

Hermeneutics

God is a spirit and all his wordes are spirituall. His literal sense is spirituall. William Tyndale 1494–1536 [1](#)

It shall greatly helpe ye to understande Scripture, If thou mark Not only what is spoken or wrytten, But of whom, And to whom, With what words, At what time, Where, To what intent, With what circumstances, Considering what goeth before And what followeth. John Wycliffe (1324-1384)

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation. The key factor for a hermeneutic is that it have rigor, discipline, and consistency. How we approach language is foundational to how we determine meaning. Language is of two sorts: figurative or literal. Meaningful understanding of this subject depends upon specific examples for the reader to comprehend how a passage is interpreted. What is meant by literal is generally how a passage is normally read. An example of literal (or normal) meaning is the following passage by Matthew:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, (Matthew 2.1).

This is a simple, historical statement. The literal or normal meaning and interpretation is that Jesus was born in a place called Bethlehem (a real geographical place) when Herod (a historical person who reigned in a real time) was king (a real position) over Judea (a real place). By such a statement, Matthew rooted Jesus' birth in a real place in a real time. Contrast Matthew's literal statement to the following by Jesus:

Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep (John

10.7).

We understand Jesus did not mean He was a literal, wooden door of a sheep pen. We understand He was using a figure of speech (cf. John 10.6), a metaphor. But though He used figurative language, He communicated a *literal* truth, namely, that He is the entrance to salvation. Just as a wooden door is the entrance to a house or to a sheep pen, Jesus is the “door”, i.e., entrance through whom God and salvation is found. Jesus was not talking about animals, i.e. sheep, but human beings—specifically, Jews.

Almost all communication is literal. Think about daily conversations. We talk about going out to dinner, watching a movie, what our children are doing, ongoing projects, what we’re reading, what’s going on at church, politics, sports, our job etc. These communications are literal. Were it not so, we would find it impossible to communicate. We employ conventions regularly in speech without thinking of them as such. A new car is called a “nice set of wheels”. We employ expressions as, “She’s the apple of his eye”. In doing so we understand we are talking about a whole car and not just its wheels. We know someone’s eye does not have an apple in it but that the apple stands as an object of appeal and favor. Figurative language is, in most cases, readily understood as such by its context. It can also be identified by the kind of literature. For example, poetry lends itself to figurative language. But it is essential is to remember that figurative language always communicates *literal* truth. Isaiah penned the poetic line,

All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field (Isaiah 40.6).

We understand he meant we are mortal. The literal truth is not *flesh is grass*—that makes no sense—but that human beings have a temporal life upon the earth. Isaiah conveyed literal truth

through figurative language.

Most difficulties in interpreting the Scriptures arise from neglecting a passage's context. The guiding principle of sound interpretation is to take a passage literally (that is, in its normal sense) unless strong reasons exist for not doing so. Without such discipline, interpretation of a passage becomes so elastic it can mean almost anything. The result is erroneous or ridiculous interpretations. Following the rule cited above by Tyndale and Wycliffe, the interpreter needs to ask the following questions: To whom was a passage written? What did it mean to its audience? When was it written? Under what circumstances was it written? What was the historical context? How does the passage compare with other passages the writer has written? What light do other passages shed on it? Other questions pertinent to interpretation include: What knowledge do the original languages shed? Do cognate languages provide insight? What customs were in place? Are idioms or conventions present? Does archaeology shed linguistic or historical light on the passage? These are some of the many factors an interpreter must consider to determine meaning.

An example of interpretive confusion concerns the meaning of David's throne. Great controversy has resulted about this subject. The controversy is whether Jesus will occupy David's throne literally in a future day or whether he is occupying it now figuratively or symbolically. A literal or normal reading of the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7.8-17), indicates God promised to establish the throne of David forever. The Davidic Covenant was unconditional. God made the promise to David *sovereignly* in light of His knowledge of Israel past and future failures and weaknesses. We know from history that no son of David occupied the throne of Israel since the time of Nebuchadnezzar. We also know Mary and Joseph were members of the tribe of Judah and descendants in the royal line of David. The angel Gabriel announced to Mary that God would give her son the throne of David. He said,

³² *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;* ³³ *and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1.32-33).*

A normal reading of the prophecy is that God would give Mary’s son, Jesus, the Davidic throne. His reign would be over the house of Jacob, i.e., Israel, and it would last forever. Thus, the promise was wholly and totally *Jewish*. How would Mary have interpreted the words of the angel? She would have remembered the Davidic covenant and the prophecies over hundreds of years that promised Israel a Messiah-King who would reign.

