

Is Literal Always Literal?

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Consider the English language. Within it are roughly one quarter of a million words that can be used in conversation – both written and spoken. In conjunction with that, we use *similes, metaphors, puns* (including chiasms, pangrams, tongue twisters and the always fun oxymoron), *hyperbole, alliteration, euphemisms, irony, paradox, personification, understatements* and many other figures of speech.

These are all specific parts of language designed to create a special effect by using words in unique ways. No one that I know of would read a metaphor and attempt to take it literally. The same is true for a simile, or any other form of figurative language.

The Bible and the Figure of Speech

So what is the problem then? You would think for people who accuse Literalists often enough about failing to take certain things literally, that the Bible did not have any figures of speech in it.

In point of fact, the Bible does utilize figures of speech. Robert I. Bradshaw from the UK has a website which includes various definitions of figures of speech and how some of them are used in the Bible.

His definition of a figure of speech says *“Idioms or figures of speech are combinations of words whose meaning cannot be determined by examination of the meanings of the words that make it up. Or, to put it another way, an idiom uses a number of words to represent a single object, person or concept.”*¹

He sums up the problem in his next sentence when he states *“Unless you recognise (sic) when an idiom is being used you can easily misunderstand the meaning of a text.”*²

Dispelling the Myth

The main reason I decided to write this book is to attempt at least to dispel the myth that if a person is a Literalist, he **is required** take every word of the Bible literally. This is absolutely untrue, and for people to insist on it is unreasonable.

If there were people in our society called Literalists, who routinely took every word of every conversation or written work absolutely literally with no exceptions, then there might be justification for insisting that these same Literalists do that where the Bible is concerned. However, this is not the case.

¹ http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_idioms.html

² Ibid

The trouble is that words used in language are for the most part, not singular in meaning. Most English words have more than one meaning and some have many meanings. Determining that meaning in each specific usage is tantamount to finding the actual meaning of the text itself, which is made up of those individual words.

Besides figures of speech though (which I would imagine people worldwide would agree should not be taken literally, but are simply literary devices used for a specific purpose), is there any other reason not to take portions of Scripture literally?

Yes, of course there is. Reading through the Psalms, or Proverbs, or Song of Solomon or just about any of the Major or Minor Prophets in the Old Testament, it is extremely easy to know when figures of speech pop up.

Proverbs 1:20 says, "*Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice...*" Here we see that wisdom is not only able to speak (cries aloud in the street), but is also a woman (she raises her voice). I have actually run across a few people who believe this to be literal, referencing women. Normally though, the average person understands this as *personification*, the way it was obviously meant when it was written.

There are many instances of this type of word usage in Scripture and no one that I am aware of would actually expect someone who takes the Bible literally to take passages like this hyper-literally. In fact, to take these passages literally would simply mean to determine their actual meaning.

Years ago, I used to subscribe to a printed magazine called "The Wittenberg Door" and in one particular issue that I recall, there was a drawing of an extremely weird looking individual. The caption read something like "For our literalist friends; from Song of Solomon." It was funny to see a woman with a neck made out of bricks and other things described in the biblical text. The truth of the matter is that many people see Literalists that way: as having to see everything in Scripture literally.

Even for those who grant a little wiggle room to the Literalists, allowing them to understand passages like the one from Proverbs as a figure of speech, they insist that all other parts of Scripture which are not obviously some type of figure of speech must be taken as written. To not do so means that the Literalists pick and choose in order to achieve their desired end of having the Bible say what they want it to say in order to support their own claims about the Bible.

Eradication or Bust!

It is the intention with this book to eradicate at least some of those false notions, or at the minimum, cause people to ask questions. The ideal would be for people to stop placing the

Literalist in a space so small that there is no room to breathe, much less interpret Scripture. Will it happen? One can only hope.

Throughout the remaining portions of this book, we will take the time to discuss what it really means to take the Bible literally as well as provide examples of where it may appear as though the Literalist is not taking Scripture literally.

Thank you for your willingness to journey through these pages. Hopefully, the trip will be labeled “worthwhile” when all is said and done.

He walked to the table, sat down, turned to his friends and said, “I am so hungry, I could eat a horse!” The guy who made that statement had just joined his friends for dinner at the same restaurant where I was eating with my family, just a few tables away. Well, let me tell you that I was repulsed! Who did this guy think he was and why, for goodness sake, did he think that this restaurant had an entire horse killed and dressed and ready for him to eat?! You can be sure that as soon as I saw any part of a horse on a plate served to him, my cell phone was ready to call the authorities!

Okay, enough of my unbelievable reaction. The guy *had* literally said that he could eat a horse, but my reaction was far different than the one I just described, because I knew that he did not literally *mean* that he could eat a horse. I actually chuckled when I heard it because I had said the same thing to describe times when I had been very hungry.

When I heard this comment from the other diner seated not far from me, I knew that he actually meant that he was simply very hungry; nothing more and nothing less.

Consider the use of the word “left.” If I was in a taxi and I said to the driver, “Please turn left at the next intersection,” he would know that I was informing him of where I needed to go. If at the end of my trip, I took out my wallet and after looking into it said, “Oh, I have ten dollars left in my wallet,” then the taxi driver would be wondering what else I was going to use to cover the twenty-five dollar fare!

The same word – left – was used in both examples, but it is quite obvious that the word has more than one meaning. The determining factor for each is the context, as well as the grammar itself.

Does Being Literal Ignore Figures of Speech?

The truth of the matter is that in everyday speech and conversation, language is filled with all sorts of speech, including hyperbole, exaggeration, simile, metaphor, etc. When someone uses these types of figures of speech, most of us have no difficulty hearing them and understanding them instantly without so much as a raised eyebrow. My neighboring diner had used a figure of speech to emphasize how hungry he was and I knew what he

meant. He did not have to take the time to explain it to me. He had uttered a statement for which I understood what he actually meant as soon as he had stated it.

Some would argue that he wasn't being literal, or that I wasn't truly taking him literally. In fact, when I was teaching an adult Bible class at my local church and was introducing the concept of the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic, one individual said that it seemed like an awkward hermeneutic. I was a bit floored, but asked him how he might express the fact that he was very hungry to others. His response was that he would just say "I am very hungry!" I then asked him if he heard someone using the phrase mentioned above if he would assume they were going to eat a horse, or understand them to say they were very hungry. It seemed like he did not want to give in, but he admitted that he would understand what they meant by the figure of speech.