

LITERALISM

At Pentecost Peter sensed the surge of power from the Holy Spirit.

“Under the influence of this heavenly illumination the scriptures that Christ had explained to the disciples stood out before them with the luster of perfect truth. The veil that had prevented them from seeing to the end of that which had been abolished, was now removed, and they comprehended with perfect clearness the object of Christ's mission and the nature of His kingdom.”¹

Jesus had called the Holy Spirit, that divine Being, “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17, 15:26). He embellished its function by telling His disciples that the Spirit would not only guide them into all truth but would show them “things to come” (John 16:13). The apostle then validated this prophetic gift by noting that it was a “sure word.” He solemnly said: “*For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*” (II Peter 1:21).

To understand prophecy, the Holy Spirit must be ministering to the seeker. David had noted long before that God's secrets were to be given to those who “fear Him” (Psalm 25:14). Peter further summarized the depth of this issue by saying: “*And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that **obey him***” (Acts 5:32).

There is a caveat imbedded in these thoughts: without divine–human interaction, understanding prophetic truth is susceptible to opinion and prejudice. Expositor White penetrated this issue:

“The Jewish leaders had studied the teachings of the prophets concerning the kingdom of the Messiah; but they had done this, not with a sincere desire to know the truth, but with the purpose of finding evidence to sustain their ambitious hopes. When Christ came in a manner contrary to their expectations, they would not receive Him; and in order to justify themselves, they tried to prove Him a deceiver....

“Is not the same thing repeated in our day? Are there not many, even religious leaders, who are hardening their hearts against the Holy Spirit, making it impossible for them to recognize the voice of God? Are they not rejecting the word of God, that they may keep their own traditions?”²

When we permit heaven to intercept our exploration of truth, divine guidance adds to our Biblical knowledge, giving us insight; then reasoning and correct understanding follow. A profound barrier to such guidance has invaded the whole Christian world in “futurism.” A child of the papal Counter-Reformation, it fosters a **literal** interpretation of the prophecies. Where God is leading the student to spiritually analyze a symbol or metaphor, literalism minimizes the elevated **spiritual purposes** God introduced. No greater illustration of this has come than through the Protestant emphasis on the restoration of literal Israel. It is a “hermeneutic” that invites opinion into its precincts.

¹ White, Ellen G.; *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 44.

² White, Ellen G.; *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 212-213.

The history of futurism and literalism is colorful and tragic. It draws the attention to the earthly. This was given a major stimulus through the Scofield Bible of 1909, and then 1917. Though its translation was the King James Version, its explanatory footnotes promoted incorrect interpretive views, especially of prophecy. The Jewish nation is still seen as God's chosen people, leading to the belief that they will restore the temple, leading to an end-time antichrist who will defile its corridors.³ This has deeply influenced popular writers such as Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye. They have amazingly impacted the thinking of the Protestant world.

Literalism concludes that Christ's return will give the Jewish people a second chance when He sets up His millennial reign on earth. This is replicating the stunning failure of the Jewish nation in Christ's day, believing an earthly kingdom would be established at the Messiah's arrival. This view defied and defies Christ's own words: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

The "interpretive technique" of literalism is very appealing to Bible students. It draws upon events or places that the student identifies through contemporary "eyes." This leads, however, to surface reading of Scripture. If the word "temple" is used, it is taken as a literal building. The Pharisees thought Jesus, in a similar vein, was referring to Herod's Temple when he said: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). Since Jesus was referring to His own body, the "temple" was a type of Himself.

Philip asked Jesus to "shew us the Father" (John 14:8). Jesus responded, "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (14:9). Jesus was literally right there conversing with Philip. Yet, the "imagery of God the Father transcended the physical senses. The moral depth of His character was embodied in *who* Jesus was! "Philip, look beyond what the senses are experiencing and perceive the transcendent experience you have in My presence!"

Forward-moving toward the Spiritual

In the Old Testament Jesus was revealed literally and dramatically through the directing cloud and pillar of fire. His nature was remarkably choreographed through the priests, temple services, furniture and feast celebrations. When He was on earth, Jesus' life revealed the qualities of the Father (John 14:7, 9). Deity was *literally* and *visibly* manifested through a holy life.

When Jesus returned to His Father, the era of the Holy Spirit was ushered in. A visible manifestation of that power and working with man came with the tongues of fire on God's leaders (Acts 2:3-4). That changed the nature of the divine working with man. The gospel message was to be elevating and founded on wonderful spiritual insights. The indwelling of the Deity within each temple person was to be a beautiful and unfolding mystery (Colossians 1:27, I Corinthians 6:19, 3:16, II Corinthians 6:16), constantly directing the thoughts upward.

