

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

The Principles of Hermeneutics

CHARLES C. RYRIE, TH.D., PH.D.

A. A Definition of Hermeneutics

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Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation. Exegesis consists of the actual interpretation of the Bible, the bringing out of its meaning, whereas hermeneutics establishes the principles by which exegesis is practiced.

In actuality every interpreter of the Bible has a system of hermeneutics, whether consciously so or not. As one practices his exegesis, he reveals his hermeneutics, though probably most interpreters do not ever systematize their hermeneutics. Few, if any, interpreters begin by working out their hermeneutics before proceeding to exegesis. Most seem to think about hermeneutics after they have been interpreting for years. But thinking about the subject of hermeneutics serves an important purpose, for it forces one to examine the basis of exegesis and the consistency of his interpretive practices.

B. Some Hermeneutical Systems

I believe (for reasons yet to be stated) that the correct system of hermeneutics is that which may be labeled normal, plain, or literal. However, examples of other systems that do not promote normal or plain interpretation (at least not consistently) can serve to sharpen what is meant by the normal interpretation and the hermeneutical principles on which it is based. It should be said that hardly anyone has a “pure” system of hermeneutics. Most combine elements of several systems.

1. *Allegorical hermeneutics.* An allegory is a symbolic representation. Allegorical hermeneutics stands in contrast to literal hermeneutics and is usually resorted to when the literal sense seems unacceptable to the interpreter. The actual words, then, are not understood in their normal sense but in a symbolic sense, which results in a different meaning of the text, a meaning that, in the strictest sense, the text never intended to convey.

If used consistently, allegorical hermeneutics would reduce the Bible to near-fiction, for the normal meaning of words would be irrelevant and would be replaced by whatever meaning the interpreter gives to the symbols. However, for the most part, allegorical hermeneutics is not practiced consistently or thoroughly. Evangelicals who use this

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system do so usually in the area of prophecy, while using normal or literal hermeneutics in other areas of biblical interpretation.

F. W. Farrar tells where this allegorical method originated. He says:

Allegory by no means sprang from spontaneous piety, but was the child of rationalism which owed its birth to the heathen theories of Plato. It deserved its name, for it made Scripture say something else than it really meant.... Origen borrows from heathen Platonists and from Jewish philosophers a method which converts the whole of Scripture, alike the New and the Old Testament, into a series of clumsy, varying, and incredible enigmas. Allegory helped him to get rid of chiliasm and superstitious literalism and the “antitheses” of the Gnostics, but it opened the door for deadlier evils.¹

2. *Literal interpretation.* At the opposite end of the spectrum from “pure” or consistent allegorical interpretation stands literal interpretation. Since the word “literal” has connotations that are either misunderstood or subjectively understood, labels like “plain” or “normal” serve more acceptably. “Literal” is assumed to preclude figures of speech, etc. (which is not the case).

Usually it is assumed that literal interpretation goes hand in hand with a belief in verbal, plenary inspiration. This is not necessarily so, for there are exegetes who practice literal hermeneutics but who do not hold to the highest view of inspiration.

More will be said about the principles of literal interpretation later. At this point I only want to present it as the opposite of allegorical interpretation.

3. *Semiallegorical or semiliteral interpretation.* Among evangelicals, at least, scarcely any are pure allegorists. Therefore, there exists a method of interpretation that may be labeled semiallegorical. Turning the coin over, it may also be called semiliteral, especially if there is a strong emphasis on literal interpretation in most of the areas of theology.

As I have said, usually literal interpretation is abandoned in the area of the interpretation of prophecy. Robert Mounce in his commentary *The Book of Revelation* exhibits a semiliteral exegesis. He states that Armageddon should be taken seriously but not literally. It “portrays the eschatological defeat of Antichrist ... but does not require that we accept in a literal fashion the specific imagery with which the event is described.”² Concerning the Millennium, he favors the idea that “John taught a literal millennium, but

¹ F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 193–94, 196.

² Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 349.

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its essential meaning may be realized in something other than a temporal fulfillment.”³
“The millennium is not, for John, the Messianic Age foretold by the prophets of the O.T.”⁴

Oswald T. Allis tried to develop legitimate reasons for semiallegorical hermeneutics. Arguing that no literalist takes everything literally, he proceeds to try to demonstrate why limitations must necessarily be placed on literal interpretation. The reasons he advances are: (a) the presence of figures of speech mean that we cannot take all the Bible literally; (b) the fact that the main theme of the Bible is spiritual requires a spiritual hermeneutic (he prefers “spiritual” to “allegorical”); and (c) the fact that the Old Testament is preliminary and preparatory to the New Testament in which we find deeper meanings.⁵

Now, of course, no one denies that the Bible uses figures of speech, but they convey literal truths and often more vividly and literally than if the figures were not used. They enhance rather than change the plain meaning behind the figures. The main theme of the Bible is spiritual (redemption), but content does not determine hermeneutical principles. Hermeneutics provide the principles on which the content is understood. Of course the Old Testament is preparatory to the fuller revelation of the New Testament, but that does not mean that the New is to be understood allegorically or spiritually. God communicated plainly in both Testaments.

