



# **How Do You Read - Study the Bible?**

**by**

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Recently I came across a person who did not take most of the first few chapters of Genesis to be literal. The ‘days’ were not literal days but rather long periods of time. The words ‘evening’ and ‘morning’ were not really literal either. As I questioned him further, some parts this person took literally and other parts were figurative. Genesis 1:16 was interpreted allegorically. The greater light/sun is Christ, the lesser light/moon is the church, and the stars are the saints. When I asked the person if different people interpreted these things allegorically then which meaning would be the correct one?; and did the original author of Genesis intend to convey one meaning?...there was no definitive answer forthcoming.

The problem with such allegorical interpretation is that it sets up *inconsistencies* as well as *subjective* interpretations from which a number of meanings can be derived. *The authority is more with the reader than the author.* Yet the original author surely had *one meaning* he wanted to convey.

When I was a Roman Catholic the Bible in many parts was said to be symbolic and that I needed someone to interpret it for me. But when I went to my trusted priest I discovered his interpretation was not necessarily the same as other priests might have on various passages. It seemed like the Bible was a complex, symbolic book of vague allegorical meanings. Of course I did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit then to guide me, and being a ‘natural man’ and ‘carnal’ I was not able to understand the things of the Spirit (1Cor.2:14; Rom.8:7). It seemed like I would never be able to read the Bible for myself and understand the *plain meaning*. This matter got worse as I became interested in the last book of the Bible where there *obviously* were symbols and signs to be interpreted (Rev.12:1), as well as a strange chapter 17 which read oddly like a description of my own Roman Catholic religion! But again I was told that this book could not always be understood. I accepted that the Bible could not be read literally and gave up.

Nearly two years passed and I was challenged by a ‘Protestant’ (a rare breed today) to examine my religion in comparison with the Bible. Being a religious education teacher at the time I proudly took up the challenge, forgetting what I was told previously about reading the Bible. My aim was to show that what the Roman church taught and including its

traditions were either found somewhere in the Bible or that the Bible did not contradict it. I decided to read the Bible like a child would - *where it made sense I would seek no other sense.*

God used this event to draw me to Himself and to be converted. It was only then that I had an insatiable desire to read and understand the Word of God. I read the Bible literally and attempted to attain *the understanding as the original author would have had.* Where there was *obvious* allegorical language I attempted to find the literal truth behind the language. The Holy Spirit opened up a whole new realm of God's revelation of Jesus Christ. I was unaware at this stage of any other way of reading and studying the Bible. As time went on I began to discover that some people, including scholars, seemed to interpret the Bible quite similar to what I had seen in prior religious circles. I wondered why if the Bible was inspired that some would concentrate on what *the interpreter could find as the meaning rather than what the original author had written.* Who was the final real interpreter, the Holy Spirit or the reader?

## **The History of Hermeneutics**

The literal hermeneutic system, sometimes called the Grammatico-Historical method, was used by the earliest Christians and the earliest church fathers. This system allowed Scripture to say what it meant in its normal plain meaning. The words have their normal meaning as would be used in every day language by the author at the time. *The emphasis was not on the interpreter but on the original author and what they meant to say.* This simple consistent method used by the earliest of church leaders resulted in a consistent understanding of most passages.

### *Enter Other Methods*

Towards the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century this literal method began to be replaced by other methods. Some believe this can be traced to pagan philosophers such as Aristobulus, who lived around 160 B.C. He believed that Greek philosophy borrowed from the Old Testament and those teachings could be uncovered only by allegorizing. Allegory is an interpretation device where the words for a character or event is used as a metaphor for a broader or secondary message to be interpreted by the reader. The end result often is a wide range of meanings depending on the subjective understanding of the interpreter.

More prominent to the time of the New Testament is Philo (20 B.C.-A.D. 54). Philo used this allegorical method to *interpret Jewish scripture but with his Greek background of philosophy*. Scholars cite hundreds of examples of his allegorization of the Old Testament. The allegorical interpretation often became a secondary meaning to a literal meaning of the text.

### *Enter Origen*

The allegorical interpretation of Scriptures cannot be historically proved to have prevailed at the time of Christ and the apostles in the first century. The first century historian, Josephus, shows not a sign of it in his writings.

