

Literal Bible Interpretation

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[All dictionary quotes here are from the “New Oxford American Dictionary.” Emphasis in all quotes is mine. I will refer to authors as “him” rather than “him or her” for the sake of convenience.]



Thesis: Literal interpretation is here defined as the author’s intended meaning. It is simply the way we understand anything any author has ever spoken or written. Nothing spoken or written in words is ever understood any other way.

Should the Author’s Intended Meaning be Called “Literal”?

It has often been suggested that “literal” is not a good word to describe the way we understand things. Admittedly, we are not using the word “literal” exactly as the dictionary does, but it’s closer than you might think. The dictionary says, **Literal** means:

“taking words in their usual or most basic sense without metaphor or allegory.”

But can we really divorce metaphors and allegories from the word “literal”? For example, a hyperbola is a form of metaphor. The dictionary says hyperbolas are

“exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally.”

Here’s three hyperbolic statements:

- “That suitcase weighs a ton.”
- “I’ve told you a million times not to exaggerate.”
- “She’s as skinny as a toothpick.”

In these hyperbolic statements, the words “ton,” “million,” and “toothpick” are “exaggerated statements,” but they do not ignore “the most basic sense” of the words. If we didn’t know the “most basic sense” of a toothpick, it would be meaningless to say, “she’s as skinny as a toothpick.”

Let’s look at a few examples from the gospels. Matthew wrote about John the Baptist,

Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan
(Matthew 3:5).

Does that mean that there was no one left in Jerusalem or Judea because *all* of them went out to hear John when he was preaching and baptizing? Of course not.

Jesus said,

If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you (Matthew 5:30).

Does that mean Jesus’ solution to temptation is to remove parts of our body? Of course not.

Matthew meant people were coming to John from all parts of the region. Jesus meant we should eliminate the things in our lives that cause us to sin. Both of these hyperbolic statements are used to emphasize a point. But the emphasis would not be possible unless the author understood the words *all* and *cut off* “in their usual or most basic sense.”

All words get their “usual or most basic sense” from an author, and the “most basic sense” of a word can change when the author’s usage changes. What’s the “most basic sense” of the word “tweet”? Donald Trump is a president who tweets a lot. I doubt if anyone ever said presidents Roosevelt, Truman, or Eisenhower tweeted. I suggest that if we could review all the uses of the word “tweet” over the next 24 hours, a very small percent would be about the sound a bird makes, and nearly all would refer to 140 characters of a social media communication. Today’s dictionaries give both definitions as the “most basic sense” of the word. But they wouldn’t have in President Eisenhower’s day. So what changed?

Authors used the word differently, creating a new basic sense of the word. So it seems a bit presumptive to divorce the term “literal” from things like metaphors or allegories.

If we don't call the author's intended meaning “literal,” then what should we call it? Some have suggested a better definition of what we are talking about is “contextual interpretation” because the context determines the interpretation. Well, that's true. We cannot just get the meaning of a word from a dictionary, unless we are reading a dictionary. We must always, even when reading a dictionary, use the meaning of the word the author has in mind, and we must use the context to determine that meaning. But if we called it “contextual” instead of “literal,” we would still have to explain what we mean by “contextual interpretation.” Since we need to explain some misunderstood label anyway, I suggest we might as well use the more commonly misunderstood one “literal interpretation” and explain that. Whatever we call it, the explanation is that it's the author's intended meaning, and his meaning is determined through the context.

Allegorical Interpretation

Literal interpretation approaches Scripture in the same plain, ordinary, normal, customary way in which we talk, write, and think. It's the only way anybody understands anything they want to understand, and always has been. All other ways of interpretation can be put under the category of **allegorical interpretation**. But this has a built-in confusion because there is a difference between an allegory and allegorical interpretation. The dictionary tells us that an **allegory** is

“a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a **hidden meaning**, typically a moral or political one: *Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory of the spiritual journey.*”

A biblical example would be the story Nathan told David about the rich man who stole the poor man's one ewe lamb, after David sinned with Bathsheba and Uriah. But here's the confusion. An allegory (a story with an unannounced hidden meaning), like a metaphor (a brief statement with an unannounced hidden meaning) or a parable (a story with a pre-announced hidden meaning), is a certain genre of literature. But a specific genre of literature is not a method of interpretation. An allegory has an author's intended hidden meaning tucked away in it, but allegorical interpretation says there is “hidden meaning” which the author did not intend.

