever their hermeneutical fancy desires the text to say. For these allegorical interpreters the Bible can become a lump of wax that they mold into a foreign shape, perhaps even in their own image.¹⁷

Some of the main teachers who followed the Antiochene approach of literal interpretation in opposition to the rise of allegorical interpretation were Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and John Chrysostom. Although Chrysostom seems to be remembered the most by later students of history, no doubt due to his oratorical skills, it is Theodore who leaves the strongest hermeneutical legacy. Bernard reminds us that Theodore was simply called “The Interpreter” for generations.¹⁸ Theodore insisted that there were rules for understanding written texts (grammatical) and asserted that there was a historical context to each passage which cannot be unraveled.¹⁹ In the latter, one of his most well known discussions focused on the historical reality of the Pre-Fall account in Genesis.²⁰ The Antiochene focus on literal interpretation comes close to the interest that later evangelicals have placed on grammatical-historical interpretation. To be sure, it is impossible to see a complete contrast between the schools of Alexandria and Antioch. There was interest in literal interpretation at times in Alexandria while typological interpretations were sometimes appealed to by the Antioch exegetes. Thus, there was overlap, but an overlap that did not blur definite tendencies.

Historically, as the Middle Ages descended upon the Western world, Alexandrian hermeneutics seems to have won the day, while Antiochene interpretation went into decline. By the time one comes to the Scholastic Period, a similar interpretive scheme is in place as formulated most clearly by Thomas Aquinas (1224-74). Aquinas’ understanding of the flexibility of the biblical text to render polyvalent meanings is clear.

God, who is the author of Holy Scripture, possesses the power not only to adapt words to meanings, which we can do, but also to adapt things to meanings. What is peculiar to Holy Scripture is this, the things there signified by words may also in their turn signify other things. The first signification, whereby words signify facts, is called the historical and literal sense; the second signification, whereby the facts signified by the words also signify other facts, is called the spiritual sense. Note that the spiritual sense is based on, and presupposes, the literal sense.²¹

Thus, Aquinas held that interpretive truths existed beyond the literal and historical sense of various passages in the Bible. More specifically, he believed that the spiritual sense of a passage could (but did not always) work itself out in different layers of meaning much like Origen had suggested:

A meaning expressed by words, which is the *literal or historical sense*, is discovered by getting the hang of the sentence. You find the *spiritual sense*, however, by looking past the things signified by the literal sense to other realities behind them, and especially by treating things visible as figures of things invisible: that is why it is called the spiritual sense.

The purpose of the spiritual sense is twofold, first, to help right conduct; second, to help right belief. The first points a moral, and is called the *moral sense*, and sometimes the *tropological sense*. The second is divided according to periods. The Old Testament is the figure of the New Testament, both are figures of the Heavenly Jerusalem:

¹⁷Hall, *Reading Scripture*, 156.

¹⁸Bernard, “Hermeneutics,” 64.

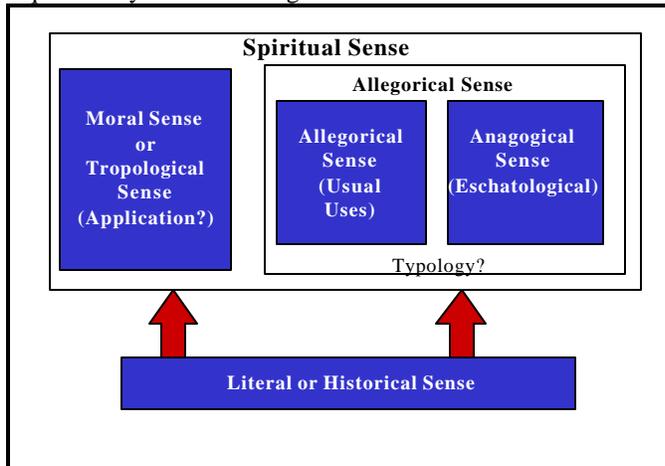
¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Hall, “Reading Scripture,” 165.

²¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.i.10, cited in Thomas Gilby, ed., *St. Thomas: Theological Texts* (reprint ed., Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1982), 17.

the Church's present state has been described as lying midway between the Synagogue and the triumphant City of God. The prefigurations of Christ and his Church in the Old Testament belong to what is called the *allegorical sense*; the prefigurations of the Church Triumphant in both Testaments to what is called the *anagogical sense*. Not every passage of the Bible is invested with all these senses; sometimes but one is present.²²

The anagogical sense appears to be for Aquinas a special case of the allegorical sense when the text is looking forward to heaven. Hence, he also calls the anagogical sense the *eschatological sense*.²³ A graphical portrayal of Aquinas' layers of meaning can be seen below.



One area of continuity between Aquinas and the earlier Alexandrian hermeneutics is that the literal sense does play a role as the basis for all other interpretations and that it is considered largely in its historical features, even if, in the end, it is not the most important sense.

The Medieval consensus was later eroded with the advent of the Reformation with Luther and Calvin getting most of the credit for restoring some sanity by abandoning (for the most part) allegorical interpretation in favor of a more literalistic approach. Luther commented in no uncertain terms:

When I was a monk I was a master in the use of allegories. I allegorized everything. Afterward through the Epistle to the Romans I came to some knowledge of Christ. I recognized then that allegories are nothing, that it's not what Christ signifies but what Christ is that counts. Before I allegorized everything, even a chamber pot, but afterward I reflected on the histories and thought how difficult it must have been for Gideon to fight with his enemies in the manner reported. . . . It was not allegory, but it was the Spirit and faith that inflicted such havoc on the enemy with only three hundred men. Jerome and Origen contributed to the practice of searching only for allegories. God forgive them. In all of Origen there is not one word about Christ.²⁴

Although there is no similar clarion statement in Calvin along the same lines, it is clear by example that Calvin follows Luther in this sentiment. Calvin's commentaries are especially significant as one watches the famous exegete lay out the text according to grammatical and historical concerns. This is not to suggest that all was perfect in Reformation exegesis. Dispensationalists would especially be bothered by the refusal of the Reformers to apply their interest in literal interpretation to prophetic portions of Scripture as they clung to their amillennial tradition. However, the overall direction of how the Bible was read was more readily tied to a literal understanding than it had been before.

²²Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibets*, vi. 14, c., cited in Thomas Gilby, ed., *St. Thomas: Theological Texts* (reprint ed., Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1982), 18-19.

²³Thomas Aquinas, *I Sentences*, Prologue, i. 5, cited in Thomas Gilby, ed., *St. Thomas: Theological Texts* (reprint ed., Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1982), 22.

²⁴Martin Luther, *Table Talk* No. 335 recorded by Veit Dietrich, Summer or Fall, 1532, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 54 ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, n.d.), 46-47.

This literal approach to the Bible continues to this day as the major hermeneutical concern among evangelicals. However, the rise of higher criticism within mainline Protestantism (and from there to others) has altered the hermeneutical landscape. For lack of any better term, the word *liberal* will be used to label the movements which have come to embrace this methodology.²⁵ In liberalism, grammatical-historical interpretation has been abandoned in favor of the *historical-critical approach* (historical criticism²⁶) which has evolved over the last two centuries.²⁷ This approach is also sometimes referred to as *traditional criticism*. This view generally assumes that much, if not most or all, of the biblical text is not historical. That is, the events recorded therein did not actually happen. However, it has a keen interest in its own set of historical concerns, namely, the history of the text itself. In broad strokes, this approach prioritizes text over event (to use some recent terminology). It seeks to learn the process of how the biblical text came to be by examining alleged sources and/or the final product of the text to ascertain development (source, form, and redaction criticism). In the end, this hermeneutical approach devalues the idea of the historicity of the text, an idea that we have seen is significant in the history of the Church long before the Reformation as part of what is meant by literal interpretation.

In essence, the state of affairs which now appears is the contrast of two camps: liberals who generally follow historical-critical methodology and conservatives who normally follow grammatical-historical or literal interpretation. Conservatives have generally been cautious in using insights from the liberal methodology while trying to avoid any of the presuppositions that come with it.²⁸

THE DEFINITION OF LITERAL INTERPRETATION

In the above survey of historical development, the term *literal interpretation* was used throughout apart from any formal definition. Several other words have emerged as possible descriptors of the idea: plain, natural, normal, historical, grammatical, straight-forward, customary, and others. The one which seems to predominate in Church history is the concept of *historical sense*. In modern times, evangelicals have spoken of literal interpretation as *grammatical-historical interpretation* to indicate that there exists both a grammatical-language context as well as a historical context which must be taken into account to read a passage. Other evangelicals have added the word *literary* to the mix (grammatical-historical-literary interpretation) to highlight the need to examine literary structure. It is thought that the word *grammatical* may not point one to some of the larger context questions which literary structure may answer.

