

Will the Real Literalist, Please Stand Up

by Don Walker

What do we mean when we say, "I take the Bible literally?" Does that mean for instance that when Jesus said: "Out of your innermost being shall flow rivers of living water, " that we believe that He meant actual "water?" Or do we believe that Jesus was using "symbolic" language to describe the Holy Spirit flowing forth from the believer? Is the Bible to be taken "literally" as some would define it, or is it to interpreted in light of the "symbols" God uses throughout the Scriptures? Both in the Old and New Testaments we find symbols and figures borrowed from history, the surrounding culture, and from creation. On the other hand, we must recognize that not everything in the Bible is to be interpreted "symbolically." For instance, the Ten Commandments are not to be "symbolically interpreted." God was not speaking figuratively when He said, "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

The Bible is literature, divinely inspired and inerrant literature, but nevertheless, it is literature. That means we must read it as literature. Some parts are meant to be literally understood, and they are written accordingly – as history, or theological propositions. But one would not expect to read the Psalms or the Song of Solomon by the same literary approach as the Book of Romans. We cannot understand what the Bible really means unless we appreciate its use of literary styles.

Even the most ardent "hyper-literalist" is forced at times to abandon his so-called "literal" approach. No one for example (at least to my knowledge) believes that the Beast of [Revelation 13](#) is really an animal; or that a pregnant woman will stand on the moon and be clothed with the sun ([Revelation 12:1-2](#)). I seriously doubt that anyone understands Satan to be actually "a great red dragon with seven heads" ([Revelation 12:3](#)). I have encountered "literalists" who were convinced that the Bible taught that the earth was flat ("flat-earthers"). They base this ridiculous idea on the fact that the Bible speaks of the "four corners of the earth" ([Isaiah 11:12](#); [Revelation 7:1](#), [20:8](#)). It is apparent to most readers of the Scripture that these passages are poetic and symbolic. In a similar vein, the Bible speaks of trees and rivers having hands ([Isaiah 55:12](#); [Psalms 98:8](#)).

To take the Bible literally means that we read and interpret it in respect to the Bible's own literary structure. All languages use symbols and figures of speech. When we use those figures of speech with those unfamiliar with their meaning it can be quite confusing. If for example, I say to someone, unacquainted with our figures of

speech, that the car that I am driving is a "lemon," they could mistakenly believe that I am using citrus fruit for transportation. Likewise, someone unacquainted with the figures of speech used in the Scriptures is likely to misinterpret its meaning. We must learn the "language" of the Bible, meaning we must learn how God consistently uses certain symbols throughout His Word to convey His message. I do not mean by this that there is a "code" that God has written in, nor am I saying that one must have a "special revelation knowledge" in order to understand God's message. What I am saying is that the Bible interprets the Bible.

The book of the Revelation, which contains a great deal of imagery, can only be interpreted by examining the symbols in light of their use in the other 65 books of the Bible. You do not interpret the book of the Revelation by using the newspaper or Time magazine. Such an approach only ends up in speculation, not scriptural exegesis. The symbols used in the book of the Revelation are found in the language of the Old Testament, particularly in the prophetic literature. In other words, the book of the Revelation, along with the rest of the Bible, is self-interpreting.

Those who claim to interpret the book of the Revelation in a "literal" manner, in fact do not. If it is to be taken "literally," as they propose, there is no need for interpretation. The fact that they are rendering interpretations of the symbols in Revelation (often derived from a vivid imagination) reveals that they are not true "literalists" at all. For instance, the locusts in Revelation 9 are interpreted by the so-called "literalist" Hal Lindsey to be Cobra helicopters. No! It "literally" says they are locusts – Mr. Lindsey! Furthermore, he is interpreting the Bible out of his imagination rather than by the Scriptures themselves. This is why these books on prophecy have to be re-written every few years. Because they are interpreting the Bible by "speculation," their interpretations must change with the advancement of technology. "Cobra helicopters" will be an outdated interpretation in 25 years.



J.L. Martin, writing in 1873, offered his interpretation of [Revelation 9:17-19](#) where it

says: "The riders had breastplates of fire and of hyacinth and of brimstone; and the heads of the horses are like heads of lions; and out of their mouths proceed fire and smoke and brimstone. A third of mankind was killed by these three plagues; by the fire and smoke and brimstone, which proceeded out of their mouths. For the power of the horse is in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents and have heads; and with them they do harm." While today's "speculative interpreters" view this in terms of lasers and missile launchers, Martin had another interpretation in light of the military technology of his day, the time when Custer and the Seventh Cavalry were fighting the Sioux Indians:

"John is pointing to the modern mode of fighting on horseback, with the rider leaning forward, which, to his sight, and to the sight of one looking on at a distance, would appear as the great mane of a lion; the man leaning on his horse's neck. He would in fighting with firearms, have to lean forward to discharge his piece, lest he might shoot down his own horse that he was riding. In John's day the posture was very different Now, I want to ask my friendly hearers if it is not as literally fulfilled before our eyes as anything can be? Are not all nations engaged in this mode of warfare? Do they not all kill men with fire and smoke and brimstone? . . . Do you not know that this is just ignited gunpowder? . . . Could an uninspired man, in the last of the first century, have told of this matter?"

J.L. Martin was speculating out of his own mind, to try and determine what John was saying in [Revelation 9:17-19](#). This is unfortunately what many have done, rather than study the language of symbols in which God has spoken; they put their imagination to work. In order to be to be "faithful workmen that need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" ([2nd Timothy 2:15](#)), we must understand Biblical imagery. Allow me to list several books I have found helpful in this regard:

- [Images of the Spirit](#) by Meredith G. Kline
- [Through New Eyes](#) by James B. Jordan
- [Dictionary of Biblical Imagery](#) by Leland Ryken (editor)
- [Paradise Restored](#) by David Chilton
- [Typology In Scripture](#) by Richard M. Davidson
- [Biblical Hermeneutics](#) by Milton S. Terry

This article is written by Don Walker, pastor of Christ Covenant Church in Kansas City, and is used with his permission.