

CONSISTENT BIBLICAL FUTURISM

Part II

by Thomas Ice

In an effort to resolve some differences among those of us who interpret the Bible and Bible prophecy in a consistently literal way, I will start by looking at our interpretative approach. Literal interpretation is shorthand for our hermeneutic which is called the grammatical, historical, contextual method. What does this mean and what are the implications of such a method.

LITERAL HERMENEUTICS

Dispensationalists are well known for their literal hermeneutic. Many opponents of dispensational theology attempt to make it appear that dispensationalists use some special or hyper-literal approach. Such is not the case. Dispensationalists simply apply more consistently the grammatical, historical, contextual method. 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.”ⁱ 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.ⁱⁱ

Non-dispensationalist Bernard Ramm points out that in Europe “there was a hermeneutical Reformation which preceded the ecclesiastical Reformation.”ⁱⁱⁱ Luther and Calvin generally returned the church to literal interpretation. Had they not done this, then Protestantism would have never been born and reformation would have never taken place. Luther said, “The literal sense of Scripture alone is the whole essence of faith and of Christian theology.”^{iv} Calvin said, “It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.”^v However, like many of us Luther and Calvin did not always follow their own theory, but they and like-minded reformers turned the hermeneutical tide in the right direction.

Dispensationalists have always declared that they are simply applying the agreed upon hermeneutic of Protestantism 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.^{vi}

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."^{vii}

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.^{viii}

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."^{ix}

Herein lies the problem with those, whether evangelical or liberal, who do not like where the proper approach (the literal hermeneutic) leads them. It is clear that these conclusions do not fit their *a priori* worldview or their church's creed. Thus, the logic of their view leads one to conclude that they do not like the clear biblical teachings concerning the future.

ALLEGORICAL HERMENEUTICS

The dictionary defines literal as "belonging to letters." It also says literal interpretation involves an approach "based on the actual words in their ordinary meaning. . . . not going beyond the facts."^x The mother of all dictionaries, *The Oxford English Dictionary* says, "Pertaining to the 'letter' (of Scripture); the distinctive epithet of that sense or interpretation (of the text) which is obtained by taking its words in their natural or customary meaning and applying the ordinary rules of grammar; opposed to *mystical, allegorical, etc.*"^{xi} "Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language."^{xii} How is this done? It can only be accomplished through the grammatical (according to the rules of grammar), historical (consistent with the historical setting of the passage), contextual (in accord with its literary context) method of interpretation. Literalism looks to the text, the actual words and phrases of a passage. Allegorical or non-literal interpretation imports an idea not found specifically in the text of a passage. Thus, the opposite of *literal* interpretation is *allegorical* interpretation. As Bernard Ramm in his classic and authoritative book on biblical interpretation said, "the 'literal' directly opposes the 'allegorical.'"^{xiii}

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.^{xiv}

I have noted in a previous article^{xv} that only one approach to the book of Revelation and prophetic texts is able to consistently interpret the Bible using literal hermeneutics and that is the futurist system. This means that a significant part of the other three systems of prophetic interpretation (preterism, historicism, and idealism) involves some degree of allegorical hermeneutics. Remember the allegorical element of an interpretative approach would mean that an idea not found specifically in the text of a passage must be imported from outside a specific text and declared to become part of the meaning of a given text. A common example employed by the three systems is that often when the biblical text says plainly "Israel," they often think or say "church." There is no textual basis, but since they believe that the church has replaced Israel they think they are justified to allegorize.

All three deviant systems employ allegorical hermeneutics at key points in the interpretive process. Preterism, through the alchemy of allegorical hermeneutics takes passages that require a supernatural means while referring to global events, and turns them into local and natural phenomenon. Historicism allegorizes days into years, Israel into the church, and the future tribulation period into the current church age. Idealism says that symbols do not represent future historical entities, even though similar symbols did have historical antecedents in the past. Idealism reduces future symbols into just ideas that will not play out in future history. Only futurism is able to apply consistently the grammatical, historical and contextual method of interpretation.

MIXING HERMENEUTICS

Since one should always apply the same method of interpretation and let the text tell us what it means, it makes no sense to mix literal and allegorical hermeneutics. However mixing hermeneutics is too often applied by many futurists who theoretically pledge allegiance to literal interpretation. I think the major aspect of the grammatical, historical and contextual hermeneutic, which is violated by futurists, is in relation to the intended context of the prophecy, which is future history.

Today it is common for a futurist prophecy teacher to see something happening in the news that relates to a prophesied event that is scheduled to take place during the tribulation and say that the prophecy is being fulfilled today. For example, the Battle of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38 and 39 sees Turkey in alliance with Iran against Israel. For the last 30 years Turkey and Israel have been friends. Now Turkey is turning against Israel and teaming up with Iran. Some are saying that this is a fulfillment of prophecy. It is preparation for fulfillment, but nothing in the Ezekiel prophecy has yet been fulfilled. That is a mixing of hermeneutics by not placing this event in its proper, future context as a result of the study of Scripture. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ Dale S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America During The 20th Century* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 2002), p. 6.
- ⁱⁱ DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology*, p. 8.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd. edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1970), p. 52.
- ^{iv} Martin Luther cited in Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 54.
- ^v John Calvin cited in Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 58.
- ^{vi} Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966, 1995,] 2007), p. 91.
- ^{vii} Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 126.
- ^{viii} Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), p. 38.
- ^{ix} Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, [1945] 1947), p. 238.
- ^x *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, Unabridged, Second Edition, p. 1055
- ^{xi} *The Compact Edition of The Oxford English Dictionary* (New York, Oxford Press, 1971), s.v., "literal."
- ^{xii} Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, (Winona Lake, Ind.: Assurance Publishers, 1974), p. 29.
- ^{xiii} Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 119.
- ^{xiv} Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the development of Christian thought* (Rome: Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), p. 86.
- ^{xv} "Consistent Biblical Futurism," Part 1, *Pre-Trib Perspectives* (Vol. VIII, Num. 77; June 2010), pp. 6–7.