The great *purpose* of the everlasting covenant became an unfolding reality. The principles of the Decalogue could be written in the minds and hearts of believers (Hebrews 8:10). God's kingdom could now be legally established, as John the Baptist had announced its pending arrival (Matthew 3:2).

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scofield_Reference_Bible#cite_note-7

“Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).

Suddenly, God’s salvic plan moved from a **literal** type to a **spiritual** type in its manifestation. This is why Paul stressed firmly the nature of the battle.

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12).

Suddenly, prophetic issues began to be illuminated as never before. Parts of Daniel were to be spiritually understood! They couldn’t be grasped (“shut up the book and seal it” – Daniel 12:4) until after that special era of the Holy Spirit came. Then wonderful detail could be seen embedded within many of his prophecies. The sealed parts could be opened at the end as the Holy Spirit came in great power.

“And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end” (Daniel 12:9).

The Bible must be seen as an organic whole with each individual book contributing to its body. In that light, the Old and New Testaments relate to each other. Prophecy can be seen in type and how it will unfold as an antitype.⁴

Often a Biblical author transforms a historical story into a type, forcing a typological understanding into its fulfillment. In Matthew 2:15 the gospel writer narrates that the return of Jesus from Egypt to Palestine parallels Hosea 11:1, “out of Egypt have I called my Son.” Hosea’s context is fully historical, relating to Israel’s Egyptian exodus. Yet, he transforms a literal historical story into a prophecy of a literal Jesus coming out of Egypt after Herod’s death.⁵

Egypt is prophetically a symbol of this wicked world. Christ’s returning to Canaan to complete His redemptive mission is in type and was representative of His return to the heavenly “Canaan” to complete the antitypical mission of Atonement.

Typology is a wonderful way of looking at prophecy. Prophetic representations (literal or symbolic) interact with future fulfillment. Often the fulfillment is given in another remarkable prophecy, showing how the original type will antitypally “play out.”

The fulfillment must correspond in some essential way with the type, and the antitypical narrative must be intensified over the original. If Egypt was the land of bondage, exiting planet earth must mean leaving a place of oppressive spiritual bondage. If heading for a literal Canaan with an anticipation of freedom and peace, arriving in the heavenly Canaan must be eternal bliss!

⁴ Berkhof, Louis. *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1950), p. 133.

⁵ www.Christian-thinktank.com Typology – a legitimate approach to OT passages?

Looking More Deeply at Daniel

It has now become pristine clear what the timing framework of Daniel 8 through 12 is (with “helps” in chapters 2 and 7). The *mareh* vision portion of these chapters was partially open to even Daniel’s understanding (10:1). That part was not sealed.

But the *ha hazon* (*chazown*), which involved the ram, he-goat and little horn, as well as chapters 11 and 12, were sealed. Intriguingly, the Hebrew context and setting reveals:

1. The unsealing could not occur until on or after 2300 Atonement years (Daniel 8:14).
2. The timing of most of the *ha hazon* vision would not come until the last three-and-a-half years of earth’s history, just preceding the deliverance of God’s people (Daniel 8:17, 19; 12:7).

God’s people would reach a time – a special revival time – when those things would be discerned. They represent great spiritual metaphors, informing God’s end-time people. They embody some of God’s most dramatic prophetic messages ever given to man! These are totally lost if **literalism** is applied. Their links to Revelation would then be suddenly lost.

The whole book of Revelation is for God’s last generation of people. It is highly spiritual. God is drawing our thoughts higher and higher to capture His view of the end of sin and the glory that then bursts into His church. Those stunning themes are so dramatic and the transformation of the saints so complete, God wants us to imagine that we can get so close to Jesus that He will call us His bride!

Revelation must be approached spiritually. This book was created on the structure of unfolding spiritual prophetic metaphors – the originals being presented in Daniel!

“The natural eye does not see these ‘spiritual things,’ and often interprets literally that which should be ‘spiritually discerned. (I Corinthians 2:6-16).”⁶

In the New Testament era, the merging of people into a spiritual bond or “body” is forward-moving and mind-transforming.

*“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have **put on Christ**. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for **ye are all one in Christ Jesus**” (Galatians 3:27-28).*

The legal and spiritual themes of kingdom citizenry (our adoption), then serving God around His throne, draw our attention away from literalism. Grace is taken over by God’s eternal presence filling our minds and hearts. Literalism cheapens the future and alters man’s perception of God’s apocalyptic clocks.

