

## What is Literal Interpretation?

### Vern Poythress

Vern S. Poythress (M.Litt., University of Cambridge; Ph.D., Harvard University; D.Th., University of Stellenbosch, South Africa) is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Philosophy, Science and the Sovereignty of God*, *Symphonic Theology* and *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. This article is taken from Dr. Poythress' book, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 1987)

In a sense nearly all the problems associated with the dispensationalist-nondispensationalist conflict are buried beneath the question of literal interpretation. We might already suspect as much after having reviewed Darby's and Scofield's approach to literalness. Their approaches toward strict literalness seem to be subordinated to the more fundamental principle of dual destinations for Israel and the church. For example, Scofield freely encourages the use of nonliteral, even "allegorical," meanings of Old Testament history. "Absolute literalness" is found in prophecy, and this literalness is quite compatible with the existence of many "figures" in prophetic speech (Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence School*, pp. 45-46). So what Scofield means by "literal" is not too clear. Perhaps the word has already unconsciously been loaded with some of the assumptions belonging to the theological system.

Not all dispensationalist interpreters use the word "literal" in the same way. Modified dispensationalists, for instance, may use the word simply to refer to grammatical-historical interpretation. With them it has no other special meaning. In that case I do not disagree with them. But in much of the published dispensational literature there are added connotations. Hence we must examine this key word more closely.

### **DIFFICULTIES WITH THE MEANING OF "LITERAL"**

To define literal interpretation is not so easy as it might appear. Ryrie (*Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 86-87) invokes other, related terms like "normal" and "plain" to explicate what he means by literalness. But by itself this explanation is not enough. Our sense of normality depends radically on our sense of context, including a whole worldview, as Fish shows ("Normal Circumstances," pp. 625-44). Without repeating the contents of Fish's article, let me proceed to examine the problem by a parallel route.

One major aspect of the problem of defining "literal" is that in many instances words, but not sentences, have a literal or normal meaning. Moreover, for both words and

sentences context is all-important in determining meaning at any given point in an act of communication. What contexts are to be looked at, and how they are to be looked at, in the determination of meaning is very important. Because questions of context are too often begged in classic dispensationalist discussion of literalness, we need to deal with these questions more precisely.

## THE MEANING OF WORDS

We may best approach the central issue using some examples. Let us start with the following sample from a piece of writing:

*battle*

What does the word mean? We recognize that the graphic symbol “battle” can be either a noun (“a battle”) or a verb (“to battle”). When we are not given any further context, we would most likely construe this as a noun. The verb, in fact, derives its meaning from the noun, rather than vice versa. If a large number of people were stopped on the street and asked to define “battle,” the vast majority would probably give a definition like “a part of a war, a fight” (noun), rather than “to engage in combat” (verb). They would thereby indicate that they were thinking of the noun form rather than the verb.

This example shows that for most words there is something like a first-thought meaning, a meaning that one would naturally give when asked, “What does this word mean?” Not everyone might say exactly the same thing, but one aspect of the word would usually dominate.

When, however, we are given even a little bit of context, our guesses about the meaning may change radically. Let us see:

to battle

Now we are almost certain that “battle” is a verb. (But “to battle” could be a prepositional phrase, as in “Off to battle we go.”) There is still a kind of “first-thought” meaning, namely, “to engage in combat, to fight.” Let us have a little more context:

I had thorns and briars to battle

Now we are in difficulty. What is the literal meaning of this clause? If we insist that each word keep its first-thought meaning, we are unable to come up with a consistent interpretation. There is a tension between the verb “battle,” which suggests an animate opponent, and the “thorns and briars,” which are indicated as the opponent but are not animate. The statement is presumably metaphorical. But of course there is still an interpretation that results in (roughly) a minimum amount of figurativeness. For instance, a gardener might use such a statement as a colorful way to express problems in gardening. The word “battle” would have a figurative sense equivalent to “keep out.” But

of course the metaphorical statement hints at a little more than a minimum meaning. It invites us to toy with a whole set of analogies between military and agricultural affairs. Are there agricultural equivalents to weapons? Are there stages in the agricultural “battle” when it may appear that one side is “defeated,” only to have the fortunes reversed? The use of “battle” suggests a little more than would the use of “keep out.” We can judge *how* much more only when we see the context and know whether it exploits further comparisons between war and agriculture.

