

Fallen Into the Hands of a Loving Father

Chapter Three

Literal Mania Lost Metaphor

As an opening, I have often stated that I believe the Bible should first be understood literally, and any other interpretation from the text should never contradict the plain literal meaning. Nothing in the next few paragraphs should be construed as a retreat from this statement, but it is necessary to clarify this somewhat due to the ambiguity that is currently manifest in the English language. Concise definitions are needed if we desire to have clear communication. Conservative Bible believing brethren have made similar statements concerning the literalness of Scripture, but if we agree on this, why is there so much debate on what constitutes the literal meaning of the text? Possibly it is our definition of literal, or maybe it is because our denomination claims to be teaching the literal meaning of the text and that everyone else's doctrines are allegorical misrepresentations. Every denomination takes large portions of Scripture and interprets them metaphorically. Often they call it literal, but calling a horse a cat does not make it so.

In the next few pages we will explore the meaning of the terms literal, metaphorical, allegorical, spiritualizing, etc. to determine a concise definition and to help us discover the use of each in Scripture. Once we learn how to properly use these terms, it will be easier to review our and others' explanation of the text and learn how we may be misapplying them to our own detriment. This will prepare us to better understand not only the meaning of the text, but the meaning of some long cherished doctrines that have been around since the first century but have developed into ideas that are not in keeping with their original intent. In future chapters we will look over some of those ancient types, midrashes (homilies), and doctrines to find the intent of the authors.

When children are young they tend to be more literal in their thinking. A parent will continually correct this literalness and be amused at some of their conclusions. Recently on an excursion with their father my 9 year old saw a sign at the entrance to a new subdivision. It advertized, "Lots for Sale." After reading the sign this young literal thinker stated, "I don't see anything." I asked, "See any what?" The reply came, "Stuff- I don't see any stuff for sale." She was not familiar with the term "lots" being used to describe several parcels of land. The casting of lots probably would have baffled her also, thinking that it meant we should pick up an throw random objects in our house.

When one is in his early stages of reading, he usually only understands one definition for a word. It is usually the most common or first meaning he grasped for the term while listening to those around him talk. Most definitions are learned subconsciously as they are being communicated in the presence of the young person prior to reading. Never do they look up these meanings in a dictionary to discover there might be more than one definition to a word. That is impossible since they cannot read. This gives the propensity to misunderstand any communication. As a child develops in his

ability to read and in the abstract notion that there may be several ways to use one word he begins to understand there may be a need for a dictionary so as to clarify the intent of the writer.

My seven year old is beginning to show that he might have some understanding of the need for a dictionary. He mentioned seeing a red car with a white stripe on it. Then soon afterward he saw a white car with a red stripe. He told me of his observation and said, "That was funny." Then he said, "Not the laughing kind of funny." I replied, "No" in agreement. Then he reverted back to the level of thinking he felt most comfortable. He said, "Why did you say, "no" daddy? Do you think it was the laughing kind of funny?" In this case, he was not familiar with the term "no" being used as an affirmative to his already presented negative. Well communication is hard in English and it is more difficult when we become excessively literal. It is especially difficult if our subject has been elevated to the level of bringing us eternal life. Since we desire eternal life in a just and perfect world, it becomes very important for our Spiritual ideas to be correct. To question another person's spiritual understanding is quite unsettling and will likely bring a strong negative response. So let's review our definitions which form the basis to our understanding of Scripture in hopes that we can discover fundamental errors which can inhibit future growth.

To better understand our discourse, maybe we should discuss the various possible definitions or subjects when using the term literal. When speaking of the definition of a word, The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines literal as, "1. in accordance with, involving or being the primary or strict meaning of the word, or words; not figurative or metaphorical:" This means if our word is "burn," it would mean to consume with fire not to "lust after with unrestrained emotions." The literal meaning of a particular word may not always convey the intent of a an author in a specific text. An example from Corinthians shows a metaphorical usage of this word burn rather than the literal usage.

^{NKJ} **1 Corinthians 7:8** But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; ⁹ but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn *with passion*.

The New King James inserts the words "*with passion*" to convey that the passage is talking about our second definition for burn rather than the literal meaning. It does so without any Greek word to support the two insertions. Yet the context clearly speaks of a metaphorical definition for burn rather than the literal consuming with fire. Considering that an author may use metaphorical nuances in his writings, maybe forcing a literal meaning on the text which is not in keeping with the intent of that author.

In stating that we believe that the Bible should be taken literally, we surely do not mean that the intent of the author should be ignored so that our preconceived notions about the literalness of Scripture could be substantiated. Don't we really mean that the plain intent of the author is how the Bible should be understood?

Let's look at the next definition of literal from The Random House Dictionary of the English

Language to reveal why this terminology may be somewhat confusing, “2. following the words of the original very closely and exactly: A literal translation of Goethe.” This definition deals with literal as it refers to a translation. A literal translation of the Bible tends to insert one comparable English word for each Greek or Hebrew word with careful scrutiny to only use words that have very similar definitions.

