

LITERALISM – A PROPHETIC PROBLEM

In the beautiful interlude of Revelation 7 John saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth. The obvious conclusion is that the world is flat. That's literalism. To those, however, who see great metaphors in prophecy, the earth represents wickedness and the four corners characterize the four main directions of the compass.[1] Biblical descriptions can represent real objects and events, even existing in time and space. But the rendering of a typological message should lead into a spiritual purpose that God has in mind.

Daniel saw a terrible beast with seven heads and ten horns. Another little horn arose and uprooted three. That wild little horn had eyes like a man and a mouth that could speak. They are surreal and do not exist in reality. What could such a beast and horn mean? Daniel gave us a clue: The fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon the earth (Daniel. 7:23). So the beast represents a kingdom. That's symbolic.

In Revelation 21 the city New Jerusalem is called the bride and wife of the Lamb. They represent real names but are surreal in their imagery. How can that be literal?

Many Bible students rely on the counsel of expositor E. G. White from the 1800s who said: The language of the Bible should be explained according to its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or figure is employed.[2]

But what is obvious in the examples given?

Based on that quotation, it is often concluded incorrectly, for instance, that Medo-Persia and Greece of Daniel 8 play into the current events of that part of the world. There is more, however, to her counsel within the context of that thought but rarely analyzed. But first, how do we tell what is figurative, symbolic or literal?

There are excellent principles that can help us grasp the meaning of prophecy. If these are understood, less speculation and sensationalism would enter our study. Here are a few areas that extend a helping hand.

1. Prophecy is not an end in itself. It is event-driven history, in advance, of how God will work to reconcile us to Himself. At the same time it portrays how Satan seeks to thwart those designs. Some call this the Great Controversy.
2. Prophecy is spiritually discerned. The Holy Spirit's guidance is necessary to correctly understand the message (John 16:13, I Corinthians 2:9-14). More about that later.
3. A true understanding of prophetic truth always leads to Jesus. That in turn invites us to prepare for His coming.
4. If the prophecy has objects that cannot be real, like the lion with eagle's wings (Daniel 7:4), especially when associated with other surreal images, it cannot be literal. It represents something important that God wants us to grasp.
5. If the portrait is related to real objects, people or activities, then it is vital for the expositor to evaluate not only the meaning of a word or phrase but its context. Are there

related clues as to what it represents in nearby verses? Then a most important step comes: The Biblical record must be consulted as to how the imagery is used elsewhere. If symbolic associations are in evidence, it should not be seen primarily as literal.

One significant example, again, is Medo-Persia in Daniel 8:20. That imagery is often interpreted literally. But contextually we find in verses 17 and 19 that it distinctly says it is for the time of the end, at the appointed time, when Gods wrath comes.

Babylon has fallen in that vision (it begins with Medo-Persia). Who was the conquering general? Cyrus. Elsewhere in Isaiah we find that Cyrus represents Jesus (Isaiah 44:6). Now a very crucial picture comes into focus. Medo-Persia is represented by the ram. Jesus is also. Cyrus delivered Gods people from Babylon the deliverer. So will Jesus (Luke 4:16). Cyrus comes from the east, so will Jesus (Matthew 24:27). There are many more parallels. The theme is deliverance and atonement.

With this approach we see that literalism not only detracts from a great spiritual message, but it robs the student of one of prophecys great covenant fulfillment messages.

Only after a deep careful and prayerful study of Scripture can one in confidence be assured of its meaning. One must tie linguistic, theological and historical information together. That often takes considerable time. But its end result is a beautiful picture.

6. All prophecy is placed within a timing framework. To deny this is to underestimate its relevance and relegate it to nothingness. God was specific regarding the first advent in many timing predictions. The Second Advent is also related to numerous timing periods. They range from the timing of the Jewish Fall Feasts to specific periods like we see in Daniel 12. The day and hour is not known, but it is clear that we can tell when He will be at the door knocking!

It is the first and highest duty of every rational being to learn from the Scriptures what is truth, and then to walk in the light and encourage others to follow his example. We should day by day study the Bible diligently, weighing every thought and comparing scripture with scripture. With divine help we are to form our opinions for ourselves as we are to answer for ourselves before God.

The truths most plainly revealed in the Bible have been involved in doubt and darkness by learned men, who, with a pretense of great wisdom, teach that the Scriptures have a mystical, a secret, spiritual meaning not apparent in the language employed. These men are false teachers. It was to such a class that Jesus declared: Ye know not the Scriptures, neither the power of God. Mark 12:24. The language of the Bible should be explained according to its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or figure is employed. Christ has given the promise: If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine. John 7:17. If men would but take the Bible as it reads, if there were no false teachers to mislead and confuse their minds, a work would be accomplished that would make angels glad and that would bring into the fold of Christ thousands upon thousands who are now wandering in error.

We should exert all the powers of the mind in the study of the Scriptures and should task the understanding to comprehend, as far as mortals can, the deep things of God; yet we must not forget that the docility and submission of a child is the true spirit of the learner. Scriptural difficulties can never be mastered by the same methods that are

employed in grappling with philosophical problems. We should not engage in the study of the Bible with that self-reliance with which so many enter the domains of science, but with a prayerful dependence upon God and a sincere desire to learn His will. We must come with a humble and teachable spirit to obtain knowledge from the great I AM. Otherwise, evil angels will so blind our minds and harden our hearts that we shall not be impressed by the truth.

Many a portion of Scripture which learned men pronounce a mystery, or pass over as unimportant, is full of comfort and instruction to him who has been taught in the school of Christ. One reason why many theologians have no clearer understanding of God's Word is that they close their eyes to truths which they do not wish to practice. As understanding of Bible truth depends not so much on the power of intellect brought to the search as on the singleness of purpose, the earnest longing after righteousness.

The Bible should never be studied without prayer. The Holy Spirit alone can cause us to feel the importance of those things easy to be understood, or prevent us from wresting truths difficult of comprehension. It is the office of heavenly angels to prepare the heart so to comprehend Gods word that we shall be charmed with its beauty, admonished by its warnings, or animated and strengthened by its promises. We should make the psalmists petition our own: Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law. Psalm 119:18.[3]

Jesus, in that beautiful discourse that preceded the cross, talked about the promise of the Holy Spirit. That divine Being transcends and rises above all human exposition of Scripture. He is the inspiration of Scripture! Jesus promised and declared regarding that Comforter:

1. He would dwell and abide in us forever (John 14:16-17).
2. He is the Spirit of truth (John 16:13).
3. He would teach us all things (John 14:26).
4. He would guide us into all truth (John 16:13).

What promises! But study must be done with great effort to let the Bible explain itself. Careless inattention to context and ties elsewhere will void divine impressions. The heart must also be submissive to every clue within the Bible that God provides. Above all, the student must submit to heavens influences, personally.

Though it is tempting to decide before the covers of the Bible are opened how its content will be interpreted, Gods plan is to carefully let the Scriptures unfold its own meaning. Literalism is too often a quick sensational escape from a deeper study of truth.

Though prophecy is event-driven, its rich meaning comes only when a systematic approach to study is undertaken. Then, the final conclusions emerge as His Spirit graces our understanding.

References:

- [1] www.beliefnet.com/story/52/story_5280_1.html
- [2] White, Ellen G.; *The Great Controversy*, p. 598.
- [3] *Ibid.*, pp. 598-600.