Would that I had thorns and briers to battle.

Having “would that” attached to the front of the sentence results in a global change in our estimate of the meaning. Whereas before we guessed that we had to do with an *actual* experience of a gardener, now we know that the experience is only a hypothetical, imagined one. Let us see still more context:

Would that I had thorns and briers to battle!  
I would set out against them,  
I would burn them up together.

With this much context we can see that more extended analogies are developing between warfare and agriculture. “Set out against them” and “burn them up” are actions that one could do in warfare against cities. But a minimally figurative interpretation might maintain that all this analogy of warfare is brought in to illuminate the farmer’s skills against thorns and briers.

**“A pleasant vineyard, sing of it!  
I, the LORD, am its keeper;  
every moment I water it.  
Lest any one harm it,  
I guard it night and day;  
I have no wrath.  
Would that I had thorns and briers to battle!  
I would set out against them,  
I would burn them up together.**

This quotation sounds like a picture of the Garden of Eden, either Eden of the past or a new Eden of the future. We tend to suspect an allusion to Eden all the more because the mention of the Lord suggests the context of biblical revelation. In that context the Genesis story involving the Garden of Eden is an obvious backdrop. We therefore suspect that Eden is being alluded to. Yet no explicit statement makes it absolutely necessary to think of Eden. If we were quite wooden and unimaginative, we could say, “This passage is *just* saying that the Lord has a vineyard that he is committed to caring for. It is not saying that the vineyard is a new Eden or an old Eden.”

Actually this passage comes from Isaiah 27:1-4 (RSV). When I say that much, I give people the opportunity to take into account much larger contexts: the context of Isaiah 27, of the whole Book of Isaiah, of Isaiah the person and his times, and of the portions of the Bible that were written before and after Isaiah. In particular, Isaiah 27:6 says that "Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots." In the light of that statement and the vineyard analogy in Isaiah 5, everyone will agree that Isaiah 27:2-4 is in fact using the entire picture of gardener and vineyard metaphorically. The "battling" of Isaiah 27:4 designates hypothetical battles that the Lord might fight against personal enemies. Though the whole picture is metaphorical, the particular word "battle" turns out to be used less metaphorically than we thought at first. Battles against personal enemies (more or less literal battles) are in view. Moreover, the effect of the word "battle" depends on our retaining a sense of the atmosphere of warfare as well as the way in which a gardener's struggles with thorns and briars are analogous to war.

In addition, it seems to me that when we take into account the total context the allusion to Eden is indeed present. The model of peace in Eden is used to evoke the comprehensive peace that Israel will experience in the future. This peace doubtless manifests itself primarily in a spiritual and social way, but the fruitfulness in view still seems to suggest the inclusion of literal agricultural bounty. It thus links up with the Deuteronomic blessings (Deut. 28:1-14) and prophetic predictions involving plant life (e.g., Isa. 32:15-20; 35:1-2).

We should notice, however, that a good many of these ideas are suggested or hinted at rather than said in so many words. We could not prove that the allusions were there to people who insisted on rock-solid evidence before they abandoned the most prosaic and limited interpretation.

### **DEFINING LITERALNESS**

In the light of the foregoing example, we can say that there are at least three plausible ways of talking about literal meaning.