Literal versus Spiritual

The late Louis F. Were eloquently addressed these principles of Biblical interpretation:

⁶ Were, Louis F.; *First Impressions*, “The Certainty of the Three Angels’ Messages,” p. 31(1979).

“In dealing with natural Israel, God spoke audibly to His people, and the evidences of His Presence were *literally* seen by them. When on earth, Jesus was *literally* seen, but with His death the period in which God revealed Himself through *literal* things – temple, priests, sacrifices, etc. – ended (Matt. 27:50, 51, etc.), and ‘the dispensation of the Holy Spirit’ (T.M. 511) was ushered in. During this ‘dispensation of the Holy Spirit,’ the things of the kingdom of *grace* are based upon the *spiritual* and the invisible. Jesus declares: ‘... Even the Spirit of truth, Whom the world cannot receive, *because it seeth Him not.*’” John 14:17.

“Jesus *visibly* appeared to man, and ministers among *literal* things: the Holy Spirit *invisibly* represents Christ to man, and glorifies Christ (John 16:14) by *spiritually* interpreting literal things. While Jesus is ministering in ‘the *true* tabernacle, which the Lord pitched’ (Heb. 8:2) – the *literal* temple in heaven – the Holy Spirit is ministering in the *spiritual* temple – the church – on earth. Ephes. 2:21, 22; 2 Cor. 6:16, etc. While Jesus is ministering among the seven candlesticks (Rev. 1:12, 13) in the heavenly temple, the Holy Spirit is ministering among the seven *spiritual* candlesticks in the *spiritual* temple. ‘The seven candlesticks which thou sawest *are the seven churches.*’ Rev. 1:20. The principle of the *literal* wherever Jesus is, and the *spiritual* now, while the Holy Spirit represents Jesus, gives rise to the principle of the triple application of the Scriptures, whereby the things relating to Israel must be interpreted to be: (1) *literal* before the cross; (2) *spiritual* on earth after the cross and the subsequent rejection of the Jewish nation; (3) *literal* after the second advent. This *triple* application establishes the certainty of the Third Angel’s Message.... From the principle that the *literal* things are always *grouped* around Jesus, and the *spiritual* things are *grouped* around the Holy Spirit while He represents Christ, arises the principle that other things in the Scriptures are also grouped together. In the days of literal Israel things were grouped on a *literal*, national basis; in the times of *spiritual* Israel things are *spiritually* grouped together. Jerusalem, which was God’s centre, and Babylon, Satan’s centre, and *all that were grouped with them*, are brought into the New Testament and applied in a *spiritual, world-wide sense.*”⁷

To illustrate these principles more deeply we then note:

“Nowhere in Scripture are we instructed that Ahab (the king and husband who introduced sun-worship into Israel to please Jezebel his wife) is typical of the State that will enforce Sunday keeping, to please the antitypical Jezebel, the apostate church; but such is the obvious application because of the fact that Jezebel, in Rev. 2:20, is applied by the Lord in an antitypical manner. An antitypical application of *one* of the features of the Old Testament narratives is an indication from God – *the principle revealed* – that *all that is associated with it* should also be understood in a world-wide, antitypical sense.”⁸

“Literalism denies the inherent biblical structure of an escalating typology.”⁹ It contrasts the worldview of salvation for both Jew and Gentile. It denies Christ’s reply to the Samaritan woman: “Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father” (John 4:2). Literalism focuses on a narrowed geographic view. It tends towards the earthly and not the invisible. “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things **not seen***” (Hebrews 11:1).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹ LaRondelle, Hans, Th.D.; *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible* (First Impressions; Sarasota, FL 34243 – 1997), p. 31.

Paul captured this beautifully in his communiqué to the Corinthian believers: *“While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are **not seen**: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal”* (II Corinthians 4:18).

The Bible is filled with literal or imaginative pictures to teach spiritual truths. Prophecy forward-directs us to obtain spiritual discernment (I Corinthians 2:14) from things seen to the future of the unseen. Abraham caught this principle in a stunning expose of trust: *“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God”* (Hebrews 11:8-10). “Spiritual things” are open through “historical narratives.” The “literal eye” is unable to see “spiritual things” because they are spiritual.¹⁰

Christ used life experiences, nature and parables as His medium for spiritual truths.¹¹ Then He symbolically conveyed through John: *“I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see”* (Revelation 3:18). This was God’s directive to alert us to develop spiritual eyesight from the literal as we look into the future.

God designs that from type to antitype, from Old Testament to the New, from prophecy to its anticipated fulfillment, that progression embellishes its beauty and understanding.