But, granting Allis’s limitations on literal hermeneutics (which I do not), the important question still remains: How do you know when to use literal and when to use allegorical interpretation? To this question Allis offers these guidelines: (1) Whether you should interpret a passage figuratively or literally depends solely on which gives the true meaning.⁶ This, of course, is a circular argument. (2) The only way prophecy can be understood literally is when its literal meaning is clear and obvious. But since for Allis prophecy may be “indefinite,” “enigmatical,” and “deceptive,” there are very few occasions when it can be understood literally.⁷ (3) The interpretation of any prophecy hinges on the fulfillment of it. In other words, if it were clearly fulfilled literally (as the prophecies of the first advent of Christ), then of course those prophecies are interpreted literally. But Allis’s theological system requires that prophecies about the Second Coming not be fulfilled literally, so on those he uses allegorical hermeneutics.

³ Ibid., 359.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 16–19.

⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷ Ibid., 28–30.

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We must credit Allis with attempting to systematize his hermeneutics, though we may question with how much success. His discussion points out again that many evangelicals are consistent literalists in all areas of Bible doctrine except prophecy. To do so results in amillennialism; to be literalists in all areas results in premillennialism.

4. *Theological interpretation.* In a sense amillennialism, as illustrated by Allis's discussion, may be viewed not only as using semiallegorical hermeneutics but may also be viewed as an illustration of theological interpretation. The theological system does not permit an actual kingdom on this earth over which Christ reigns; therefore, certain passages cannot be interpreted literally.

Another illustration of theological interpretation is found in the writings of Daniel Fuller. In order to preserve the unity of the Bible, he says that we must use the principle of "theological interpretation," which means interpretation that does not result in two purposes of God in the Scripture (one for Israel and one for the church). The consistent use of the literal interpretation leads to a distinction between Israel and the church, while theological interpretation does not.⁸

C. Rationale for Literal Hermeneutics

1. *The purpose of language.* The purpose of language itself seems to require literal interpretation. That is, God gave man language for the purpose of being able to communicate with him. God created man in His image, which included the power of speech, in order that God might reveal His truth to man and that man might in turn offer worship and prayer to God.

Two ramifications flow from this idea. First, if God originated language for the purpose of communication, and if God is all-wise, then we may believe that He saw to it that the means (language) was sufficient to sustain the purpose (communication). Second, it follows that God would Himself use and expect man to use language in its normal sense. The Scriptures do not call for some special use of language, implying that they communicate on some "deeper" or special level unknown to other avenues of communication.

⁸ Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," Th.D. dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957, especially 188; and *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

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2. *The need for objectivity.* If one does not employ normal interpretation, then objectivity is lost to the extent that he does not use it consistently. Switching the hermeneutical base from literal to allegorical or to semiallegorical or to theological inevitably results in different, inconsistent, and often contradictory interpretations.

3. *The example of the Bible.* The prophecies of the first advent of Christ were all fulfilled literally. This obvious but extremely significant fact argues for the validity and use of the literal hermeneutics in all of biblical interpretation. It is said that more than three hundred such prophecies concerning the coming of Christ were literally fulfilled. Some examples include: Micah 5:2; Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 9:1–2; 42:1; 53:5; 61:1; Psalms 16:9–10; 22:1, 15–16, 18; 31:5; 34:20; 68:18; Zechariah 13:7. To be sure some prophecies of the Old Testament are given a typical fulfillment, but of the approximately twenty-four such prophecies only seven are cited as examples of a nonliteral hermeneutic (and, of course, not all agree that these seven prove this). The seven are Matthew 2:15, 18, 23; 11:10; Acts 2:17–21; Romans 9:24–26; and Galatians 4:21–31. Remember, however, that we are not just comparing seven out of a total of twenty-four, but seven out of a total of hundreds, for almost all Old Testament prophecies are clearly fulfilled literally in the New Testament. To be sure, the New Testament may use the Old Testament in ways other than fulfillment, but I am here speaking of prophecies and their fulfillments. This is a strong support for literal hermeneutics.