Now here is what's fascinating about this. I'd like you read this definition in Wikipedia:

“**Allegorical interpretation** is an interpretive method (exegesis) which assumes that the Bible has various levels of meaning and tends to focus on the spiritual sense” (9/22/16).

Notice Wikipedia, a decidedly secular work, defines allegorical interpretation as an interpretive method **for the Bible**. Allegorical interpretation is only used for the Bible. For example, nobody ever tried (or tries) to allegorize Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Josephus, Shakespeare, etc. Because then you could never find out what the authors meant. Allegorical interpretation assumes that the meaning is not only “hidden” from the reader, it's also “hidden” from the author. Since it is only used to understand the Bible, one can only conclude that it is a way to avoid the meaning of the Bible. Such meaning would have to be supplied by someone else, like the clergy or the church. An allegory is a story with an author's intended hidden meaning. Allegorical interpretation is an absurd contradiction in terms. It's like saying non-understanding understanding, which cannot be used to understand anything.

If we cannot get the meaning from the authors of the Bible, then we are no longer studying the Bible but somebody's ideas imposed on the Bible

Eight Principles of Interpretation

1. The correct interpretation is found in the words of the author

Whatever meaning, intentions, motives, or feelings an author has, the only access to them is through his words. Never think, “That’s what he said, but that’s not what he meant.” What he meant is only available through what he said. When speaking to the Sadducees (who did not believe in the resurrection from the dead), Jesus said,

But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I AM the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matthew 22:31-32).

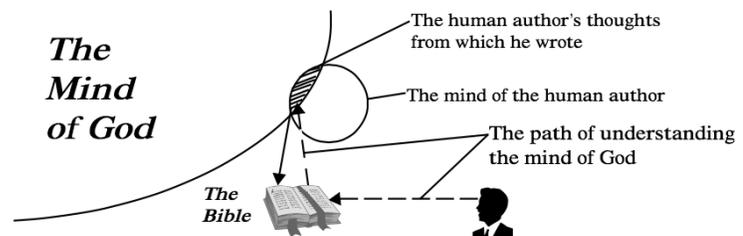
Here Jesus proved that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were still alive, after they physically died, by the fact that God used the word “AM” instead of “was.” That is, the tense of the verb determined the meaning of the passage. So every word the author uses, and only the words he uses, must be considered if we are to understand what he wrote (see also Matthew 5:17-18; 24:35; Luke 16:16-17).

2. What the author meant is the only correct interpretation

There is only one right interpretation, and it’s exclusively that of the author. There are many possible right applications of a passage, but there is only one right interpretation. The Bible is not abstract art where everyone comes away with their own meaning. So don’t say, “This is what it means to me.” Consider the Greek word *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*) in James 1:2, 12-13. A lexicon will tell you it means “temptation, trial, or testing.” In James 1, most English versions of the Bible correctly translate it “trials,” something which can lead to maturity (verses 3-4). This idea continues on through verse 12. But in verse 13, James begins a new thought using the same word *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*), which most English versions correctly translate “temptations” because this *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*) does not come from God, instead it leads us to lust, sin, and death. So, the meaning of words comes from how the author uses them, not just from dictionaries and lexicons.

3. Even though the Bible has a dual human and Divine authorship, the understanding is in the mind of the human author

The purpose of Bible study is to access the mind of God. Serving God requires getting to know God. The way we get to know God is by reading His revelation, which is recorded in the Bible. But what the human author wrote in the Bible comes from his thoughts about what he wrote. Although the mind of God is



infinite, some part of it was rightly understood by every human author of the Bible. From that correct understanding, the human author composed and recorded without error God’s revelation in the words of his original writing. Our access to the mind of God is through that writing.

4. The purpose does not determine the meaning

Meaning is the answer to the question *what* did the author say, whereas *purpose* is an attempt to figure out *why* it was said. There are several reasons the purpose (the why) should not be used to determine the meaning (the what) of a text.

- a. *The purpose is not necessary to determine the meaning.* For example, *why* did the Law command the Israelites to *not breed together two kinds of cattle* (Leviticus 19:19), or not shave their beards (Leviticus 19:27)? Many guesses have been suggested—the pagans were doing it, health reasons, it was part of some idolatrous practice. The reality is, Leviticus 19:27 never says

why God commanded these things. So, we don't know *why*. But it doesn't matter in order to understand *what* the author meant. *Why* did Paul say an overseer was to be *a husband* (1 Timothy 3:2)? *Why* not a wife or a single person? I suggest we don't know *why*, but it doesn't matter because we know *what* Paul commanded.