Daniel Fuller noted: “Why could not the Old Testament revelation be thought of as the grain of sand, which, after entering the oyster of progressive revelation, has the pearl of additional and deeper concepts added to it without necessarily canceling out the original grain of sand.”¹²

Joel B. Green argues that those who seek literal and detailed fulfillments of prophecy “... must face the reality that fulfillment is often not quite what was anticipated.”¹³ He explains: “When fulfillment exceeds promise, three things are underscored: God’s freedom and creativity and the historical quality of biblical prophecy. Given in particular, historical circumstances, prophecy uses words and ideas appropriate to its day. A different historical situation at the time of fulfillment, however, may involve a realization in updated terms beyond the literal meaning of the original prediction.”¹⁴

Unfolding Illustrations

We now present a few examples of how a spiritual approach to prophecy is elevating and preparatory to the Second Coming in contradistinction to literalism.

Ram and He-Goat (Daniel 8:3-9)

¹⁰ Were, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹¹ White, Ellen G.; *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 17-18.

¹² Fuller, Daniel; “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism.” Doctoral Dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary.

¹³ Green, Joel B.; “How to Read Prophecy” (Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, 1984), p. 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

The interpretative angel Gabriel clearly noted that the ram was associated with Medo-Persia (8:20) and the rough he-goat was the king of Greece (8:21). However, **before** that explanation, he said that this vision would come at the “time of the end” (vs 17) and **at that** time it would be called “the time appointed.” From Daniel 11 and 12 we know that this immediately precedes the Second Coming.

A literal end-time view demands that one look at the countries of Iraq (and perhaps Iran) and Greece. There are many expositors doing just that. Middle Eastern and European current events drive newsletters, books and internet sites, applying these to Daniel 8. But Daniel informed us that he had this vision in Shushan, at the king’s palace by the Ulai River. Ashurbanipal, the last great Assyrian king, destroyed Shushan and the palace in 629 B.C. Daniel was in vision in a non-existent place!

This is the first clue that a spiritual theme is being introduced in this prophecy. Then Daniel continued: “*Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw,*” using the same words that Abraham said on Mt. Moriah when he discovered the ram caught in the thicket. Could this prophetic **ram** represent **Jesus**?

The Daniel 8 rough he-goat (using those actual Hebrew words) means **the devil**. We see unfolding in this prophecy the Bible’s **first** apocalyptic introduction to earth’s final battle between Christ and Satan. Literalism would force us to totally misinterpret this prophecy. It is foundational to the book of Revelation.

Restoration of Jerusalem (Daniel 9:25)

From the command to restore and build Jerusalem unto Messiah the Prince, the street will be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times.

Many denominations claim that Artaxerxes I fulfilled this prophecy either in 457 B.C. or 444 B.C. He is declared to be the restorer and builder of that city, which lay in waste at the time Daniel receives this prophecy. But there are horrendous problems with that interpretation!

God specifically said that Cyrus would not only build the temple but the **city of Jerusalem** (Isaiah 44:28, 45:13). There are many references showing that people were already living in their own dwellings long before Artaxerxes I!

However, the pivotal issue is what Artaxerxes’ decree actually said. It is recorded in Ezra 7. There is **nothing** about building the city, its walls and streets. It is a stunning document, ordering God’s people to get back to their homeland and begin to worship God again! Re-establish your theocracy as God commanded! It is entirely spiritual!

Literalism confines Daniel 9 basically to literal history mainly before Christ. That chapter is elevated and focuses on spiritual restoration themes and then carries us right to the very end of time!

The Abomination and the Antichrist

Jesus told His followers to “flee to the mountains” of Judea when the “abomination of desolation” comes (Matthew 24:16).

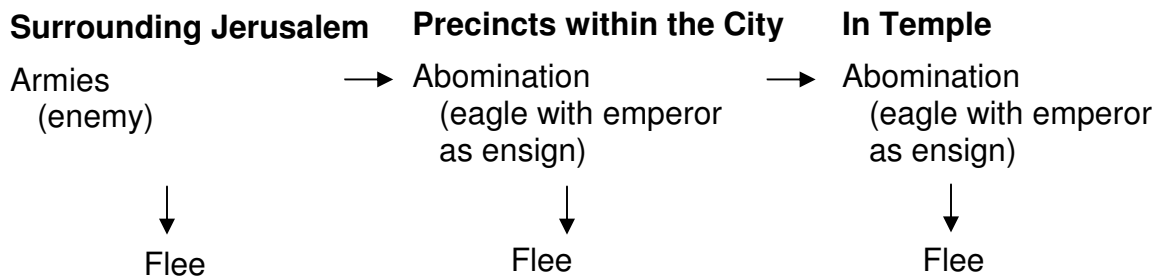
There is a progressive message between Luke and Matthew that helps us:

Luke 21:20-21: When “armies” encompass Jerusalem, you know desolation is near. For those in Judea – flee to the mountains.

