

"LITERAL" INTERPRETATION

"Hermeneutics, the universal laws of human language, is a science. Man has not made up these laws, rather he has discovered them. These laws are just as real and objective as the law of gravity. These laws apply to all languages and cultures. They are timeless. They are relevant in interpreting writings written four thousand years ago and they will continue to be up-to-date as long as man is communication to other men or even God. Just as for thousands of years, men knew and functioned by the law of gravity even though Newton had not formulated the law, even so for ages man has observed and functioned by the laws of human language even though they often were not aware of their existence." - Dennis W. Brindley.

We have seen that it is imperative to have the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit in understanding the Word of God. However, this illumination occurs in conjunction with a written revelation. Because God has chosen to communicate to us through the vehicle of Scripture, the believer must also give heed to the fundamental laws of language mentioned in the quotation above. In the following pages, our attention turns to these essential principles of interpretation.

Earlier we saw that accurate interpretation only occurs when we understand the intended meaning of the writer of Scripture. ("The moment the Bible student has in his own mind what was in the mind of the author of authors of the Biblical books when these were written, he has interpreted the thoughts of the Scriptures.") We see, then, to understand the meaning intended by the writer. This is sometime called the "literal" (or "grammatical-historical") approach to interpreting Scripture. It is simply interpreting Scripture according to the ordinary principles one uses to understand anything written.

WHY LITERAL (OR "NORMAL") INTERPRETATION

Besides the fact that approaching Scripture literally is the obvious, common-sense method, a number of factors support interpreting Scripture normally:

- 1) First, this method is consistent with and supported by the literal fulfillment of biblical prophecies. When the Bible was originally written, approximately one-fourth of it was prophetic (in the sense of "foretelling the future"); much has been fulfilled, and all literally! Careful students have found more than 300 prophecies fulfilled just in the first coming of the Lord Jesus! (look up Micah 5:1-3 and compare with Matthew 2:3-6 and Luke 2:4-7; also, see Isaiah 7:14 and compare with Matthew 1:23; or, note Isaiah 53:1-12 and compare that with Matthew 26 and 27)
- 2) A second reason is logical, namely that literal interpreting exercises some control over the interpreter. It insists that he give some basis for his views other than his own subjective feelings. If we do not interpret literally, all objectivity is lost - you end up with as many interpretations as you have interpreters! Just as a scientist must point to data that confirms his results of proves his theory, so the careful student of Scripture must ground his interpretations in proper interpretive data.
- 3) There is also a philosophical argument for interpreting literally. If God gave man his ability to use language to communicate, and if He has communicated to mankind through language in Scriptures (and both of these "ifs" are true), then it must follow that God would communicate to man through language understood in its plain, ordinary sense.
- 4) A fourth support for literal understanding of Scripture can be seen pragmatically. Only the normal method of interpreting Scripture maintains any respect for the historical nature of the Bible; because of this, literal interpretation has given mankind the greatest success in opening up the Word of God. Wherever men have approached the Word of God using the literal hermeneutic, there the truth of Scripture has begun to accomplish God's intention in giving it to man.

LITERAL INTERPRETATION AND FIGURES OF SPEECH

Of course, when one says he interprets literally, he doesn't mean to imply that there are no figures of speech in the Bible. Figurative language is abundant in the English language, in all great literature, and especially in Oriental thought (and the Bible is an Eastern book, humanly speaking).

Figurative language occurs when a writer or speaker represents one concept in terms of another. "The animal devoured his meal" is a literal statement. "The flames devoured an old landmark" is a figurative statement...When an animal devours a meal, he chews it, swallows it, and digests it. Flames have no teeth, mouth or digestive process. Nevertheless, the 'devour' anything combustible which lies before them. The figurative meaning in this case has to do with the removal of what lies before the consuming quality of fire." (Mickelsen)

Describing something ordinary in an unusual way makes it more vivid. In fact, sometimes figurative language can make a person's thoughts even clearer than a plain-literal statement. A skillful writer or speaker will use figurative expressions both for greater emphasis and for intensified feeling. But even when utilizing figures of speech, a communicator still has an intended meaning! If a girl says to a fellow, "leave me alone" the intended meaning is very obvious. If she says to him, "go jump in the lake," though she is speaking figuratively, the meaning of her statement is still obvious (and unchanged).