- b. ***The purpose cannot always be known.*** For example, what is the purpose of the Gospel of Matthew? I have read it was to teach the standards of the future Millennial Kingdom, to equip the apostles to start the church, to declare a lordship salvation, and to present the Messiah to Israel. I suggest we don't know the purpose of Matthew. Matthew may have had several of these purposes in mind or some other ones. But it doesn't matter because it does not affect the meaning of what he (or Jesus) said. Even when we know an author's purpose (as in John 20:31), we don't know that it was his only purpose or the one he had in mind when he wrote some particular passage in a different context.
- c. ***Using purpose to determine meaning affects application.*** For example, some homosexuals claim the purpose of Moses in Leviticus 18 was to forbid idolatrous practices, so the homosexuality forbidden in Leviticus 18:22 was idolatrous homosexuality. Therefore, their application is that non-idolatrous homosexuality should be permitted. Some say the purpose of the synoptic gospels was instruction for the Millennial Kingdom, so they don't apply to the church. The effect is to ignore or negate the clear meaning of a passage by imposing on it a supposed purpose.

5. Understanding must begin with what is known and proceed to what is unknown

To understand something, we must begin with what we know, then use that to make sense of what we do not yet understand. To start with the unclear would be to operate without a foundation. That's what the cults do with the Bible. They tend to take unclear passages, then impose their theology on them. For example, John 10:34-36 says, *Jesus answered them, "Has it not been written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'?"* The Mormons use this passage to say Jesus was God only in the sense that we all can become Gods (capital "G" intended). That's consistent with Mormon theology but totally inconsistent with the rest of the Bible.

We move from what is biblically clear to the biblically obscure, and as we do, we take the clear along with us as a tool to understand the obscure

6. The historical culture provides a relevant context if, and only if, it is revealed by the author

The Bible is full of cultural information. For example, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman took on special significance when John told us, *Jews have no dealings with Samaritans* (John 4:9). Cultural information given in the Bible is valuable because: (1) it's inspired by God, so we know it's accurate, and (2) we can be sure it is information the Holy Spirit wanted us to know. Outside cultural information can be helpful for filling in the details and illustrating the passage, but it should never be used to determine the meaning, or worse, change the meaning, of a text. For example, if you have an opportunity to travel to Israel, it will make your Bible three-dimensional. But travel to Israel will not change the meaning of the Bible. **The Land does not bring meaning to the Bible, the Bible brings meaning to the Land. Without the Bible, the Land is just a pile of rocks.** If your guide tells you Jesus was a stone mason because most builders were stone masons or that the eye of a needle is a small door in the city gate of Jerusalem or other extra-biblical information from Jewish or Greek culture, don't assume that "cultural information" is accurate, and do not use it to determine the meaning of a biblical passage. Notice what this does. It says the Holy Spirit left out some vital information needed to understand the passage, it denies the sufficiency of the Scripture, and it takes your Bible away from you, since you cannot understand it the way it was written.

7. "Scripture interprets Scripture" is an invalid concept

The Bible is, in one sense, a library of 66 books, and God is the One who supernaturally inspired each of

those 66 books. Therefore, the meaning of one of its human authors cannot contradict that of another one. This allows us to compare one Scripture with another. But **we should not use one passage to determine the meaning of another**. One passage gives direction to and puts boundaries on the possible meaning of another. But the meaning of each passage must be determined from its own context. However we understand the Trinity described in John 16:13-15, it cannot contradict Deuteronomy 6:4, *Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!* However we understand the predestination described in Romans 8 and 9, it cannot contradict the free will choice of John 1:12, and vice versa. One Scripture should never be used to interpret another. Other Scriptures only put parameters on the theological and moral principles we derive from a passage.

8. The more immediate the context, the more significant it is for understanding

The final arbiter for all interpretation decisions is the immediate context. The whole context is relevant, but the nearer the context is, the more relevant it is. For example, in John 1:4, we read, *In Him was life*. How should we understand the word “life”? A concordance study reveals that the word “life” is used 37 times in the Gospel of John, and 17 of them have the word “eternal” with it. And most of the others could imply eternal life. So in 1:4, does John mean “in Him was eternal life”? The problem with that interpretation is, the immediate context deals with Jesus being the Creator. The previous verse says, *All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being* (John 1:3). So even though John usually uses this word for eternal life, it appears from the **immediate context** that he is saying Jesus was the source of all life, specifically, the natural life which was given to Adam in the Garden of Eden. So, our word study is eclipsed by the immediate context which focuses on Jesus as the source of physical life.

