

How to Interpret the Bible

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I'VE HAD A LIFELONG interest in theology. Some things Christians believe are curious to me. For example, many conservative evangelical Christians, the group which I generally consider myself to be a part, proudly say, “We take the Bible literally.” Indeed, they use this statement as a test for orthodoxy. Well, here are few questions I’d like to ask them:

- When Jesus said that He is the vine (John 15:5), did He mean that He is a plant?
- Is God literally a rock (2 Samuel 22:3; Psalm 18:2, etc.)?
- Should we literally hate our mother and father so that we can be Jesus’ disciple (Luke 14:26)?
- If your eye causes you to sin, should you literally pluck it out (Mark 9:47)?
- Must we sell everything we have and give it to the poor in order to inherit eternal life (Luke 18:18-22)?
- Is it necessary to literally eat Christ’s body in order to have life (John 6:53)?
- Did the mountains and the hills really break into song and the trees clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12)?
- Is it literally true that serpents and scorpions cannot harm Christians (Luke 10:19)?
- Would the moon literally turn to blood before the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:31)?
- When God judged Babylon, an event in actual history, did the stars and sun literally stop giving their light (Isaiah 13:10) and the heavens literally tremble (Isaiah 13:13)? When God judged Edom did the sky literally roll up like a scroll (Isaiah 34:4)? When God judged Israel according to Micah 1:2-16, did the mountains literally melt and the valleys split? Read these passages and numerous others like them in the Bible (for example, Isaiah 24:23; Ezekiel 32:7; Amos 5:20; 8:9; Zephaniah 1:15) and then consider what you think of Matthew 24:29.

Some Christians may insist that, indeed, even these passages are to be understood “literally.” But certainly at least some of these are examples of how the Bible uses a variety of language techniques to describe real things in NON-literal language. Note that Jesus himself often used hyperbole, for example, to make important points.

I have a very conservative view of the Bible and believe that it is the inspired Word of God in its entirety—and that it communicates a literal sense even when it employs non-literal genres. But that does not mean that every word or phrase was meant to be taken in a wooden literal sense. The fact is that nobody is a consistent literalist, nor should anyone be!

In our everyday language, we use figures of speech so often that we do not even think about them. We sing metaphorically “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” We say things like “I could eat a horse,” “cat got your tongue,” “the four corners of the earth,” “the sky is falling,” “coming apart at the seams,” “he has a yellow streak down his back,” etc. We use hundreds of such idioms that are not literal, but people in our culture understand exactly what is meant.

The Bible too uses a variety of literary devices. It uses parables, poetry, hyperbole, allegories, metaphors, and many other figures of speech. In particular, it is common in the Bible to use astronomical language to describe important prophetic events. These events are often when God “came down” in judgment against the Jews or their enemies.

Hebraic terminology may be unfamiliar to us but was clearly understood by first-century Jews. Certain events prophesied in the Bible in Hebraic apocalyptic language we know for certain have already been fulfilled, such as God’s judgment upon Babylon (above).

Are there times when we should understand the Bible literally? Yes! But, should we really interpret the Bible “literally” in every instance? Of course not. It is more faithful to Scripture to interpret each passage the way it was INTENDED in its context and understood by its original audience. ✝

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