The context indicates Gentiles or the Church were *not* in view. An interpretation that denies this is an erroneous interpretation. Jesus was a Jew. He was from the tribe of Judah and his ancestor was King David. Herod occupied David’s throne during Jesus’ time on earth. Herod was not from the tribe of Judah. Herod was a Gentile, an Idumean. Jesus never occupied David’s throne during his life on earth. Is he now sitting on it? Can one visit Jerusalem and find Jesus sitting on a throne there? No, Jesus is seated presently at the right hand of his Father’s throne (Psalm 110.1). Therefore, we can conclude the prophetic promise awaits fulfillment. A future day remains in which Jesus will rule from Jerusalem on David’s throne and fulfill God’s promise to David as reiterated to Mary (Daniel 7.14; Zechariah 14.9; Isaiah 9.6-7, 16.5; Jeremiah 33.17, 20-22, etc.).

Some maintain this throne is symbol, not literal. This is where one’s hermeneutic comes in. What is the normal reading of the passage? Those who maintain the throne is symbolic have abandoned the discipline of a literal, grammatical, and historical hermeneutic. The key question is whether the Scriptures govern theology or does theology govern the Scriptures. If the former, we have an inductive, scientific

method of interpretation with rigor and discipline. If the latter, we have a deductive system in which the Scriptures become so elastic that the interpreter can mold them to mean whatever he wishes. That is what has happened in most of Christendom.

The Davidic Covenant was prophetic. How were other prophecies associated with Jesus fulfilled? Were they fulfilled literally or figuratively? Were they types? For example, were His garments parted? Did soldiers cast lots for them? Was this literal or figurative? Was He betrayed literally for 30 pieces of silver? Did His disciples literally forsake Him? Did He literally die for us or was His death only figurative or symbolic? Did Jesus literally rise from the dead or did He rise figuratively or symbolically? Some have declared Jesus' resurrection was only figurative—He rose in the hearts of his believers. The answers to these questions should be obvious. The above prophecies and many others were fulfilled literally. If we follow a consistent grammatical, historical interpretative method, then interpretation that maintains Jesus now occupies the *Davidic* throne in heaven is nonsense. The Scriptures are clear a future day remains in which Jesus will reign from David's throne in *Jerusalem*, not heaven, as King of the Jews and of the entire earth (Zechariah 14.9; Matthew 6.10).

Another example of interpretive confusion regards events that took place at Pentecost, recorded in Acts. Peter told his audience they had crucified their Messiah. His words pierced their hearts and they responded to his message and asked him what they should do. Peter told them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2.38) and they would receive the promise of the Holy Spirit. He went on to say,

For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself (Acts 2.39).

In Peter's second sermon, he spoke similar words,

²⁴ *And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days.* ²⁵ *It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED'"* (Acts 3.24-25).

The great challenge of this passage is not to read in future revelation, i.e., Paul, into the passage. What was the situation? Peter's audience was all Jews. No Gentiles were present. Pentecost was meaningless to Gentiles except as a curiosity. Remember that our Lord's ministry was *all Jewish* with a couple of exceptions. He never had a ministry to Gentiles. All his apostles were Jews and His audience was the nation of Israel. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and told the Jews to "repent for the kingdom of God is near." Not only did Jesus Himself have no ministry to Gentiles, He forbade His disciples to go to Gentiles (Matthew 10.5-7). Thus, the kingdom Jesus proclaimed was Jewish. It was a kingdom in which the nation of Israel would be preeminent among all the nations of the earth (Deuteronomy 28.1, 13). Through *this* kingdom Gentiles would be blessed (Zechariah 8.23; Isaiah 42.1). This kingdom was to be the fulfillment of all that the Jewish prophets had proclaimed and the promise God had given to Abraham (Genesis 12.1-3).

