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LITERAL VS. ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

The primary way in which critics of our prophecy views attack what we believe the Bible teaches is to distort our view of literal interpretation. They like to paint us as ones who believe in “wooden literalism,” which they now label as simply literalism. This is assumed by them to be a naïve, sophomoric understanding of biblical literature. Many have answered these claims and tried to set the record straight, but they are increasingly falling upon the deaf ears of opponents who simply refuse to listen.

THE CRITICS SPEAK

In his book, *End Times Fiction*, Gary DeMar ridicules Tim LaHaye’s claim to interpret the Bible literally in connection with the *Left Behind* series. “Having made the claim that his method is based on literalism, LaHaye spends considerable time redefining what he means by literalism,” complains Gary DeMar. “He does this so he can account for the many symbols in Revelation and other parts of the Bible that he doesn’t interpret in terms of his literalism definition.”¹ Carl Olson suggests that, “One of the most attractive features of dispensationalism is that it is a method of interpreting Scripture that appears to be logical, tidy, and all-encompassing.”² Barbara Rossing says, “Lindsey, LaHaye, and other dispensationalists claim to be reading the book of Revelation ‘literally,’ applying geopolitical predictions to today. But a literalist reading of Revelation is impossible, and they know it.”³ She adds, “A strictly literal interpretation of Revelation is neither possible nor desirable.”⁴ “This process of translating the Bible into a prophetic code and then calling on readers to recognize the ‘plain meaning’ of the text has a long history in rapture fiction,” declares Amy Frykholm.⁵ So the rants and misrepresentations of literal interpretation flow from the pens of evangelical and liberal alike.

Why do these opponents of our theology misrepresent and distort literal interpretation? I believe that this is done because if the literal interpretation of prophecy is left standing then they would have no basis for criticizing dispensational theology. It is clear from the above statements that they represent literal interpretation as “wooden literalism.” This is an approach that is not able to understand figures of speech and symbols for what they are and does not properly characterize what literal interpreters such as myself, Tim LaHaye and Hal Lindsey actually believe. So critics usually contend that dispensationalists come up with improper interpretative conclusions because we use a bad or inappropriate hermeneutic.

LITERAL HERMENEUTICS

Dale DeWitt has correctly noted that “dispensational theology owns no other method of interpretation or hermeneutic than that of the Reformation. . . . dispensationalism is not best considered an interpretative method.”⁶ DeWitt continues:

Dispensational theology employs no unique or cultic hermeneutic; its hermeneutic is the historic Protestant hermeneutic. But it does attempt to apply this method more consistently to Old Testament predictive prophecy than the Reformers or the denominational traditions coming from them were willing to do. At the same time, dispensationalists effort at the fullest

possible literalism has been more a matter of principle than thoroughgoing rigor in practice.⁷

Dispensationalists have always said that we are simply applying the agreed upon hermeneutic of Protestantism—the historical, grammatical method—also known as literal interpretation to the entire canon of Scripture, without resorting to spiritual or allegorical methods simply because the text dealt with the subject of prophecy. This means that included within the literal hermeneutic is the ability to recognize and understand figures of speech and symbols without having to abandon literal interpretation. Dr. Ryrie drives this point home when he says,

Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.⁸

Non-dispensationalist Bernard Ramm in his widely accepted textbook on biblical interpretation says,

The program of literal interpretation of Scripture does not overlook the figures of speech, the symbols, the types, the allegories that as a matter of fact are to be found in Holy Scripture. It is not a blind letterism nor a wooden literalism as is so often the accusation.⁹

In some of their more candid moments, opponents of literal interpretation admit that if our approach is followed then it does rightly lead to dispensational theology. Floyd Hamilton said the following:

Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures. That was the kind of Messianic kingdom that the Jews of the time of Christ were looking for, on the basis of a literal interpretation of the Old Testament promises.¹⁰

In the same vein, Oswald Allis admits, “the Old Testament prophecies if literally interpreted cannot be regarded as having been yet fulfilled or as being capable of fulfillment in this present age.”¹¹

Herein lies the problem with those, whether evangelical or liberal, who do not like where the proper approach (the literal hermeneutic) leads them. Either these conclusions do not fit their *a priori* worldview or their church’s creed, but it is clear that they do not like the clear biblical teachings concerning the future.