The difficulty in making an exclusively literal translation is revealed when one understands that languages typically do not have common definitions for individual words. In less abstract levels of thinking a person considers another language much like a code. They think both languages have the same meanings for their words, but the word itself is different. As we mature linguistically, we discover that there are many associations in other languages that are not found in our own language. In reality it is an oddity to find two words in unrelated languages that have exactly the same meaning. Such would usually imply a common heritage. A few years ago, a friend of mine who had not been brought up around dogs spotted a Chihuahua and asked, “Is that a Doberman puppy?” To me this sounded really silly, but there were certain similarities between the two breeds that I had never noticed. I laughed, afterwards, but recognized the reason for his statement. Yes, I questioned his intellect even though it wasn’t a sign of stupidity only a sign that he did not have much knowledge about dogs.

The above example may enable you to better understand how an Israelite might be confused if we translated a text literally from English into Hebrew. The Hebrew word Khatool usually translated as the English word cat reveals how this can be confusing. These two words are similar in sound, probably due to them both being an onomatopoeia developed from the sound a cat makes when upset. The difference is revealed when we refer to the lion, tiger, and leopard as big cats. We use cat as a category of felines where Hebrew does not. To call a lion a big “Khatool” would cause a Hebrew to question your IQ. Khatool does not designate the feline category in taxonomy hence such would sound really silly to them, just as the Chihuahua being a baby Doberman.

Consistently using a single term in one language to translate another single word in the source language could cause much confusion as shown by the Khatool, cat scenario. Yet, if the translator understands the various nuances of the two languages he can correct many errors that can arise in this method of translation. For example, he would not always use Khatool for cat since in English we may use cat for a category that the Hebrew word khatool is unable to communicate. There is a use for excessive literal translations of the Bible. I prefer a to have Young’s Literal Translation and The Interlinear Bible, available during any Bible study. Many times a Hebrew or Greek idiom will appear in the text, or even a quote of the Hebrew writings hidden in the Greek of the Apostolic writings, which would be undetectable due to the different languages. While the excessive literal translations are worthwhile, it is hard to put together the intent without some knowledge of the source language. It remains up to the reader to determine and understand the intent of the text if excessive literalness is used as the method of translation. Most literal translations will to some extent eliminate the misunderstandings produced by the method of translation. Often an uninformed reader will misconstrue the intent of the translator and suggest he is trying to change the text. This problem reveals the necessity of further learning to enable the reader to allay his confusion.

There are many places where all translation is inadequate. We are faced with a choice between revealing one intent, or other connections that may expose a deeper meaning. Jeremiah 1:11-12 in speaking of the “Almond tree,” is one such verse. This is a pun in Hebrew and there is rarely a way to translate a pun and make it effective in the second language. This verse not only is making a word play which in Hebrew connects an almond tree with watching over intricate details but also brings in the picture of Israel being the first among the nations to receive God’s plan. This passage has so much hidden in that one little word that it would be impossible to fully interpret without expanding the text with explanation. All of the meanings are clearly the intent of the author.

Considering the problems exposed when using the word literal to describe how we should understand the biblical text, possibly we are emphasizing the wrong concept. Another phrase may more correctly represent the intent of those of us who wish to believe God. How about, “I believe the plain, simple meaning of the Bible and believe it should be understood in this manner first, not allowing for any other interpretation to contradict the plain simple meaning?” This wording is somewhat closer to the Jewish explanation for the primary method of exegesis. They call this method *pashat*, meaning “simple.” This word is often translated as literal, but “plain simple meaning” might be a more accurate translation.

Using the word literal often extends the application of literalness beyond its safe parameters. For example a literal translation of an idiom, may give you a word for word translation but may totally bury the meaning of the phrase. Yehoshua said, “if you do not drink my blood or eat my flesh you will have no part of me.” The over literalization of this text has led to some real unique doctrines. There is the Eucharist transubstantiation explanation to which many of you think I am referring, but it pales in the face of those who demand that at each Passover one must kill a lamb and drink its blood, then eat its flesh in order to be saved.

To use the “plain simple meaning” rather than “literal” does not mean that there are no metaphors, allegories, idioms or types found within the Bible. The intended meaning for the passage could include metaphors, allegories, idioms and types if the intent of the author was to use such linguistic techniques when it was written. The problem arises when there is no clear defining factor giving us the intent of the author. Since the author is God, it becomes incumbent upon us to properly determine the intent trying to be communicated through the Scripture. This facilitates much debate and increases the amount of anxiety when someone questions our present understanding.