But this was to change after the first century. Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155-216) who was influenced by Philo believed a passage might have up to five differing meanings. But it was Origen, who was probably a student of Clement and who studied Platonic philosophy, who went further and popularised the allegorical method. Of the church fathers the one that is most cited as showing a shift from a literal hermeneutic to allegorical is Origen. Origen's work '*On First Principles*', teaches that if no spiritual understanding is found on the surface of a bible passage, then the verses are to be taken symbolically. Greek philosophy was most evident in Origen's thinking as is clearly evident to the Jews in Alexandria Egypt. (1) Origen wrote '*I do not quote these words, however, as taking them in their literal signification, but, agreeably to the title of the book (for it is inscribed 'Proverbs'), I investigate them as containing a secret meaning. For it is the custom of these writers (of Scripture) to distribute into many classes those writings which express one sense when taken literally, but which convey a different signification as their hidden meaning*'. (2)

Note the mention of a '*secret meaning*' and '*hidden meaning*'. Later centuries would show a plethora of mystics and mystical writings.

There were others who at the time opposed this method. Origen wrote of Celsus who complained that Origen was '*doing violence to the meaning of the writers*'. (3)

Origen's explanation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) shows how far the allegorical method would go. Origen interpreted the man robbed as being Adam, Jerusalem is paradise, Jericho the world, the

priest the Law, the Levites the Prophets, the Samaritan is Christ, the donkey Christ's physical body which bears the burden of the wounded man (the wounds his sins), the inn is the Church and the Samaritan's promise to return is the second coming of Christ.

With the new allegorical method of interpretation came an emphasis on different 'genres' (styles/categories of books). By defining the books of the Bible into various styles, a different hermeneutical method was developed for different genres.

The allegorical method became increasingly popular among the church fathers. Some of the later allegorical interpretations are nothing short of fanciful, mystical and bordering on the ludicrous.

In later centuries Augustine's (AD 354-430) allegorical interpretation of Bible prophecy dominated the understanding of eschatology during the medieval period. The Roman church adopted this method. The allegorical method persisted up until the Reformation and the Puritans, when many in refuting the Roman church, sought more the *plain meaning of texts*. But many Reformers simply did not reform their theology in some areas. Vestments of Romish traditions persisted in infant baptism, christenings, etc. In fighting the vices and the false teaching of Rome, little time was dedicated to the reforming of eschatology or to returning to such as was taught by the early church fathers who were predominantly pre-millenarians (such as Justin Martyr, Papias, Tertullian, Victorinus and more). In the field of hermeneutics some Reformers and Puritans did go back to the literal methods. The Puritan Jonathan Edwards wrote of a literal future Israel. Spurgeon saw a literal millennium as yet to come and a physical reign of Christ on earth (see our booklet '*The Millennium - Literal or Figurative; The Early Church and Beyond - Views on the Millennium*').

### **Hermeneutical Methods Weighed**

The aim of any hermeneutics should be to answer the question - *what meaning did the original author intend to convey?* Added to this is the question - who becomes the authority here - God the Holy Spirit or the interpreter? One author argues: '*If used consistently, allegorical*

*hermeneutics would reduce the Bible to near-fiction, for the normal meaning of words would be irrelevant and would be replaced by whatever meaning the interpreter gives to the symbols. However, for the most part, allegorical hermeneutics is not practiced consistently or thoroughly. Evangelicals who use this system do so usually in the area of prophecy, while using normal or literal hermeneutics in other areas of biblical interpretation'. (4)*

The problem with this method is what some call a 'spiritualisation' of scripture. But which 'spirit' is involved here - the one of the Holy Spirit or the interpreter?

A-millennialist Schaff is fair when he describes the great hermeneutical failings of Origen: '*His great defect is the neglect of the grammatical and historical sense and his constant desire to find a hidden mystic meaning. He even goes further in this direction than the Gnostics, who everywhere saw transcendental, unfathomable mysteries*'.

Evidence is lacking within Scripture that Jesus or the Apostles understood the Old Testament in this way.

