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ONE THOUSAND YEARS: LITERAL OR FIGURATIVE?

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

Hank Hanegraaff of Bible Answer Man fame has recently delved into the field of eschatology (the study of last things) with the release of a novel called *The Last Disciple*,[1] co-authored with Sigmund Broward. It appears that Hanegraaff has adopted the preterist position in this first novel in a series that sees the book of Revelation as having been fulfilled in the first century. "Hank is a partial preterist who holds to a view on eschatology that is similar to the position held by Gary DeMar,"[2] according to DeMar's American Vision website. The *Last Disciple* is being billed as a preterist counterpart to the *Left Behind* novel series of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.[3] In the past Hanegraaff would not publicly state his views on eschatology but now is aggressively propagating them as the true biblical teaching.

LITERAL OR SPIRITUAL?

On a recent Bible Answer Man radio broadcast, a caller asked Hanegraaff: "How do you know when to spiritualize things in the Bible and when to take them literally." Hanegraaff's reply was as follows:

> If the Bible is using a metaphor or a figure of speech, do you want to take that in a wooden-literal sense? I think not. For example, the word "thousand" is used throughout the Bible. *I don't know of any, or at least many places where that word thousand is used in a literal sense.* For example, if you look at the Decalogue. *Thousand is used but not in a literal sense*, when God shows His loving-kindness to thousands of generations. We're not to take that in a wooden-literal sense, but we are to take that in the sense in which it is intended. God says that He is a jealous God punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commands. Now the question is does God only show love to a thousand generations or does He extend it to a thousand and one generations? What does a thousand mean? It means that He extends His love forever.
>
> Or it says in Scripture God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Do we say then, "Oh my goodness, I didn't know that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, but the thousand and first hill, I guess He doesn't own those cattle." So who owns them? Well, we know what that means. It means that God owns all the cattle.
>
> If the Lord your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as many as the stars in the sky. May the Lord increase you a thousand times and bless you as He has promised. We don't want to take that thousand in a wooden-literal sense. And I think this is the problem. People end up, in fact, ironically of the most symbolic of all the books of the Bible taking thousand in a woodenly literal sense. *When it is never used in Scripture in a woodenly literal sense*. So you always want to take something in the sense in which it is intended. And when you don't, the Bible becomes non-sense.[4] (emphasis added)

Hanegraaff says that the word "thousand" is rarely used in a literal sense throughout the Bible. I am not sure of which Bible he has studied, because when I looked up the word "thousand" it was used at least 531 times in the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for a thousand is *'elep* and it occurs 497 times. In the New Testament the Greek words are *chilia* and *chiliades*, which occur 34 times.[5] While there are a few examples of a non-literal use of "thousand," and some instances that could be disputed, it is safe to say that almost all uses of this word carry a literal value, contra Hanegraaff.

EXEGETICAL ESCHATOLOGY?

Hanegraaff claims that his approach to Bible prophecy is "based upon a methodology called exegetical eschatology."[6] Hanegraaff explains: "I coined the phrase 'exegetical eschatology' to underscore the fact that above all else I am deeply committed to a proper method of biblical interpretation rather than to any particular model of eschatology."[7] It is common today to stress method over outcome, but nevertheless, Hanegraaff does conclude that the Book of Revelation was primarily fulfilled in the first century of Christianity. Such a view is known as preterism.

Hanegraaff contrasts his "exegetical" approach with wooden literalism. He characterizes the *Left Behind* eschatology as the product of wooden literalism. Why does Hanegraaff frame the contrast by using the extreme and pejorative term "wooden literalism," instead of the more accurate portrayal of "literal'? Is it because he wants to plant in the listener's mind, through dishonesty in labeling, that a literal understanding of a thousand years in Revelation 20 is somehow an extreme view? Hanegraaff used the occasion of the call, not to go to Revelation 20 and demonstrate exegetically within the context why a thousand years is symbolic rather than literal. Instead of demonstrating an exegetical approach in his answer, as he boasts is his method, he argued from other biblical texts that "thousand" should be taken symbolically. By not dealing with the context of Revelation 20, Hanegraaff did not arrive at his view through exegesis. He merely transfers into Revelation 20 an interpretation he had already arrived at without ever examining the text he had referenced. On this occasion Hanegraaff failed to live up to his self-proclaimed label of "exegetical eschatology," rather he provides an example of "eisegetical eschatology."[8]

THE CATTLE ON A THOUSAND HILLS

Hanegraaff is correct to note that Psalm 50:10 means that "God owns all the cattle."[9] How do we know that "thousand" in Psalm 50:10 is figurative? We know because the context supports a figurative understanding. In Hebrew poetry it is common to have two lines juxtaposed to each other. This is the Psalm 50:10 which says, "For every beast of the forest is Mine, The cattle on a thousand hills." The first line states that God owns all beasts. The second line gives an example (cattle) of all the beast of the forest belonging to God. Thus, the context supports in this instance a figurative use of "thousand." The next line (Psalm 50:11) continues in the same vein: "I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine." Does God only know the birds or the mountains and not those of the valleys? In this verse the Psalmist goes from the specific to the general. It would make sense from this passage to conclude that God owns all. However, this passage is not an example of a figurative use of a thousand years.