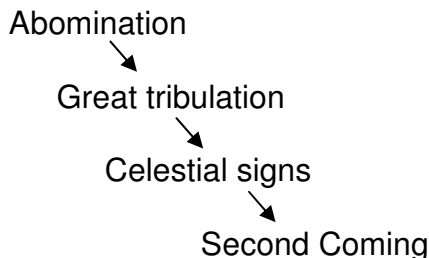
Mark 13:14: When you see the abomination of desolation spoken by Daniel *standing where it ought not*, those in Judea flee to the mountains.

Matthew 24:15-16: When you see the abomination of desolation spoken by Daniel standing in the holy place – those in Judea flee into the mountains.

For the Jewish people who had become Christians this was a literal message:



History shows that there were three major opportunities for the Jewish Christians to escape from Jerusalem. But the prophecy continues to note a sequence of events **after** the abomination, leading right up to Christ’s Second Coming (Matthew 24:29-30):



Daniel has extensive information regarding this prophecy, which is couched in **end-time** language. There, the abomination is clearly a law against the Sabbath and in support of a false worship day (a distinct message in Hebrew!).

Many conclude that when the Sunday laws (as some call that event) come, they are to flee to the mountains. If that were the case, there would be no one left to finish the gospel work, which goes out over the next three-and-a-half years.

There is a spiritual meaning to this prophecy! When that is grasped, the beauty of end-time prophecy unfolds.

Jerusalem: personified as God’s people (Jeremiah 13:27, Matthew 23:37).

Mountain: the major emphasis is on the mountain Zion, where God’s house, His temple, His presence is (Isaiah 2:2, Micah 4:1) – or His symbolic kingdom (Zechariah 4:7).

Abomination: that is a divine label for something God hates. Daniel 8:13 defines the transgression that leads to desolation (in Hebrew – *pesha*). It is rebellion against the Sabbath (cf. Daniel 12:11).

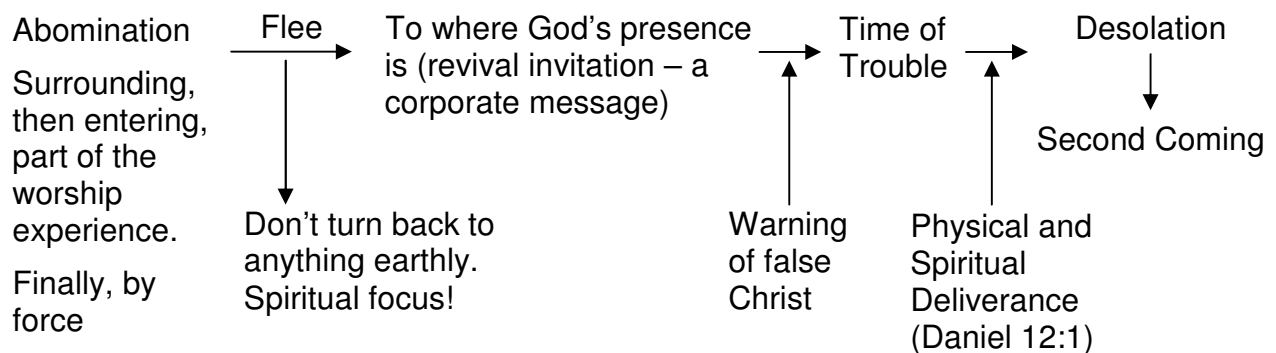
Desolation: utter destruction – a term in prophecy revealing what occurs at the Second Advent (Daniel 9:27; Revelation 6:13-17, 20:3).

Great Tribulation: Matthew 24:21 describes exactly what is in Daniel 12:1 – that at the time of Jacob’s Trouble is when deliverance comes to God’s people.

Coming of the Son of Man: Second Advent is mentioned twice in Matthew 24 (vss 27 and 30).

Contextual messages for the end of time reveal this amazing, event-driven sequence:

“When you see”



The first application is literal – the last, spiritual. If the literal is preserved for the end of time, it sends us to the Middle East in search of the nearest mountain to Jerusalem. The apocalyptic end *is* spiritual! Prophetic interpretation demands an elevated, progressive view that leads to the time and associated events where God’s people are free, restored to Christ’s likeness and ready for the journey upward!

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EndTime Issues..., Number 128, September 30, 2011