There is no doubt an argument exists for different 'genres' of books. There are clearly different literary styles in the Bible. The style of Proverbs differs from the Psalms and other books. Some styles are narrative, others poetic. The book of Revelation uses symbols and signs. Other passages use hyperbole as exaggeration to prove a point (1Cor.13:1-3; Col.1:23). But to impose different methods for different genres brings inconsistencies. Some books are also rather mixed genres. Revelation is said to be an 'apocalyptic genre' and thus cannot be taken literally. But who invented that rule? John was told to *write what he 'saw'* (Rev.1:2), not what he interpreted or understood.

With the allegorical method the '*thousand years*' in Rev.20 is not a thousand years but a long or indefinite period. Yet in the Old Testament the mention of 'a thousand' in many instances is usually accepted across the board as literal (Nu.1:41 - tribes of Israel; also in 2:16,28; 31:34; Ezra 2:69 - thousands of pounds of silver and gold; Is.30:17; etc.). Are the '*loaves and the fishes*', the '*two thousand swine*' (Mk.5:13) and the '*three thousand*' souls saved in Acts 2 - do we allegorise them also? And what about the other mentions of the word 'thousand' in the rest of the book of Revelation? In Revelation 11:3 '*...two witnesses... prophesy a thousand*

*two hundred and threescore days...*’ (3.5 years) 12:6 ‘*And the woman fled into the wilderness...a thousand two hundred and threescore days*’. 14:20 ‘*...space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs*’. What reason do we have for allegorising these? If a ‘thousand years’ is not literal then why did John have so much detail for this (Rev.20:3-7)? Is the ‘*lake of fire*’ and the ‘*torment*’ in the same passage literal or figurative? The text says that Satan will be tormented ‘*for ever and ever*’ - do we take that literally? Most do. Why is it we take ‘*for ever and ever*’ literally and not the ‘*thousand years*’ when it is mentioned six times in one passage (Rev.20) and further in the same book?

The problem with picking and choosing what is literal and not literal is that *inconsistencies* begin to occur. Most of the early church fathers in the first two centuries took this passage concerning the millennium literally. The passage is arguably not figurative unless one adds a hermeneutical rule that says ‘prophecy’ is figurative in such a passage. But the language is literal and means what it says *unless it is obviously figurative which it is not*.

Are there times when we would *not* take the word ‘thousand’ literally? Yes, and for *obvious* reason. There are times when the text is *obviously* figurative language (1Cor.4:15 ‘*ten thousand instructors*’; 14:19 ‘*ten thousand words*’). Here also a different Greek word is used for these instances - ‘*murios*’ - we get ‘myriad’ from this.

If we do not take such passages as the millennium in Revelation to be literal, then why would we take other prophetic books such as Zechariah to be literal - Jesus coming to the mount of Olives physically (Zech.14)? This latter passage directly correlates with the prophecy in Revelation chapter 20 that Jesus the Messiah will reign on the earth for a thousand years!

Similarly, allegorical interpretations do not take the many references to the Messiah’s ‘reign’ on ‘David’s throne’ on earth (Isaiah 9:6-7; Zechariah 14:1-21). Is Genesis to be taken literally? If so, why do some take the *days* literally in the first book and not the *years* in the last book?

The same problem occurs with the ‘New Jerusalem’. Is the ‘New Jerusalem’ not really what John saw but only figurative, symbolic of other things? But again, this is not the hermeneutics of the earliest church fathers but a later invention.



Then there is ‘replacement theologies’ which bring such things as the Mosaic ‘Sabbath’ into the New Testament and make it a Sunday ‘Sabbath’. And the classic is the Israel of the Old Testament being changed to the ‘church’ of the New Testament or the ‘New Israel’. Hundreds of scriptures throughout the Old Testament have to be re-read allegorically to get this.

*But what about allegories, figurative language in the Bible?*

Revelation has examples of *obvious* figurative language. In Revelation 12 there is a ‘woman’ giving birth to a ‘manchild’. The ‘woman’ is a ‘wonder’ (‘*semeion*’ - a ‘sign’). This ‘*sign*’ obviously has to be a metaphor for something else. The Old Testament consistently describes Israel as a ‘woman’ (Micah 4:9,10; Is.54:5, Jer.31:32, etc). Christ is born of the nation Israel (Heb.7:14). The passage is *obvious* allegory.