In noting the potential problems of the term *literal interpretation*, the covenant theologian Vern Poythress sees three plausible ways of talking about literalness.²⁹ First, he refers to "first-thought" meaning in which the various words and phrases of a sentence or discourse are viewed in isolation from the context.

²⁵For a more complete survey of modern liberal hermeneutics, see Mike Stallard, "An Essay on Liberal Hermeneutics," *Conservative Theological Journal* Vol. 3 No. 10 (December 1999), 290-303.

²⁶In the past, this area was often referred to as higher criticism. Terms are sometimes used differently. Some authors refer to the discussion of source, form, and redaction criticism as *literary criticism* while historical criticism is the study of the historicity of the text. See Harrison, Waltke, Guthrie, and Fee, *Biblical Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

²⁷The two main views of grammatical-historical and historical-critical should not be seen as the only two views necessarily. A study of the early church fathers, especially the school at Alexandria, shows other possible ways of coming to the text. However, in the present day, these two views predominate.

²⁸The strongest warnings about the dangers can be found in Norman L. Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (March 1999): 3-19; and F. David Farnell and Robert L. Thomas, eds., *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998). For further study, see Henry Vander Goot, *Interpreting the Bible in Theology and the Church* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984) and Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

²⁹Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 82-86. Also, chapter nine gives some significant descriptions of dispensationalist views of literal interpretation, 87-96. This paragraph

Second, there is "flat interpretation" in which a passage is taken as *literal if possible*. Obvious figures of speech are recognized but nothing more. Consequently, "we would ignore the possibility of poetic overtones, irony, word-play, or the possible figurative or allusive character of whole sections of material."³⁰ The shortcomings of these first two approaches are apparent. The potential for ignoring the entire context of a statement is great in both cases. Thus, Poythress correctly opts for a third alternative (albeit reluctantly), the equation of literal interpretation with the grammatical-historical interpretation of a passage. Poythress is concerned that the concept of literal interpretation not be used theologically to bludgeon nondispensationalism's less-than-literal approach to eschatology:

Moreover, in the history of hermeneutical theory, the term *sensus literalis* ("literal sense") has been associated with grammatical-historical interpretation. Therefore, there is some historical warrant for using the word "literal" in a technical sense, simply to designate the aim of grammatical-historical interpretation. Nevertheless, in our modern context the repeated use of the word "literal" by dispensationalists is not helpful. "Literal" tends to be understood as the opposite of "figurative." Thus the word "literal" may quite easily suggest the two other types of interpretation above (first-thought interpretation or flat interpretation).³¹

Thus, Poythress finds no better way to describe literal interpretation than to indicate that it means the application of the grammatical-historical method to a text even though it is a term that is much misunderstood.

The dispensationalist Elliott Johnson echoes the same problem when he notes:

The term *literal* has been understood in two ways: (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 true interpretation. This twofold use of "literal" has resulted in a great deal of confusion. Removed from its proper context of hermeneutical discourse, the phrase "literal interpretation of the Bible" is often and erroneously taken (as by the secular media) in the first sense and is construed as devaluing any figurative understanding of biblical language.³²

What Johnson is noting is that "literal interpretation" is technical jargon for a way of approaching the Bible, not simply the opposite of figurative as is often the case in popular dialog. He views himself in harmony with the Reformers on this general systematic approach to reading the biblical text. Therefore, it is not surprising to see him emphasize the historical context:

A literal hermeneutic places primary importance on the historical realm within which God's original revelation was expressed. The historical realm provides both the context of the original expression and the particular stage in the progress of revelation when the message was expressed.³³

In the last sentence, "context of the original expression" refers to the language (i.e., grammatical) context, while the reference to progress of revelation highlights the historical context. It is the historical context which provides the occasion on which God gave His exact words to explain certain historical events. Thus, in the end, Johnson joins Poythress in defining literal interpretation as grammatical-historical interpretation in keeping with the evangelical ICBI statements cited earlier. What this means is that the reader of the Bible takes the passages as they were meant grammatically and historically for their original audiences. One implication is that one should seek the meaning that is *in the text*, not behind it, above it, around it, below it, or in front of it.

of the paper has been adapted from an earlier article: Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1 (Spring 1997): 16-17.