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

Historically when people do not like what a document says or they want to make it fit their philosophical bent they allegorize that document. This is what Philo did with the Jewish Bible in Alexandria, Egypt and, early on, some Christians picked up this

habit from him and imported it into the church. Ronald Diprose tells us about Origen's allegorical interpretive approach:

However, his exegetical methodology was profoundly influenced by the intellectual climate in which he grew up. The Greeks had used allegorism to make the mythical content of ancient works, such as those written by Homer and Hesiod, acceptable to readers with a more philosophical turn of the mind. Origen was also influenced by the example of Philo, a first century Alexandrian Jew who had interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures allegorically in order to make them harmonies with Platonism.¹²

Gary DeMar and other non-literal interpreters of prophecy cannot develop an agreed upon system of interpretative principles from which to carry out the allegorical approach. They cannot deal with dispensational theology through a positive approach; they must always be on the attack. Therefore, they have attempted to argue that if you interpret prophecy literally then it leads to absurdity. This is clearly the tact that DeMar uses throughout *End Times Fiction*. Such an approach also explains why the tone throughout DeMar's book, and others like him, is one of condescension and ridicule.

Historically, allegorical interpreters have commonly looked down on literal interpreters as stupid or slow since they are unable to ascend to the deeper, spiritual insights of the allegorical approach. A classic example of this attitude is on display in the writings of the first historian of the early church, Eusebius (c. A.D. 260-340) when writing about one who interpreted prophecy literally named Papias (c. A.D. 70-155).

Papias . . . says that there will be a millennium after the resurrections of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth. I suppose that he got these notions by a perverse reading of the apostolic accounts, not realizing that they had spoken mystically and symbolically. For he was a man of very little intelligence, as is clear from his books. But he is responsible for the fact that so many Christian writers after him held the same opinion, relying on his antiquity, for instance Irenaeus and whoever else appears to have held the same views.¹³

Such an attitude of allegorical condensation toward literalists appears to account for why a parody of *Left Behind* has been produced entitled *Right Behind*.¹⁴ Nathan Wilson, a twenty-something author, has clearly mastered the art of sarcastic ridicule, which too often typifies the postmodern mindset of our day. Instead of thoughtful interaction with the *Left Behind* series, Wilson's approach is that of attack, insult and ridicule. Allegorical interpreters think that they are deep thinkers and see more than is actually in the text. That's the problem, they see more than is in the text. On the other hand, literal interpreters they say, don't understand, the sophistication of language and literature.

AN ALTERNATE AUTHORITY

I believe that the trend among evangelical scholars is to create an alternate authority base outside the Bible. They then use what amounts to an alternate authority base as a basis for attacking the literal meaning of Scripture, especially as it relates to beginnings and the future. Having cultivated an alternate authority base, such as the improper use of archeology, history, mythology, science, and others sources of influence, they use

these extra-biblical “authorities” to question and challenge the Scriptures themselves. This is done under the guise that we must understand the background and culture of the text of Scripture in order to properly understand it. I too believe in the use of background material, but the question is how should it be used. These evangelicals are not using this material to merely add depth to an interpretation that is gleaned primarily from the text itself, but instead they are using this extra-biblical information to introduce whole new interpretations of the text that one could not get without this alternate information. Thus, the basis of their interpretation becomes the extra-textual information that they often use to discredit the traditional and plain understanding of a given Scriptural passage. This amounts to a form of allegorical interpretation.

One such example in the area of eschatology is Brent Sandy’s *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks*.¹⁵ Typical of those under the spell of today’s postmodern influence, Sandy exalts the interpretative process at the expense of arriving at a definite theology. Sandy’s doublespeak is evident in the following:

The limitations of prophecy as a source of information for the future were demonstrated with examples from various prophetic parts of Scripture. It became evident that the predicative element of prophecy is more translucent than transparent. Prophecy is always accurate in what it intends to reveal, but rarely does it reveal information so that we may know the future in advance. Figures of speech function to describe not the details of what is going to happen but the seriousness of what is going to happen.¹⁶

So typical of those evangelicals who want to assign to biblical prophecy some special category or literary genre they call “apocalyptic,” Sandy says, “interpreters must withhold judgment on many particulars of prophecy, unambiguous prophetic themes abound throughout Scripture, centering on the second coming of Jesus the Messiah.”¹⁷ Well, many preterists, who agree with his vague and shadowy handling of biblical prophecy don’t believe in a future second coming. Sandy concludes, “if my conclusions about the language of prophecy and apocalyptic are correct, all systems of eschatology are subject to reconsideration.”¹⁸ It should not be surprising, since Sandy is beholden to a postmodern mindset that he believes that the correct understanding of the Bible’s eschatological message will be composed of a blend of all the different prophetic views.¹⁹