D. Principles of Normal Hermeneutics

1. *Interpret grammatically.* Since words are the vehicles of thoughts, and since the meaning of any passage must be determined by a study of the words therein and their relationships in the sentences, determining the grammatical sense of the text must be the starting point of normal interpretation.

2. *Interpret contextually.* Words and sentences do not stand in isolation; therefore, the context must be studied in order to see the relation that each verse sustains to that which precedes and to that which follows. Involved are the immediate context and the theme and scope of the whole book.

3. *Compare Scripture with Scripture.* The dual authorship of the Bible makes it necessary not only to know the human author's meaning but also God's. God's meaning may not be fully revealed in the original human author's writing but is revealed when Scripture is compared with Scripture. We must allow for a *sensus plenior*, which allows for a fuller (though directly related) meaning in the mind of the divine Author of Scripture. We cannot say that the human authors of Scripture always understood the full implications

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of their own words. When we compare Scripture with Scripture, we can discover the fuller intention of the divine Author.

S. Lewis Johnson summarizes this well.

Thus the work of the biblical interpreter is not necessarily finished when he has come to the meaning intended by the original human author.... The total context of a passage is necessary for its correct understanding and, therefore, the intention of the secondary author must be subordinated to the intention of the primary Author, God Himself. The biblical principle of the *analogia Scripturae* should have taught us that *Scripture ex Scriptura explicanda est, or Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, traditional expressions of the sense of the analogy, teach that our first and final task is to discern God's intention in the text of Scripture. After all, is not the Bible God's Word?⁹

4. *Recognize the progressiveness of revelation.* To be able to consistently interpret plainly, it is imperative to recognize that revelation was given progressively. This means that in the process of revealing His message to man, God may add or even change in one era what He gave in another. Obviously the New Testament adds much that was not revealed in the Old. What God revealed as obligatory at one time may be rescinded at another (as the prohibition of eating pork and other unclean meats, once binding on God's people, now rescinded, 1 Tim. 4:3).

To fail to recognize this progressiveness in revelation will raise unresolvable contradictions between passages if taken literally. Notice the following pairs of passages that will contradict if understood plainly unless one recognizes changes due to the progress of revelation: Matthew 10:5–7 and 28:18–20; Luke 9:3 and 22:36; Genesis 17:10 and Galatians 5:2; Exodus 20:8 and Acts 20:7. Notice too the crucial changes indicated in John 1:17; 16:24; 2 Corinthians 3:7–11. Those who will not consistently apply this principle of progressive revelation in interpretation are forced to resort to figurative interpretation or sometimes simply to ignore the evidence.

E. An Objection to Normal Hermeneutics

The most frequent objection by evangelicals to normal interpretation points out that since the New Testament uses the Old Testament in a nonliteral sense we also may interpret Old Testament prophecies (about the Millennium, for example) in a nonliteral sense. Or

⁹ S. Lewis Johnson, *The Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 51.

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to put it more simply: since the New Testament spiritualizes the Old Testament, so can we.

This might seem at first glance to be a strong objection to the consistent use of normal hermeneutics. However, we must remember that most often the New Testament uses the Old Testament prophecies literally and does not spiritualize them. Instances cited where the New Testament uses a nonliteral hermeneutic in relation to Old Testament prophecies number only seven at most. Other uses of the Old Testament include using it (a) illustratively (Rom. 9:9–12); (b) analogically (1 Cor. 1:19); (c) applicationally (Rom. 12:19); (d) rhetorically (James 4:6); but (e) usually as fulfilled directly, eschatologically, or typically (Acts 2:25–29; John 13:18).

Hardly ever do New Testament writers not use the Old Testament in a historical-grammatical sense (which, of course, includes the use of figures of speech). The rule is that they interpreted the Old Testament plainly; exceptions are rare and typological (but in a sense all of the Old Testament is typical in relation to the fuller revelation of the New Testament).

However, the crux of the matter is this: Can we as interpreters follow the example of the biblical writers in these rare exceptional uses of the Old Testament that seem to be nonliteral? Of course, the answer is yes, if we want to. But if we do it, we do so without apostolic authority, only with personal authority; comparatively, that is not much authority. Any and all uses of the Old Testament that the New Testament writers made were made under divine inspiration and were therefore done properly and authoritatively. If we depart from the plain sense of the text, we do so improperly without such authority. What the biblical writers wrote was infallible; the work of all interpreters is fallible.

To sum up: It is God who desired to give man His Word. It is God who also gave the gift of language so He could fulfill that desire. He gave us His Word in order to communicate, not confound. We should seek to understand that communication plainly, for that is the normal way beings communicate.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ryrie, C. C. (1999). *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (pp. 125–131). Chicago, IL: Moody Press.