³⁰Ibid., 83.

³¹Ibid., 84-85.

³²Elliott Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 8. One can also find a similar explanation in perhaps simpler terms in Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton: Victor, 1991), 146-48. Zuck suggests speaking of "ordinary-literal" and "figurative-literal" to show that even figures of speech come under the rubric of grammatical-historical interpretation understood in its formal hermeneutical context.

³³Ibid.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN LITERAL INTERPRETATION

The above discussion was not meant to oversimplify the issue of literal interpretation. There are many issues which are beyond the scope of this article. However, three issues are a concern which need to be dealt with briefly:

- The use of *literary structure* in Bible interpretation
- The use of *genre* in Bible interpretation
- The concept of the *perspicuity of the Bible* in light of modern hermeneutical trends

Literary Structure³⁴

Toward the end of the present century, a growing relativism has taken on a scholarly formulation as the culture has become “postmodern.” To be sure, this has not meant liberal rejection of historical criticism, since a disbelief in the historicity of the biblical record and, in fact, a debunking of the historical enterprise in general go hand in hand with a belief in the absence of absolute truth. Consequently, the focus on text as opposed to event, literature as opposed to history, has been intensified in recent years.

Much of the continued research under the banner of historical criticism has really been a continuation of redaction criticism with its focus on the text as we have it – a literary text. Within that arena, a focus on style has come to predominate in some circles. This is sometimes labeled *rhetorical criticism*.³⁵

As biblical scholars focused on the details of style in the text such as chiasmic structures, repetitive textual clues, the role of genealogies stylistically in some books like Genesis, and other detailed textual points, there was a growing awareness of the need to read the text holistically as a literary piece. The name for this approach has increasingly been called *literary criticism*, although that term earlier had been used to label source criticism.³⁶

This emphasis on literary structure attracts many evangelicals who want to take the details of the entire text seriously. In the past, it was assumed that such concerns were really part of the focus of grammatical-historical interpretation in “context” although, as mentioned earlier, over the last two decades a growing number of evangelicals have begun talking about grammatical-historical-*literary* interpretation of the Bible in order to highlight the need to examine the literary structure of the text and all that such an effort entails.³⁷

However, at this point one should be reminded of the primary distinction between liberal and evangelical hermeneutics – the rejection versus acceptance of the historicity of the text itself. The liberal, because of his rejection of the historical truth of the Bible, can be more selective in the particular literary structures he chooses to examine and what particular literary schemes he elects to highlight.³⁸

Since the evangelical tenaciously clings to historicity, he must be more holistic, so to speak, in his understanding of the text, leaving no stone unturned, distinctions as well as continuities, natural as well as supernatural elements in the text.³⁹

³⁴Much of the discussion of literary structure and genre has been taken from an earlier paper: Mike Stallard, “An Essay on Liberal Hermeneutics,” *Conservative Theological Journal* (December 1999).

³⁵Tremper Longman notes that the term rhetorical criticism, although originally emphasizing a focus on style, sometimes takes on a broader meaning in the minds of some (“Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation,” in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. Moisés Silva [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 101; this work was originally published as a separate volume in 1987).

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Elliott Johnson notes that “*LITERARY* affirms that these textually based meanings are in part determined within the context of textual design considered in the composition as a whole” (*Expository Hermeneutics*, 22).

³⁸This is not to suggest that all liberals are careless in their reading of the text. Their main problem is unbelief, not cognitive understanding. Evangelicals are here being warned not to let the liberal disinterest in historicity leak into their study of literary structure.

³⁹One disturbing trend that can be seen at times is a focus on common or repetitive elements in the text. However, this feeds a false assumption. The text is just as likely to highlight discontinuity as it is continuity. It seems that

There can also be some legitimate concern that the focus on literary structure has not necessarily brought about any growing consensus over what in fact the text actually says. This present author has notebooks full of articles by liberals detailing the literary structure of Genesis and other books of the Bible. These articles reveal a division just as deep, if not more serious, as classical Protestantism's denominational divisions over certain doctrinal teachings. The emphasis on literary structure has its own fads that appear to come and go according to the whims of the individual interpreters. Evangelicals must be careful, then, not to accept the current fads of liberal interpretation on this score lest their own commentaries of today be outdated in ten years with nothing useful to be offered.