First, one could say that the literal meaning of a word is the meaning that native speakers are most likely to think of when they are asked about the word in isolation (that is, apart from any context in a particular sentence or discourse). This I have above called "first-thought" meaning. Thus the first-thought meaning of "battle" is "a fight, a combat." The first-thought meaning is often the most common meaning; it is sometimes, but not always, more "physical" or "concrete" in character than other possible dictionary meanings, some of which might be labeled "figurative." For example the first-thought meaning of "burn" is "to consume in fire." It is more "physical" and "concrete" than the metaphorical use of "burn" for burning anger. The first-thought meaning, or literal meaning in this sense, is opposite to any and all figurative meanings.

We have said that the first-thought meaning is the meaning for words in isolation. But what if the words form a sentence? We can imagine proceeding to interpret a whole

sentence or a whole paragraph by mechanically assigning to each word its first-thought meaning. This would often be artificial or even absurd. It would be an interpretation that did not take into account the influence of context on the determination of which sense or senses of a word are actually activated. We might call such an interpretation “first-thought interpretation.” As an example consider again the text “Would that I had thorns and briers to battle!” What would first-thought interpretation of this passage be like? First-thought meaning of “thorns” (the word in isolation) is “plant with prickly spines.” First-thought meaning of “briers” is similar. First-thought meaning of “battle” is “military action against an opposing army.” Adding these together in a purely mechanical way, we might obtain the result that the speaker wished to use briers and thorns as weapons in the next military campaign, or that thorns and briers had suddenly been transformed into a science fiction scenario where they actually organize themselves (consciously) into an army. Clearly first-thought interpretation is sometimes strange or absurd.

Next, we could imagine reading passages as organic wholes, but reading them in the most prosaic way possible. We would allow ourselves to recognize obvious figures of speech, but nothing beyond the most obvious. We would ignore the possibility of poetic overtones, irony, wordplay, or the possibly figurative or allusive character of whole sections of material. At least we would ignore such things whenever they were not perfectly obvious. Let us call this “flat interpretation.” It is literal if *possible*.

Again let us take Isaiah 27:2-4 as our example. Flat interpretation recognizes that this passage is embedded in the rest of Isaiah 27 and Isaiah 27 in turn is embedded in the whole Book of Isaiah. But Isaiah 27:2-5 is taken simply as a prediction that the Lord will construct a perfect horticultural work in the form of a vineyard. Admittedly Isaiah 27:6-“Israel shall blossom”-is figurative for the spiritual prosperity *of the people* of Israel. So it is natural to take Isaiah 27:2-5 as an allusion to spiritual prosperity. But there is nothing to *prove* this conclusion. Isaiah 27:2-5 may be purely about agriculture. It is then related to Isaiah 27:6 only in terms of the common general theme of prosperity. Moreover, the purely agricultural reading is the most “literal.” It is as close as possible to first-thought interpretation without falling into absurdity. Hence, since it is possible, it is the flat interpretation.

If this seems too extreme, we could take a more moderate case. Suppose a person admits that Isaiah 27:2-5 is a figurative description of God’s spiritual favor to Israel. Yet the person might still claim that there is no allusion to the Garden of Eden. No one could prove this wrong beyond any possibility of dispute, since Eden is not explicitly mentioned in the passage. This too is flat interpretation. But it is not as flat as the interpretation of the previous paragraph. I think it is convenient to retain the term “flat interpretation” as a designation of the most extreme case and then recognize that there may be other interpretations that would approach this extreme by degrees.

Finally, we may speak of a third kind of interpretation. In this type one reads passages as organic wholes and tries to understand what each passage expresses against the background of the original human author and the original situation. One asks what understanding and inferences would be justified or warranted at the time the passage

was written. This interpretation aims to express the meanings that human authors express. Also it is willing to recognize fine-grained allusions and open-ended language. It endeavors to recognize when authors leave a degree of ambiguity and vagueness about how far their allusions extend. Let us call this “grammatical-historical interpretation.”

If the author is a very unimaginative or prosaic sort of person, or if the passage is part of a genre of writing that is thoroughly prosaic, the grammatical-historical interpretation of the passage coincides with the flat interpretation. But in other cases flat interpretation and grammatical-historical interpretation will *not* always coincide. If the author is trying to be more imaginative, then it is an allowable part of grammatical-historical interpretation for us to search for allusions, wordplays, and other indirect ways of communicating, even when such things are not so obvious that no one misses them.