Peter's quoted Joel because he recognized the last days (Hebrews 1.2) had come upon Israel. He and his fellow apostles knew the prophecies concerning Israel were being fulfilled. Interpretive errors arise when expositors interpret Acts 2 and 3 with reference to the Church, the Body of Christ. As noted above, Pentecost was a *Jewish* feast. It applied to the Jews, to national Israel, not the Church. Those who interpret Acts 2 and 3 as Church doctrine have departed from the historical

context and abandoned sound exegesis. They read Church (Body of Christ) doctrine into Israel doctrine. Another way to express this is they read Pauline theology into Petrine theology. But the Church (the body of Christ) is *different* from Israel. How do we know this? We know it because the Scriptures *explicitly tell us so*. The Body of Christ did not exist when Peter gave his early Acts sermons. Peter's sermons in Acts indicate he knew *nothing* about the Body of Christ. Everything in Peter's sermons (Acts 2-3) indicated his focus was upon national Israel, that is, his kinsmen after the flesh. At that time, only the Jewish "church" or "assembly" of national Israel existed. Jewish priority was the rule. Those who believed in the Messiah were either Jews or under the aegis of the Jewish program, i.e., the kingdom of heaven.

Today, the situation is completely different. In the Church, the Body of Christ, we have no distinction between Jew and Gentile and no Jewish priority. Why not? The answer is because God revealed to the Apostle Paul the doctrine of the Church. Peter, nor any of the Twelve, knew nothing about it. This teaching was still a "[secret](#)" (Ephesians 2.11-22; 3.3-9; Colossians 1.26-27). Peter or any of the other writers of the New Testament do not mention the Body of Christ. Peter knew only one program: God's prophetic program in which Gentiles were to be blessed *through* Israel. His knowledge of the Church, the body of Christ, came later, through the Apostle Paul. To force later revelation and Church doctrine onto the early chapters of Acts is to abandon a literal, historic, and grammatical hermeneutic. For further study on this matter see [The Church](#).

Maintaining a "literal" hermeneutic has been a challenge throughout history. One form of figurative interpretation is allegorical interpretation. Allegorical interpretation came to influence Christian interpreters of Scripture by way of the Greeks. The allegorical hermeneutic provided a solution to a

Greek scholarly dilemma. The Greeks had an established religious heritage from Hesiod and Homer. When the philosophers and scholars began to reject the religious heritage and philosophical traditions of earlier ages it created a political problem. To reject completely the writings of the earlier Greek poets could not be done due to their popularity with the people. To preserve Hesiod and Homer in an intellectually acceptable form they allegorized their religious heritage. The stories of the gods were not to be taken *literally* but figuratively or allegorically. This new hermeneutic proclaimed that beyond and beneath the literal sense lay a greater meaning of the story.

Using hermeneutical methods applied to Greek pagan texts, scholars, primarily from Alexandria, began to influence biblical interpretation. While Rome was the political center of the ancient world, Alexandria was the intellectual and cultural center. It was one of the chief centers of scholarship and had the greatest library of ancient texts and writings in the world. A large Jewish population had come to reside there and later, a great Christian population. Jewish scholars adopted an allegorical hermeneutic and used it to reconcile the biblical Scriptures with Greek philosophical tradition. The Christian church, influenced by these scholastic trends, later accepted this hermeneutic. It dominated Christian interpretation until the Reformation. The man probably most responsible for introducing allegorical interpretation into the Christian church was Origen (c. 185-254) who sought to harmonize New Testament theology with the teachings of Plato.

Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo (354-425), incorporated Origen's methodology and devised a unified theology. Augustine's ideas influenced Christian interpretation for a millennium. Allegorical methodology and its effect on theology led to several false interpretations of the Scriptures including the view of eschatology (the doctrine of last

things) called amillennialism. Augustine had held a pre-millennial eschatological viewpoint as had almost all the earliest Church fathers. As he systematized his theology with allegorical methodology, he abandoned premillennialism and became an amillennialist. According to amillennialism, no literal millennium or kingdom of God exists in which Christ will reign as Israel's king for a thousand years. The amillennialist interprets the "millennium" figuratively or allegorically as our present Church age. In other words, no millennium exists except what is *now* and it began when God created the Church. Thus, it is identical with the Church age. An issue we won't delve into here is when God created the Church (examples: with Adam, with Christ, in Acts 2, other). This a significant problem for those who do not take the Scriptures literally. For those who do, the answer is simple.