One final caution concerning a possible overemphasis on literary structure is that the biblical text is composed of more than stylistic innuendoes and structural markers. For example, examine the *toledoth* sayings in the book of Genesis (Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1, 32; 11:10, 27; 25:12; etc.). These provide structural markers which help the interpreter to see certain significant movements within the Genesis text. However, if one views these markers as "all" that is going on in the text, he might come to the conclusion that there can be no pre-patriarchal dispensations since no dispensational scheme ever advanced for Genesis chapters 1-11 strictly follows the boundaries marked off by the *toledoth* sayings. However, the dispensational distinctions usually given by dispensationalists follow conceptual distinctions and divisions which the text discusses rather than any literary elements found in the text (for example, the post-Fall fixation on conscience).

In other words, there are several levels of movements going on in a text, all of which have significance for the one who would rightly divide the Word of truth.⁴⁰ This should not be surprising. If Charles Dickens can write multi-layered literary works, why not Moses under inspiration of the Holy Spirit?⁴¹ Consequently, the evangelical must make sure that the liberal tendency of over-selectivity in literary areas does not cause him to miss all that God has to offer in His Word.

Genre

Related to literary structure (and somewhat to form criticism) is the issue of using *genre* to interpret the Bible. It is certainly helpful for the Bible interpreter to know what type of literature he is reading, be it poetry, narrative, epistle, parable, apocalyptic or other particular forms or types of literature. Evangelicals have certainly acknowledged its importance. Liberal hermeneutics has been generous in its use of this particular method of focusing interpretation. However, the issue is not a simplistic one. One sometimes finds that extra-biblical ideas of the forms of literature become the driving force for interpretation. The evangelical correctly asks to what extent these forms, which are usually derived from extra-biblical literature, should judge the text of the Bible. However, another complicating factor is the presence of mixed forms. For example, apocalyptic sections of Daniel are embedded in a seemingly narrative story. Poetry is often interwoven in narrative as well. Right away one senses the need not to rush to judgment on using various genres in an uncritical way.

Some examples may be instructive. First, there are some liberals (and perhaps some claiming evangelical credentials) who regard the book of Jonah as the particular genre of fiction.⁴² If fiction has become a genre, then there is no end to what can be denied in the biblical record. The seriousness of this cannot be denied:

a dispensational interpreter might have a theoretical advantage over the nondispensational evangelical because of his openness to distinctions as well as commonalities.

⁴⁰A helpful resource on this score is Vern Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987).

⁴¹It used to be a matter of pride and an application of the false theory of evolution that caused many liberals to look at ancient writers as unable to match more recent authors. However, the sophistication of ancient writers is now more generally recognized.

⁴²There is known to this particular writer, through the testimony of a colleague, a seminary of an evangelical denomination which is encountering this debate right now.

Several years ago, I wrote the author of a commentary on Jonah from a good evangelical school who had declared in it that it was not necessary to take Jonah literally. After pointing out that Jesus took it literally in Matt 12:40-42, I asked him if it was necessary for us as believers in Christ to believe what Jesus taught. Surprisingly, he had apparently not considered this, and the statement was subsequently retracted.⁴³

Unfortunately, not all of life's stories end with such solid corrections.

A second example would be the often discussed analyses of the biblical covenants (especially the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New) and the attempt to categorize their form or genre. The classification as a vassal treaty that many scholars render is especially instructive. This particular form seems to fit the Mosaic Covenant, and a comparison to extra-biblical literature may substantiate the traditional date of the Exodus account. However, an unthinking assignment of all of the covenants to this particular form assumes a uniformity to all of the biblical covenants that denies diversity in the text and undermines the grace or grant nature that the details of the text actually yield when many of the other covenants are in view (especially the Abrahamic and Davidic). What is at stake is the unconditional nature of these other covenants. When we think about the kingdom promises associated with these covenants, what is in danger of being lost by this genre assignment is nothing short of premillennialism itself.