Now what do dispensationalist interpreters mean by “literal”? Do they mean one of the above types of interpretation or something different from any of them? Dispensationalists have said repeatedly that they recognize that there are figures of speech in the Bible. On the basis of that affirmation, and on the basis of the clearest and best of their statements on interpretive principles, we should presumably understand them to be advocating grammatical-historical interpretation. Moreover, in the history of hermeneutical theory, the term *sensus literalis* (“literal sense”) has been associated with grammatical-historical interpretation. Therefore there is some historical warrant for using the word “literal” in a technical sense, simply to designate the aim of grammatical-historical interpretation. Nevertheless in our modern context the repeated use of the word “literal” by dispensationalists is not helpful. “Literal” tends to be understood as the opposite of “figurative.” Thus the word “literal” may quite easily suggest the two other types of interpretation above (first-thought interpretation or flat interpretation).

### **“PLAIN” INTERPRETATION**

The word “plain,” which has been used as an alternative to “literal,” is not much better. The original listeners to a piece of communication already have tacit awareness of a full-blown context: they are aware of the context of their historical situation, the context of their knowledge of grammar, and the context of the part of the communication that they have already heard. Because they have thoroughly absorbed these rich contexts *before* they hear the next sentence, that sentence will (ordinarily) seem to them to have a plain meaning. But if we as twentieth-century hearers read the same sentence and ask ourselves what its plain meaning is, what we will get is the meaning that the sentence or paragraph would have if occurring in our twentieth-century context—the context that is an inextricable part of *our* tacit knowledge. Sometimes the grammatical-historical meaning is not at all “plain” to us because we must work hard to try to reconstruct and appreciate the differences between then and now. Moreover, for lay dispensationalists the plain meaning will be the meaning that occurs to them in the context of their already existing knowledge of the prophetic system of Dispensationalism.

This leads us to the possibility of still a fourth type of interpretation. “Plain interpretation,” let us say, is interpretation of a text by interpreters against the context of the interpreters’ tacit knowledge of their *own* worldview and historical situation. It minimizes the role of the original historical and cultural context. Grammatical-historical interpretation differs from plain interpretation precisely over the question of the primary historical and cultural context for interpretation. Plain interpretation reads everything as if it were written directly to oneself, in one’s own time and culture. Grammatical-historical interpretation reads everything as if it were written in the time and culture of the original author. Of course when we happen to be interpreting modern literature written in our own culture or subculture, the two are the same.

We have now seen that there are certain liabilities to the words “literal” and “plain.” If dispensationalists are dead serious about advocating grammatical-historical interpretation, in distinction from first-thought interpretation, flat interpretation, and plain interpretation, I think they could demonstrate their commitment by dropping the phrase “literal interpretation.” “Grammatical-historical interpretation” unambiguously designates what they want, whereas the word “literal” is ambiguous and tends wrongly to suggest some or all of the alternatives to grammatical-historical interpretation.

Of course the word “literal” could still be used to describe individual words that are being used in a nonfigurative sense. For instance the word “vineyard” literally means a field growing grapes. In Isaiah 27:2 it is used nonliterally, figuratively, as a designation for Israel. By contrast, in Genesis 9:20 the word is used literally (nonfiguratively). In these instances the word “literal” is the opposite of “figurative.” But since any extended passage might or might not contain figures of speech, the word “literal” would no longer be used to describe a global method or approach to interpretation.

I suspect, however, that dropping the phrase “literal interpretation” might prove difficult for some dispensationalists, because “literal” has become a watchword or banner. It is a useful watchword, I suggest, precisely because it can become a vehicle for sliding into a flat interpretation or plain interpretation when it is convenient to do so.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

### **Subscribe to RPM**

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).