All of Scripture has intended meaning, whether the particular truth is communicated by plain-literal or figurative statement. And so we need to make a distinction between these two kinds of statements.

-a plain - literal statement is one whose meaning is the explicit assertion of the words. John 6:3 states, And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. This is a plain literal statement.

-a figurative-literal statement is one whose meaning is the specific intention of the figure. For example, Galatians 2:9 refers to James, Peter and John, who were reputed to be pillars. Here the term pillars is to be understood in a figurative-literal sense. Its literal meaning speaks of the stabilizing and supportive functions performed by these men.

The following are some guidelines for working with figurative-literal statements.

1) Look carefully for a plain-literal meaning first. This should be done because the plain-literal sense is the most common and most logical means of communication.

-Consider Zechariah 14:4; speaking of the Lord, it states, and in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south. The most obvious sense of this verse is plain-literal. It depicts certain topographical changes in the area around Jerusalem when the Lord will go forth and fight (verse 3).

2) If a figure of speech is employed by the author, look for an explanation or clue to its meaning in the context (figures of speech often drop their hints in the surrounding contexts).

-For example, John 1:29 records the statement of John the Baptist about Jesus, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. How, it is striking and different to speak of a person as a lamb. But what did John mean by that figurative-literal expression? If we continue reading, we discover that John is alluding to the work of the Messiah in taking away sins. Further study would enable us to see relationships to the Passover lamb at the time of the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 11 & 12) and to the Old Testament sacrificial system.

3) If the plain-literal sense of a statement gives a contradiction, or a moral or physical impossibility, then look for a figurative-literal sense. However, remember our human limitations in understanding some of the phenomena of Scripture (miracles, for example).

-Jesus said on one occasion, why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?...first take the log out of your own eye (Matthew 7:3,5). The physical impossibility of this statement alerts us to its figurative-literal sense.

4) The "GOLDEN RULE": If the plain-literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.

"Figurative language is a pervasive feature of human discourse. It lends vivacity to expression and adds depth of meaning. In order to understand any figure, one must of course first recognize the literal meaning and then, by reflecting on the relevant points of similarity, interpret the significance of the figure. Fortunately it is usually easy to recognize a figurative expression and to make the necessary distinctions." (Mickelsen)

All figures of speech operate either by comparison ("this is like that") or by substitution (this word can be substituted for that because there is some relationship between them). Below you will find definitions of eight figures of speech:

A **metaphor** is a comparison by direct assertion in which the speaker or writer describes one thing in terms of something else (a comparison by representation); "you are a beast!"; "the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees is leaven"; "this temple is my body"

A **simile** is an explicitly stated comparison employing "like" and "as" (a comparison by resemblance); "you are like a beast!"; "the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees is like leaven"; "my body is like a temple"

Hypocatastasis (high-poe-ka-tas'-tah-sis) is a comparison in which one thing, which is named, (comparison by implication); "Beast!"; "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees"; "destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up"

In **synecdoche**, (sin-nek'-doe-key) a part is spoken of as if it were the whole; although "X" is part of "Y," "X" is spoken of as though it were "Y"; for example, a hired hand (worker) who desires to keep bread (food) on the table, a roof(shelter) over his family and a shirt (clothing) on his back (body) will put in long hours (a work day); one way to identify synecdoches is to press the concrete meaning.

Metonymy (me-tawn'-uh-me) occurs when one thing (A) is spoken of to refer to something else ("B"), to which the first thing (A) is related in some way (based on relation, not resemblance); for example, "the pen is mightier than the sword" the White House said today....."; "she writes an elegant hand"

A **personification** occurs when a thing, quality, or idea is represented as a person; for example, "the heavens declare the glory of God"; "the gates lamented and mourned"; our sins testify against us"; "the news ran on ahead"

In **euphemism**, a word or phrase that is less direct is substituted because the writer believes that the direct form would be distasteful, offensive, or unnecessarily harsh; for example, "he was gathered to his fathers"; "Lazarus has fallen asleep"; "she is having an affair"; "he is gay"

Hyperbole is conscious exaggeration by the speaker to gain effect.