The teaching the Church had replaced Israel began as early as the second century.² The idea was since the Jews had rejected their Messiah, God had rejected them (nationally) and had given their promises to the Church. These promises were not to be fulfilled literally but figuratively. Throughout the Middle Ages, belief Israel been irrevocably replaced by the Church solidified. Thus, the Church replaced Israel. This error is held by most of Christendom under the theological system known as covenant, reformed, or replacement theology. Theologians call it supercessionism. While it is the predominant theological view in Christendom and has a long pedigree, it is heterodox, errant theology and has a hermeneutical foundation of sand.

Despite the prevailing theological climate in the Middle Ages, certain groups such as the Syrian School of Antioch and the Victorines rejected the allegorical method. When the Reformers emerged, they revised current theological thought and established a more disciplined method of interpretation. Literal interpretation began to reassert itself as the dominant methodology, primarily in the realm of soteriology

(the doctrine of salvation). As a result, they were able to recover and rediscover the great doctrine of justification by faith alone. The bywords of the Reformation were *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fides*—the Scriptures alone, grace alone, and faith alone. They saw the Scriptures, read in a normal, natural way, taught salvation by faith in Christ's work alone. But old habits and traditions die hard. The reformers did not apply their methodology to other realms of theology such as eschatology (doctrine of last things) and ecclesiology (doctrine of the church). While the reformers failed to exploit a historical, grammatical, and literal hermeneutic into other areas of theology their failure can be understood. They were under tremendous pressures and what they achieved was nothing less than remarkable. But the great tragedy in Christendom is that since then almost no progress has been made to bring hermeneutical rigor into other areas of theology. The vast majority of scholars, pastors, and theologians fail to apply a consistent literal, grammatical hermeneutic to the Scriptures. They are essentially in the same place as the reformers 500 years ago.

The degree to which some interpreters reject a normal reading of a text is stunning. They have imprisoned themselves in a flawed hermeneutical system and most want to stay enslaved. They reject God's sovereignty and His faithfulness for they refuse to believe that God will fulfill his word literally as he did in the past. God has been proven faithful by fulfilling hundreds of promises already. Were they fulfilled figuratively or literally? Consider the following. How would non-literal interpreters interpret the Scriptures related to the Lord's first advent had they lived before that advent? Would they not "spiritualize" away the prophecies related to the Lord's first advent? Think about it.

Those who hold a non-literal hermeneutic also often uncritically follow tradition. While tradition has virtues it can seduce one into rigidity and blindness. Jesus' condemned

the religious authorities of his day for two reasons. One was hypocrisy. The other was tradition. The religious leaders in Jesus' day placed tradition alongside or above the Scriptures. The teachings of the Church Fathers, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and other reformers and theologians have value but they contain many errors. The Scriptures are supreme. When commentary conflicts with the normal reading of the text, the text trumps.

The gospels reveal that when Jesus referred to the Scriptures, he always interpreted them in their literal sense. Jesus made references to the biblical figures of David, Abiathar, Jonah, Solomon, Isaiah, Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Abel, Daniel, Noah, Elijah, and Elisha. He taught they were literal personages and the events surrounding them were historical. He also noted the events and places of Sodom, Nineveh, the creation of man, and the Flood. In each case he interpreted the events and places as literal and historical. Consider the following statement by Jesus:

¹⁷ "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matthew 5.17-18).

More familiar as "jot or tittle" in the King James translation, the "smallest letter or stroke" is the Greek expression ἰῶτα ἕν ἢ μία κεφαία (one iota or one point) which referred to the smallest Hebrew letter "yod" and part of a letter such as the "horn" part of a letter. Did Jesus believe in the literal fulfillment of Scripture? According to his above statement, not just down to the word but down to the smallest letter and to the smallest part of a letter. Can one be more literal than that?

The figurative, allegorical, "spiritualizing" interpreter is

at odds with his Master. The root of the hermeneutical problem is unbelief, the remedy, faith. This one fact should be sobering to those who "allegorize" texts.

¹ Lewis, C. S. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954, p.186.

² This should not be surprising to the reader who has read Paul (cf. 2 Timothy 1.15, 4.10-11).

©1998 Don Samdahl. Anyone is free to reproduce this material and distribute it, but it may not be sold.

Updated, August 20, 2010