

FROM A GARDEN TO A CITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERAL INTERPRETATION Tom's Perspectives by Thomas Ice

The sweep of human history, as revealed in God's Word, begins with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. History is moving toward the New Jerusalem, in the new heavens and new earth, which will become the eternal state of believers. There are a lot of important events in the interim, but it is important to know where we came from and where we are going.

Only the premillennial view of eschatology provides a satisfactory climax that corresponds to the biblical of beginnings. The story of history that commences in Genesis is brought to a fitting climax in the book of Revelation. Such harmony is only true if the text of Scripture is taken as God intended—literally. Distortion of God's plan for history sets in when individuals stray from the historical, grammatical hermeneutic. Not only does it go astray hermeneutically (how we interpret literature), but it also goes astray epistemologically (how we know that we know).

Over the years I have heard the late Dr. John Walvoord speak many times in person about the importance of interpreting the entire Bible literally. A few years ago he was asked "what do you predict will be the most significant theological issues over the next ten years?" His answer included the following: "the hermeneutical problem of not interpreting the Bible literally, especially the prophetic areas. The church today is engulfed in the idea that one cannot interpret prophecy literally."¹ Things have only gotten worse since he made that statement ten years ago. Today too many evangelicals believe that we need to blend literal and non-literal hermeneutics when interpreting Holy Writ. According to Dr. Walvoord, it cannot be legitimately done, without producing a confused and contradictory mix of Scripture in general and specifically in the area of eschatology.

CURRENT EVANGELICAL SCHOLARSHIP

It was also ten years ago that Mark Noll of Wheaton College came out with his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*,² in which he indicts Evangelicalism for having lost its mind, if it ever had one. Noll blames this scandal on an anti-intellectual trend within evangelicalism.³ I agree with his statement about an anti-intellectual trend, however, I disagree with his location of the problem. In essence, he says that the cause of anti-intellectualism is due to those who hold to a literal six-day creation in the early chapters of Genesis and those who take a literal approach to future prophecy, like dispensationalists.⁴ Noll says, "Creationism could, in fact, be called scientific dispensationalism, for creation scientists carry the same attitude toward catastrophe and the sharp break between eras into their science that dispensationalists see in the Scriptures."⁵ Just why are dispensationalists and creationists damaging the intellectual life of evangelicalism according to Noll? Noll explains:

Beyond personal belief and the dynamics of recent social history the spread of creationism also reflects dynamics arising from fundamentalist theology, particularly the eschatological mentality and the fascination for dispensations. A biblical literalism, gaining strength since the 1870s, has fueled both the intense concern for human origins and the end times. Literal readings of Genesis 1–3 find their counterpart in literal readings of Revelation

20 (with its description of the thousand-year reign of Christ). The observation by Ronald Numbers—that, “for Christians expecting the end of the age, Whitcomb and Morris offered a compelling view of earth history framed by symmetrical catastrophic events and connected by a common hermeneutic”—only confirms a connection that both creationists and premillennial dispensationalists had identified long ago.⁶

Noll’s outline of what he proposes as evangelical scholarship is vague at best.⁷ However, it seems clear to me that he does not like a Bible only approach to the establishment of one’s intellectual framework. He says, “a Christian who attempts to interpret passages of the Bible with cosmological implications will misinterpret the Bible if that believer does not take account of what can be learned ‘from reason and experience.’”⁸ It is clear that Noll favors an eclectic approach.

Os Guinness also came out with a book similar to Noll’s, though much more simple, in which he included dispensational premillennialism as one of the problems hindering evangelical thought.⁹ In *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, Guinness looks back to the Puritan heritage upon which America was founded and he, as an Englishman, wishes that evangelicals would return to those things that made Colonial America great. I do too! However, many of those thinking Puritans were premillennial and speculated greatly on prophecy and current events, even more than current dispensationalists. While I agree with much of Guinness’ book, I think his real problem with premillennialism is not so much that we don’t think, it is how we think that bothers him. Once again, a critic is unsympathetic of a Bible first approach to worldview.

FRAMEWORKS AND APPROACHES

Apparently, Noll and others like him believe that one can be too biblical. In other words, both creationists and dispensationalists start scholarship with a “thus saith the Lord.” We start with God’s revelation as our framework through which we interpret every area of life. What’s wrong with that? I believe that it is the only view that gives proper place to the view that the Bible does provide us with accurate information about whatever it speaks about. It appears that Noll does not want to start with God’s Word as the authoritative framework with which to view every area of life, but desires to blend with the Bible pagan sources and viewpoints. This synthesis of a secular viewpoint, with some Bible thrown in, is what Noll calls evangelical scholarship. I have heard that snake venom has about 80 to 85% protein, but using it as a protein source will be deadly.