A third example highlights the tendency in liberal hermeneutics to reinterpret any supernatural elements in the text. The apocalyptic portions of Daniel (chapters 7-12) give such detailed prophecy with explicit historical fulfillment that liberals, who deny that God can pre-write history, insist that all of these specifics must be written after the fact.⁴⁴ Consequently, the date of the book of Daniel becomes a major battleground. To complicate matters is the fact that the liberal date of the second century B. C. (Maccabean period) has Daniel written during a time when apocalyptic literature is exploding on the scene. The forms of that literature can be identified and easily read by the liberals into the book of Daniel.

It is assumed that these forms can be used this way since the book of Daniel is part of that normal stream of literature. On the other hand, the evangelical points to the overwhelming evidence that the book of Daniel is a genuine sixth century B.C. work. Thus, to read the forms of apocalyptic back into the book of Daniel may be anachronistic. Instead, it might be best to see Daniel as one of the earlier forms of apocalyptic which forms the foundation for later developments in that genre. In the end, it appears that the presuppositions about the supernatural decide the case.

One other issue must be mentioned in this matter of use of genre for interpretation. One must ask how the interpreter recognizes the genre that a piece of biblical literature happens to be. The answer is *by literal interpretation*, that is, grammatical-historical interpretation. In other words, literal interpretation logically precedes genre recognition. This means that the sometimes heard statement that "genre determines meaning" is wrong. While genre is one input to the exegetical process, it is not an extra-biblical truism that is somehow the pre-judge of the text before the exercise of the normal reading of the text.⁴⁵

In other words, genre does not "regulate" one's ultimate reading of the text. Rather, it classifies or describes what is found.⁴⁶

Perspicuity or Understandability of the Bible

In the midst of the growing hermeneutical discussions, there is one cloud the size of a man's hand on the horizon. It may be approaching with fearful consequences. What is developing within evangelicalism may be a *technical*

⁴³Geisler, *Beware*, 17.

⁴⁴For a more detailed survey of this issue, see Mike Stallard, "Inerrancy of the Major Prophets," *Conservative Theological Journal* 3 (August 1999).

⁴⁵This approach is diametrically opposed to the interpretation theory of the liberal Paul Ricoeur. Kaiser summarizes his use of genre this way: "Literary genres do more than classify text; they actually give a code that shapes the way a reader will interpret the text" (Walter Kaiser, "The Meaning of Meaning," in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* by Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 30.

⁴⁶For a complete discussion of this issue, see Grant Osborne, "Genre Criticism—Sensus Literalis," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* ed. Robert Preus and Earl Radmacher (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 165-90.

elitism that actually communicates to the average man in the pew that he is incapable of understanding the Bible for himself. To be sure, there must always be a measure of trust of others in Bible study, even if it is to be an analytical and reasonable trust. The man in the pew must trust the translators of the text who have wrestled with the technical questions of using and understanding original languages. He must trust his pastor whom he expects to spend more time on such technical things in Bible study because, quite frankly, he does not have the time.

However, a technical elitism would be a far cry from the days of the Reformers when the battle shout was to get the Bible in the hands of the common man. The Reformers believed in a measure of clarity in the Bible, not so much in all of its details, but in the basic thrust of the larger picture and the flow of the plot line (to borrow a recent term) of each page.⁴⁷ This belief largely stemmed from a commitment to the historical sense of a passage, that is, a commitment to literal interpretation.

Consequently, certain practical ministry questions cannot be avoided. Can the average man in the pew understand the technical nuances of various genres? Can the average man in the pew comprehend the details debated by scholars concerning the literary structure of various books? Can the average man wade through the vast and tedious world of hermeneutical discussions? The answer is obvious. Not everyone is a seminary student or technical expert on biblical studies. *The point being made is not to demean or diminish the significance of genre, literary structure, and discussions about hermeneutics. Rather it is to put them in proper perspective. None of these discussions have any relevance without a foundation of literal interpretation understood as grammatical-historical interpretation.* There is throughout the Bible a historical plot line and the teaching of basic truths that can be understood apart from detailed genre analysis and knowledge of literary structure. Evangelicals must make sure to let Christians in their churches know that the Bible is a book that God has given, in one sense, directly to them. This can be done because God is not hiding from us, but has given us a Book in space and time that can be understood literally.

⁴⁷For a discussion of this issue, see Silva, 62-74.