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Should the Author's Intended Meaning Be Called "Literal"?

By Dr. David DeWitt

It has often been suggested that "literal" is not a good word to describe the way we understand things. 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.**

If we don't call the author's intended meaning "literal," then what should we call it? Some suggest we call it "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 as **the author's intended meaning, and his meaning is determined through the context.**