It is instructive that in the two major areas where we as creatures have to take God’s Word, and it alone, as the basis for knowledge in that area, it is exactly these two areas that are under attack from much of evangelical scholarship. Those two areas are first, what happened in the ancient past, when there were few or no creatures to observe events, and second, what will happen in the future. The past and the future are the main areas that we must take God’s Word about what happened or will occur. Only God was there and I have no problem trusting His account of what has occurred and what will take place. God, in the Bible, talks about how only He was there in the past and only He knows the future.

In Job, the oldest book of the Bible, at the end when God shows up and sets everyone straight about reality, He asks Job a series of 46 questions (Job 38—40:1). One of the first ones that he asks is about what happened at creation, how did God do it? “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have

understanding, Who set its measurements, since you know? Or who stretched the line on it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone?" (38:4–6) This series of questions, to which God does not provide answers, is designed to demonstrate that God is God and Job is his limited and finite creature. This is a lesson that we all need to keep in mind, especially when thinking about origins and the future.

In a similar way, God, through Isaiah, challenges Israel in Isaiah 41. He says the following:

"Present your case," the LORD says. "Bring forward your strong arguments," the King of Jacob says. Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place; as for the former events, declare what they were, that we may consider them, and know their outcome; or announce to us what is coming. Declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods; indeed, do good or evil, that we may anxiously look about us and fear together (41:21–23).

In this passage, the Lord groups together the past and future and indicates that these are things that only God can know about, because only He was there. Someone might say, "God, who do You think you are? God!" Well, yes, that is the whole point. Only God can know these things, precisely because He is God. Yet, today many evangelical scholars do not take God's record about beginnings and endings as literally true. What are they doing for an authority base?

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.

One such example in the area of eschatology is Brent Sandy's *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks*.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.”¹² 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.”¹³ 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.¹⁴

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).

HARMONY OF THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

In our newly released book *The Truth Behind Left Behind*,¹⁵ Mark Hitchcock and I defend the theology of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins upon which they developed the *Left Behind* novel series. We have a chapter in the book explaining what we, and those within our dispensational camp, mean by literal interpretation.¹⁶ It is often different than the false characterizations found in our critics. I have long been impressed with the way in which the literal approach to biblical beginnings produce harmony with the literal understanding of the future. Henry Morris, who comes under great criticism by Noll for his role in the modern creationist movement,¹⁷ charts the relationships between themes begun in the Garden of Eden and their culmination in the City of the future as follows:¹⁸

GENESIS	REVELATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rise of Satan (3:1-6) • Satan’s judgment pronounced (3:15) • Presence of God removed (3:24) • Curse received (3:17-19) • Death enters the natural creation (3:19) • Pain and sorrow experienced (3:16-19) • Entrance to the tree of life barred (3:24) • Cycle of night and day (1:5) • First heaven and earth (1:1—2:3) • God clothes fallen man (3:21) • God’s face is hidden (4:4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demise of Satan (20:10) • Satan’s judgment performed (20:2) • Presence of God restored (21:3) • Curse removed (22:3) • Death excluded from new creation (20:14; 21:4) • Pain and sorrow excluded (21:4) • Entrance to the tree of life blessed (22:14) • No night, only light (21:25; 22:5) • Final heaven and earth (21:1) • God clothes redeemed man (6:11; 7:9, 14) • God’s face revealed (22:4)

CONCLUSION

The literal interpretation of the Bible (especially Genesis and Revelation) may be offensive to many current evangelicals, but regardless of the many others reasons why it is the correct method, such an approach tells us where we came from and where we are headed in the future. It is not surprising that too many evangelicals want to cast a cloud upon those portions of Scripture for which we as creatures are dependant upon God's Revelation. If God does not tell us about beginnings and the future, we cannot know from any other source. Nevertheless, the Bible tells us that history began in a garden and is moving toward a city. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ "An Interview: Dr. John F. Walvoord Looks at Dallas Seminary," *Dallas Connection* (Winter 1994, Vol. 1, No. 3), p. 4.

² Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

³ Noll, *Scandal*, pp. 10–12.

⁴ Noll, *Scandal*, pp. 124–45 and 177–208.

⁵ Noll, *Scandal*, p. 195.

⁶ Noll, *Scandal*, p. 194.

⁷ See chapter 9 in Noll, *Scandal*.

⁸ Noll, *Scandal*, p. 203.

⁹ Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1994), pp. 63–68.

¹⁰ D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

¹¹ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 197.

¹² Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 203.

¹³ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 206.

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

¹⁵ Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, *The Truth Behind Left Behind: A Biblical View of the End Times* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004).

¹⁶ Chapter 11 is the one on literal interpretation. The reader may also be interested in chapter 12, "What is Dispensationalism," in order to see a dispensational self-definition.

¹⁷ See Noll, *Scandal*, pp. 190–208.

¹⁸ The chart in this article is derived from Henry M. Morris, *The Revelation Record: A scientific and devotional commentary on the prophetic book of the end times* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1983), p. 22.