LITERAL INTERPRETATION
What is Our Heritage?

Elliott Johnson

Our heritage of giving priority to *literal interpretation* of Scripture extends historically back to the Reformation. That, however, is not the focus of the contemporary discussions. Framing a consideration of communications, we have three *necessary*[1] components to consider:

AUTHOR – TEXT – READER

A *literal* interpretation of Scripture focuses on the text's role in communication. In today's discussion, focus rests on the reader in *determining* the meaning communicated. Several questions may introduce the discussion:

Ought the reader be passive?
Ought the reader be active?
Is there any limit to that activity?

President Obama wanted to choose a judge who would interpret the law with empathy for the one before the court. In contrast to this basis for choice, some believe that a judge should be indifferent / blind to the person who is before the court. After all, this point of view contends, the statue of Lady Justice is blindfolded; her scales are held aloft to weigh only the merits of a case in terms of the law. Empathy for one party is always prejudice against the other.

When an interpreter *reads* a text, he is not passive. Books discussing reading comprehension advise *active* reading. An active reader brings something to the task. The broad question: Are there any limits on what a reader justifiably includes in the activity? These may be subdivided into two questions:

Do we bring *pre-understanding*?

Pre-understanding refers to certain skills or knowledge of subject matters as a prerequisite to reading comprehension. A formal education is based on the view of requirements for continued learning. Seminary education includes learning language skills of the biblical languages. Theology introduces the consideration of the subject matter about which biblical texts are written. Pre-understanding provides a healthy information context in which to read about shared meanings, while at the same time allowing the biblical text to reform one's knowledge about given subjects.

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[1] A model of communication has other factors that influence interpretation (cultural codes, historical occasion, ancient world, etc.). It is not our intent to disregard these influences, but rather to focus on what is necessary in this basic discussion.

Do we bring *presuppositions*?

A presuppositions is a judgment that is made before one reads and that is held as a conviction in spite of what a text may say. Does a believer read the Bible with greater objectivity than an unbeliever? A believer's objectivity rests on *belief* that what the Bible claims to be true of itself is true. An unbeliever reads with skepticism until the message of the text satisfies the reader's criteria. These criteria are foreign to the text and thus introduce a subjectivity by which one measures the truth of the message the Bible expresses.

Subjectivity was the issue in the examination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor. Will she read the Constitution with a presupposition favoring political correctness, or cultural experiences in the Hispanic culture, or even with an eye toward personal acceptance? All of these presuppositions are illegitimate.

> Thus, we ask the question: How do we draw a line between legitimate and illegitimate activity in reading? Our heritage contributes to that discernment.

LITERAL INTERPRETATION means that the reader is *subject* to the meaning expressed in the text.

Our heritage of literal interpretation of Scripture came into focus because the medieval church interpreted many passages allegorically. The church considered that it had the right to transform or adjust the textually expressed meanings of Scripture.

> During the Reformation, the church leaders reasoned:
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> > Since Scripture is divine revelation, therefore, the Scriptures are authoritative.

As a result, the reader is subject to the message of the text, which *determines* the meaning. The reader *recognizes* the meaning expressed in the text.

> In addition, since the Scripture is divine revelation, the textual meaning is likely to be the *literal* meaning, the meaning that takes the text at face value, the meaning that the text *determines*.

Ryrie[2] emphasizes the literal *sense*. "This means interpretation that gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking." Normal usage would include, of course figures of speech. The literal principle, however, fails to determine whether the text should be understood as literal or figurative sense, that being an intuitive decision.

Walvoord emphasized literal *reference*. In a Christmas issue, *Time* magazine spoke of those who believed "the Bible literally." They spoke of believing that Jesus was born of Mary, who was engaged to Joseph. They believed that Mary gave birth as a virgin, even though that is a miracle. Walvoord was interested in prophesy speaking

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[2] Charles C. Ryrie *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 80.

about what actually would happen. Again, the literal principle doesn't determine when a reference isn't literal; as in a metaphor – The Lord is my Rock. Common sense tells us in this case that God is not an inanimate object, but that the testimony speaks of the Lord as a foundation for life.

> Thus, the literal principle cannot be used to determine interpretive decisions. Rather, once the interpretive decision has been reached by reading intuitively, the literal principle can validate the decisions made as likely to be correct.
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> This situation raises the question: Do we have a more comprehensive principle to guide our interpretive decisions? E. D. Hirsch, in *Validity in Interpretation* posits such a principle. The *goal* of interpretation is *literary communication.*

LITERARY COMMUNICATION occurs when the reader recognizes what the author meant based on the literary, verbal text.

Literary communication is broader than the literal principle, but the two are compatible. The meaning of a verbal text is *always* what the author meant based on what he wrote. That is the goal of interpretation.

In the Bible, *communication* concerns what the book's *author* meant. Communication also concerns what the *Author* of the canon meant. The divine / human authorship is described in the doctrine of inspiration. Communication occurs when the textual meaning is *recognized* as a *willed-type pattern* of meaning.[3]

What is a *willed-type pattern* of meaning?

First, language of a text communicates about reality in *patterns of meaning*.

- Different patterns of meaning occur with different vehicles of communication of meaning: Visual vehicle uses picture-patterns, language vehicle uses sign-patterns.
- Picture patterns are illustrated:
  Photographs represent reality in a complete and realistic pattern.
  Realistic paintings represent reality in a selective and conventional pattern.
  Abstract paintings represent reality in a selective and abstract conventional pattern.
- Sign patterns use the conventions of the language.
  Sign patterns represent reality.
  Sign patterns are expressed both with literary conventions and with verbal conventions.
  Sign patterns represent reality as *types* of meaning.

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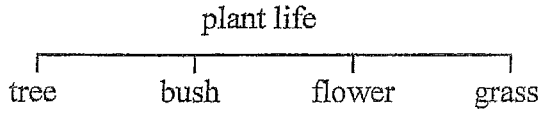
[3] E. D. Hirsch *Validity in Interpretation* and E. E. Johnson *Expository Hermaneutics*

Second, language communicates about reality in *willed-types* of meaning.

- Communication necessarily involves two requirements:
  1. Types of meaning are *shared* by language speakers.
  2. Types *determine* meaning for language speakers.

- Types and meaning are *shared* by language speakers.
  Example of a verbal type:
  The tree is a *type* of plant life.
  A language speaker shares the *type* as a basis for coming to know the *particular* meaning because of previous personal experience with trees or because of the previous experience of someone else who writes about trees.

- Types *determine* meaning for language speakers.
  Example of a verbal type of thinking:



A reader recognizes meaning as *det*
ermined in a textual use of language:
By the language definitions of the *type*: A *tree* is a plant life with an elongated single stem (trunk) and with multiple branches.
By an author's *willed* use in the text: Psalm 1:3
"he shall be like a *tree* planted . . . ."
Does the psalmist mean roots?
Does the psalmist mean bark?
Does the psalmist mean trunk?

Third, geometry developed as a field of study of "two-dimensional shapes."
This is a *triangle*.
What do we know from the text?

Conclusion
How do we understand *kingdom*?
Matt. 3:2 "the kingdom of heaven is at hand."