THOUSAND IN THE DECALOGUE

"If you look at the Decalogue," declares Hanegraaff, "*Thousand is used but not in a literal sense*, when God shows His loving-kindness to thousands of generations."[10] (emphasis added) By my count, "thousand" is used 120 times in the first five books of the Bible in the Hebrew text. Most of these instances are literal uses of the word "thousand." Exodus 20:6 and Deuteronomy 5:10 include the statement noted by Hanegraaff. First, these two instances both use the plural "thousands," unlike the singular use in Revelation 20. A singular "thousand" is found in Deuteronomy 7:9. Second, I agree that a figurative meaning is most likely intended in these passages. "Thousand/s" appears to be used in these contexts to refer to an indefinite amount. The reason a figurative understanding is possible in these texts are due to the contextual factors found in these verses. Third, none of these three instances use the word "thousand" with a number, such as one thousand, two thousand, etc. In order to have relevance to assist us in understanding the thousand years in Revelation 20, Hanegraaff would need to find examples of the figurative use of years.

CONTEXT IS KING

Outside of the six occurrences in Revelation 20, the term "a thousand years" is only used twice (Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8). In both instances they require a literal used of a thousand years. "The idea of 2 Peter 3:8, which is an amplification of Psalm 90:4, is that the delay of a (literal) thousand years may well seem like a (literal) day against the backdrop of eternity," notes Matthew Waymeyer.[11] Thus, there is no lexical basis, outside of Revelation 20, that would support a figurative reading of the thousand years in the Apocalypse, as asserted by Hanegraaff.

In spite of the semantic range of a word when used in various contexts, a word or term can only have a single meaning in a given context. Context limits the possible meaning of a word to a single meaning. This is why any good exegete knows that a suggested meaning for a word lives or dies on whether it fits the context in which it appears. For example, there are dozens of nuances for the word "run." "She has a run in her stocking." "He scored the winning run." "Run to the store." "There is a run of salmon." In spite of many possible meanings of the word "run," we do not have a hard time understanding how the word is used when it appears in a specific context. The same is true in the Bible. The context is the deciding factor for determining how a word is used.

It is interesting to observe that Hanegraaff went to a couple of the few examples of the figurative use of "thousand" found in the Bible and argued from those instances. He never went directly to instances of a thousand in Revelation 20 and attempted to make his case from that context, yet, the issue to which he spoke was concerning the meaning of a thousand years in Revelation 20. Instead of demonstrating to the caller an example of "exegetical eschatology," Hanegraaff provides a example of an "exegetical fallacy." This is example of the hermeneutical error termed by Barr as "illegitimate totality transfer."[12] While totally ignoring contextual uses, Hanegraaff seeks to establish his own context for a thousand years. Hanegraaff creates this error by attempting to establish the meaning of a thousand from its use in other passages and then illegitimately transfers a foreign meaning into Revelation 20, without support from the immediate context. So much for "exegetical eschatology!"

CONCLUSION

The original question that precipitated Hanegraaff's answer was "How do you know when to spiritualize things in the Bible and when to take them literally." I believe that Matthew Waymeyer provides a much better answer to that caller's question than did Hanegraaff. Waymeyer says: "In order to be considered symbolic, the language in question must possess (a) some degree of *absurdity* when taken literally and (b) some degree of *clarity* when taken symbolically."[13] (emphasis original) There is nothing absurd about taking a thousand years literally in Revelation 20 as was noted in the contextual uses of passages like Psalm 50:10–11.

The literal reading of a thousand years in Revelation 20 makes perfect sense. The only reason it may seem strange to an individual would be because they have a bias, for some reason, against such an understanding. Non-premillennialists have just such a bias: if they let the statements of a thousand years stand, then this passage clearly teaches premillennialism. "With this in mind," concludes Waymeyer, "it is difficult to imagine why one would consider the 'thousand years' in Revelation 20 to be symbolic language, for it possesses neither a degree of absurdity when taken literally, nor a degree of clarity when taken symbolically."[14] Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

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[1] Hank Hanegraaff and Sigmund Brouwer, *The Last Disciple* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004).
[2] American Vision homepage, www.americanvision.org, accessed Sept. 27, 2004.
[3] American Vision homepage.
[4] Hank Hanegraaff, The Bible Answer Man (BAM) radio program, Sept. 28, 2004.
[5] Based upon searching the computer program *Accordance*, version 5.7.
[6] Hank Hanegraaff, BAM radio program, Sept. 24, 2004.
[7] Hanegraaff, BAM, Sept. 24, 2004.
[8] Exegesis means to lead out the meaning, thus, eisegesis is the opposite and means to read into a passage a meaning from outside of the text, not intended by the author.
[9] Hanegraaff, BAM, Sept. 28, 2004.
[10] Hanegraaff, BAM, Sept. 28, 2004.
[11] Matthew Waymeyer, *Revelation 20 and the Millennial Debate* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2004), p. 100. This recent book is an excellent overview of the millennial debate and defends the premillennial position. It can be purchased at www.kresschristianpublications.com.
[12] James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Languages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 218.
[13] Waymeyer, *Revelation 20*, p. 50.
[14] Waymeyer, *Revelation 20*, pp. 51–52.