Twelve Implications of Literal Interpretation

“Literal Hermeneutics” [a hermeneutic is a method of interpretation] applied to the Bible means taking the Scriptures at face value. Here are a few implications of that:

1. The author’s intended meaning has the idea of what is in front of the author’s mind (what he is thinking about what he wrote), not what is in the back of his mind. Interpretation is not a psycho-analysis of the author’s entire thought process.
2. Details of a passage must be taken as literally as the rest of the passage. One should never cherry pick certain details (like numbers) to be taken non-literally. If details are not literal, why are they there? Details are only figurative if the author means them to be figurative, in which case the literal meaning is that they are figurative.
3. God’s commands were always meant to be taken literally. For example, when God spoke to Moses through a burning bush, He used Moses’ language with its grammar to communicate a straightforward message. He did not expect Moses to allegorize His message to find some hidden meaning. Moses was not allowed to enter the Land because he did not take God’s command, to speak to the rock for water, literally (Numbers 20:10-11).
4. It is difficult to re-interpret prophecy already fulfilled (such as the birth of Christ), so allegorical interpretation is (illegitimately) only used for future prophecy, not yet fulfilled. All biblical prophecy which has been fulfilled, so far, has been fulfilled literally.
5. Intentions and inferences can also be determined from the author. For example, when Moses tells us Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice of Genesis 22, it implies he was not a little boy, but a young man old enough to carry the wood.
6. All literature, including the Bible, is written in different genres (style categories): narrative, poetry, prose, parables, etc. It includes normal figures of speech, metaphors, similes, hyperboles, and symbols. Just follow the form being clearly (most obviously) used in the text. Don’t change the method of interpretation just because the genre changes.

7. Never let later Scripture interpret prior Scripture. The New Testament should not be used to interpret the Old Testament. The epistles should not interpret the gospels. The Mosaic Law should not interpret Genesis, etc. For example, nothing in the text would allow us to interpret Genesis 3:15 as redemptive, Genesis 6 as demons having sex with women, the Song of Solomon as the love of Christ for the church, it being sinful for Abraham to marry his half-sister, or Jacob to have four wives.
8. Our application of a passage, our understanding of the fulfillment of a prophecy, and our theological understanding in general, may be enhanced by later revelation or our distance from it chronologically. But our interpretation must be confined to the context. For example, Daniel knew there was a gap between the 69th and 70th week in the vision he received in chapter 9:24-27. He did not know what we know, that gap would be 2000+ years. So that cannot be part of the interpretation, even though it's part of our understanding.
9. Using the Bible, like any literature, should move from observation to interpretation to application. Never jump from observation to application without first doing interpretation, asking the author's intended meaning. Remember all Scripture is written to somebody else. **We are always reading someone else's mail.** Since that mail comes from the inspiration of God, it all applies to us (2 Timothy 3:16-17). But it must first be understood with the meaning the author had for his readers. For example, God's command to Adam and Noah to *multiply and fill the earth* meant they were to fill an empty earth with children. That's not a command for us, but we can apply it by saying marriage should include plans to have children. The commands and promises to Israel (like the Mosaic Law and God healing their land) are not for us, but they can be applied to us in that obedience yields blessings.
10. The New Testament may quote, refer to, or get principles from the Old Testament, but it never nullifies the Old Testament author's meaning. New Testament authors use Old Testament references in different ways, but they never change or allegorize the meaning of the Old Testament text. For example, Peter applied Joel 2 to the situation in Acts 2, so he could show that the signs and wonders demonstrated the Messiah had come. Peter was using Joel, not trying to change or allegorize the meaning of Joel 2. The author in Hebrews 8 used Jeremiah 31 to show the old covenant was not eternal, he was not changing or allegorizing the meaning of Jeremiah 31.
11. God originated communication, and He also created the ability to understand communication. So it would be reasonable to assume that He would have us understand His communication the way He gave us the ability to understand communication. That's just another way to look at what we mean by "literal."
12. Special revelation (what we learn from the Bible) always has priority over general revelation (what we learn from our conscience, nature, natural history, and the sciences). It's not good to say "All truth is God's truth" because, though that's technically correct, it does not tell us how we know something from general revelation is true. In most cases, you don't know if it's true unless it is tested by Scripture. "All truth is God's truth" blurs the distinction, or denies that there is any distinction, between general revelation and special revelation.

Conclusion

Literal interpretation is the author's intended meaning. It is simply the way we understand anything any author has ever spoken or written. Nothing spoken or written in words is ever understood any other way. There are other ways to **use** a text, statement, or composition, but there is no other way to **understand** it.