One thing is clear about Sandy and the evangelical scholarly view is that prophecy should not be taken literally, as has been done by dispensationalists. And they say we know this, primarily, because the prophetic portions of the Bible are apocalyptic, which were not intended to be taken literally. They may not be able to tell you what these sections of Scripture actually mean, but this one thing they know: prophecy should not be interpreted literally (that is according to the historical, grammatical approach).

CONCLUSION

Walt Kaiser suggested about twenty years ago that the church is “now going through a hermeneutical crisis, perhaps as significant in its importance and outcome as that of the Reformation.”²⁰ The present-day crisis finds its historical roots in the writings of such radical liberals as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), and Hans Georg Gadamer (b. 1900).²¹ With Gadamer, as Kaiser notes, “the meaning of the

text lies in its subject matter, rather than in what an author meant by that text."²² Kaiser explains further:

The process of exegesis of a text is no longer linear but circular—one in which the interpreter affects his text as much as the text (in its subject matter) somehow affects the interpreter as well. Clearly, there is a confusion of ontology with epistemology, the subject with the object, the "thereness" of the propositions of the text with the total cultural and interpretive "baggage" of the interpreter.²³

The last decade or so has seen the merger of evangelical and liberal hermeneutics, which has by-and-large been adopted by scholars at formerly conservative schools. It is not the liberals who have changed. In this approach the words of the author are clothed with some deeper spiritual sense. With this return to the allegorical method of interpretation, the words of the Old Testament prophets are often explained away. A more recent and "fashionable" term is *sensus plenior*. Use of this concept involves finding a "fuller meaning" that the author did not clearly intend.²⁴ The "layered look" is also finding its way into the evangelical community as some are returning to the multiple meanings of the text once held by the Schoolmen.²⁵ Bruce Waltke suggests a fourfold approach: historical, typical, anagogical, and moral.²⁶ Now there is developing an evangelical consensus, in league with liberalism that says prophecy cannot be taken literally. The press is on to demonize and marginalize the literal interpreter of Bible prophecy. Maranatha!

¹ Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of The Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), p. 188.

² Carl E. Olson, *Will Catholics Be "Left Behind"? A Catholic Critique of The Rapture and Today's Prophecy Preachers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), p. 242.

³ Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in The Book of Revelation* (Bolder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), p. 94.

⁴ Rossing, *Rapture Exposed*, p. 96.

⁵ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical American* (Oxford Press: New York, 2004), p. 116.

⁶ Dale S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America During The 20th Century* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 2002), p. 6.

⁷ DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology*, p. 8.

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995), pp. 80-81.

⁹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd. edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1970, p. 126.

¹⁰ Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), p. 38.

¹¹ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, [1945] 1947), p. 238.

¹² Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the development of Christian thought* (Rome: Istitutio Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), p. 86.

¹³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. I, translated by Kirsopp Lake, *Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 153 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), pp. 295, 297.

¹⁴ Nathan D. Wilson, *Right Behind: A Parody of Last Days Goofiness* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001).

¹⁵ D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 197.

¹⁷ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 203.

¹⁸ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 206.

¹⁹ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 250, f.n. 14.

²⁰ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Evangelical Hermeneutics: Restatement, Advance or Retreat from the Reformation?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 (1982), p. 167.

²¹ Kaiser, "Evangelical Hermeneutics," p. 167.

²² Kaiser, "Evangelical Hermeneutics," p. 167.

²³ Kaiser, "Evangelical Hermeneutics," p. 167.

²⁴ Raymond E. Brown, "The History and Development of the Theory of a *Sensus Plenior*," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 15 (1953), pp. 141-62. See also William Sanford LaSor, "Prophecy, Inspiration, and *Sensus Plenior*," *Tyndale Bulletin*, Vol. 29 (1978), pp. 49-60.

²⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, "The Schoolmen's Hermeneutics Reconsidered," an unpublished paper given at the Northwest Evangelical Theological meeting, April 1993.

²⁶ Waltke, "Schoolmen's Hermeneutics."