Some cite the ‘seven golden candlesticks’ mentioned in Revelation chapter 1 as figurative. But we are in fact told what the figures mean! Vs.20 tells us exactly what this ‘*mystery*’ is. The ‘candlesticks’ are figures, but then *we are told* that they are *literally* ‘seven churches’.

Most allegories in the Bible are *obvious*. Galatians 4:21-31 uses the metaphors of Isaac and Ishmael to refer to the two covenants, the bondage of the law and freedom and promise of the Spirit. But the reader might ask how is this *obviously* allegorical - again the answer is that the scripture tells us it is so! - ‘*Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which engenders to bondage, which is Hagar*’ (vs.24).

Some cite the parables as allegories. But they are narratives to convey literal truths. Many were designed to show the hearts of, and harden the hearts of, the pharisees. In the parable of the Prodigal Son the key person is the older brother, *whose attitude was that of the Jewish leaders of the time*. It also shows the love of the Father.

A literal interpretation is consistent, objective and accurate unless the language is *obviously* symbolic, figurative, allegorical.

One must also not confuse interpretation with ‘application’ of the text. Interpretation is done prior to ‘applying’ the text. Application is gained

by prayerfully asking questions such as ‘How does this passage affect my walk with God’; ‘Is there a sin I need to repent of’?; ‘What is the Holy Spirit applying to my life here?’ Preaching is also full of this ‘application’ after first establishing what the author means from the text.

*But what about Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’?*

I have had some who favour the allegorical method of interpretation cite Bunyan's famous ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ as an example of allegorical interpretation. Firstly, *Pilgrim’s Progress* is NOT the inspired Word of God. It was written based on dreams that John Bunyan had while in prison. It is fiction and it was written as so by Bunyan. Bunyan stated clearly it is an ‘allegory’ and was never meant to be interpreted literally! Secondly, it is a story of the life of a Christian which teaches clearly the sanctification process of a believer in trials, testings, sufferings and growth. It is also a powerful allegory of what are the various types of false believers. It was never meant to replace the word of God or be an argument for the allegorical method.

How do you read and study the bible? Do you read it to understand what the original author meant and prayerfully trust the Holy Spirit to show you an application for life? It is by this Word that God shows us truth and sanctifies us (Jn.17:17). Thus it behoves us to be consistent in how we read, study and thus interpret what God is saying. This is the process by which our minds are renewed. The Bible speaks of things that are ‘reasonable’ (‘*logikós*’ Rom.12:1). The Word of God is spiritual nourishment for us in worship and in the revelation of God. How we read and study it is important to it’s author.

- (1) Ronald M. Johnson, '*Systematic Theology is the Hermeneutic*', Conservative Theological Journal Vol.1 (Tyndale Theological Seminary, 1997; 2002), 1:222.
- (2) Mal Couch, '*An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics: A Guide to the History and Practice of Biblical Interpretation*' (Kregel Pub., 2000), 97.
- (3) Kenneth R. Cooper, '*A Survey of the Case for Literal Interpretation of the Scriptures*', Journal of Dispensational Theology Vol.10 (Tyndale Theological Seminary, 2006; 2007), vnp.10.30.22.
- (4) Charles Caldwell Ryrie, '*Basic Theology : A Popular Systemic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth*' (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1999), 125.

Bibliography: Various articles including '*Contrasting Literal Hermeneutics With Allegorical Spiritualisation, and Genre Hermeneutics*' by David Q. Santos

And

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/revelation/introduction/the-rise-of-allegorical-interpretation.html>

## About the Author and the Ministry

Terry Arnold holds a Doctorate in Theology (Dth), a Masters degree (MABS) and several diplomas. He was founder and president of *South Pacific Bible Institute*, a Bible college training and equipping people for ministry. In addition he was the founder of Hervey Bay Bible Church in Queensland, Australia. He has for 25 years served as an elder and then pastor.

Terry is the author of several books and is involved in a full time ministry of *teaching, informing* and *equipping* the church. He is also editor of a growing worldwide publication '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

His ministry includes preaching/teaching and conducting seminars and conferences in a wide range of churches and colleges.

**TA Ministries** is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book '*To Catholics Whom I Love*' was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

*Diakrisis* is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.