The suggestion that literal may be the wrong term has been considered by conservative theologians for years. Their solution involved naming the primary method of exegesis as grammatical historical. This means that the text must be reviewed within its historical context using proper grammar to determine the intended meaning of the text. This could be an improvement over the mere concept of literalness. When we use the phrase, “burning the candle at both ends,” no English speaking adult would visualize a candle with two fires burning. Yet, if we literally translated that into Spanish, since Spanish has no such idiomatic designation for a person who works too much, Spanish speakers will probably visualize a silly picture of a man carrying a candle in the middle with a fire on each side of his fist. They would not understand the intent of the description, missing the

message being conveyed. Do we make the same mistake with the Bible?

There are numerous idioms in the Bible. That should not be surprising since we can hardly speak a paragraph in English without using an idiom. We are so used to hearing them, we do not realize that many are idioms, not to be taken literally. Simply stated, idioms are phrases that make a word. The idiomatic phrase is used to convey a concept which would usually be transmitted by a single word, but for some reason there is no word in that language which easily communicates the concept. Idioms also arise when discretion, or poetry requires another way for conveying a message. Often idioms are used when adults want to talk about adult subjects while children are in the room. A poet uses picturesque phrases when conveying his artistic description of life. These may be established idioms, or may later become idioms based on the poem. Politicians try to figure out creative ways to communicate preferring to create terms and idioms rather than using established methods of communication. We have developed several phrases over the past few years merely due to our need to state something in a different way. Afro-American, Native American, politically correct, disseminating disinformation, and directionally challenged are a few of the recent idioms added to our language. The Bible uses, “an evil eye,” “cover his feet,” “the day of YHWH,” “at hand,” “he knew his wife,” and many others. If we know the idiomatic meaning, it is reasonable to read a literal translation, however, if we know nothing of the Hebraic or Greco idiomatic meaning, we will misunderstand these phrases and do ourselves no favor by demanding a literal understanding of the text.

There are phrases in Scripture that I believe should be literally translated that are thought to be idiomatic. One such phrase is ‘first of the Sabbaths,’ which is thought to be an Aramaic idiom meaning first day of the week. That might be the case if Sabbath were in a singular form, but used as a plural, this is problematic. So I would prefer the phrase to be literally translated or maybe translated, “first of weeks” referring to the first week in counting seven weeks to Shavuot (Pentecost). However, few Christians know about the counting of weeks mentioned in Leviticus, so the connection is lost. A literal translation would at least send the person on a search to discover the odd wording.

Luke 14:1 affords us with the opposite need. Here a literal read of the text obscures some of the meaning.

^{NKJ} **Luke 14:1** Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that they watched Him closely. ² And behold, there was a certain man before Him who had dropsy. ³ And Jesus, answering, spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" ⁴ But they kept silent. And He took *him* and healed him, and let him go. ⁵ Then He answered them, saying, "Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?"

Here we find Yehoshua entering into a house of, “one of the rulers of the Pharisees.” The Hebrew word for house would be *beit*, but this word does not clearly designate only the place where one lives. Notice in these verses we are given additional clues concerning this Pharisaic leader’s

house. It had an ill man there, and some lawyers. It would seem highly unlikely that every Shabbat a ruler in the Pharisaic movement would invite a group of lawyers and sick people for dinner. Furthermore it would be unlikely that Yehoshua would feel compelled to crash his party, then make him look rigid in his doctrine. If we look at the previous verses we find that Yehoshua was on His way to Jerusalem. Extra-biblical information reveals that there were two schools of Pharisaic Judaism in Jerusalem, Beit Hillel, and Beit Shammai. Notice that both the schools, named after their founders contain the Hebrew word *beit* meaning house. To me these verses clearly say that Yehoshua went into one of these two schools on the Shabbat. This explains the presence of the group of lawyers, more correctly translated as “teachers of the law.”

My suggestion would be that Yehoshua entered the House of Shammai since His question seemed to preclude that they would disagree with Him. Shammai taught that one should not heal on the Sabbath, where Hillel taught that one could heal on the Sabbath if he did not use a physical method. Speaking a healing into existence would be fine. This was Yehoshua’s procedure, and He would have no need of defending his position by using the ox and donkey if He were not before his critics. So in these verses I would be tempted to translate it as saying, “as He went into one of the schools of Law in Jerusalem...” This is probably the intent of the text. The literal read makes no qualification, but most likely misleads us to think this is the personal home of an important man who has generously invited a large group to come and eat.

Considering the examples as set forth in this chapter, I hope it is clearer why one meaning of literal may not be what we mean when we say the text should be understood in its literal meaning. When we develop a literal mania, we may totally lose the metaphoric intent of the text. Idioms may also disappear and leave us arguing over their meanings. The plain simple meaning of the text would encompass both the literal meaning as well as the intended metaphoric meaning. So let’s re-examine our thoughts on this topic and see if we cannot find reason to discuss differences in doctrine based on the possible variations of meaning within the text, while not skewing the intent of God.

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