

July 25, 2021

Should We Read the Bible Literally or Not?

Texts: **Galatians 4: 21-31; Luke 15: 11-32; *Metaphors More Real*** by Fernando Pessoa

Last week we were talking about what it means to have a child-like faith, and one of the things I think it means is that we ask a lot of questions. Today I want to ask whether we should read the Bible literally or not.

You will find no end of people telling you that reading the Bible literally is the only real way to read it, and everything else is just your interpretation added to the text. Is this right? If I tell you that the greatest theologian of the third century, Origen of Alexandria, said that the literal reading was fine for children, but adult Christians needed to go deeper, would that make you think there might be something more to it?

St. Augustine, who died in AD 430, used to say that interpretation is hard. He was already aware that there were many factors that went into a good interpretation of a text. In fact, medieval scholars in the Augustinian tradition, invented the practice of making encyclopedias - vast compendia of human knowledge - just to be able to have all the information needed to interpret the Scriptures at their fingertips.

Biblical interpretation for Christians begins with Jesus himself. Jesus uses classical Jewish interpretation rules when talking about the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. Let me show you Jesus using one of the easier rules to understand: in Hebrew this one's called *kal vechamer*, and it literally means light and heavy, or simple and complex. It basically says, if something is true in case A, then it's even more true in case B.

Here's an example: in Matthew 6:28-30 Jesus says, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you?" God takes care of the grass, clothing it in splendor. What's true for grass is even more true for you. Jesus is taking an Old Testament story about the splendor of Solomon's clothing, and turning it into a teaching about how much God cares for his listeners. That doesn't sound like Jesus is just taking the literal meaning of Scripture, does it?

And Paul uses classical Greek methods of interpretation, from the Homeric epics, when he interprets Scripture. Some secular interpretations of the Odyssey said that when Homer wrote about Odysseus' journey home from the Trojan War, it was really an allegory for every human's journey through life. Each adventure Odysseus had, represented another stage of human development. It was an allegory. Allegory works by saying of a story, "Well, this is really that!"

In Galatians 4, which we heard this morning, Paul says that the story of Sarah and Hagar, the mothers of Abraham's two sons, is actually an allegory. Hagar is Mt. Sinai and present day Jerusalem, both representing slavery to the law. Sarah is really heavenly Jerusalem: she represents freedom. Paul even uses the word *allegorizing* in describing what he's doing. There's nothing literal about either of these interpretations of Scripture, which are found *in Scripture* as interpreted by Jesus and Paul!

In the Middle Ages, Christian scholars used four modes of interpretation, claiming there were four senses of Scripture: literal, allegorical, ethical, eschatological. Not every sense was found in every Scripture, but you needed at least these four senses in order to interpret a text. The classic example of how these work is the city of Jerusalem. In the literal sense, Jerusalem is a city in Judea. In the allegorical sense, Jerusalem might represent a person's soul, which might be free and worshipping God, or captured by the Babylonians and stuck in sin. In the ethical sense, Jerusalem represents the aspiration towards holiness as expressed in the pilgrim Psalms, where the pilgrim longs to be part of God's holy temple worship in Jerusalem. In the eschatological sense- that is, the end times sense - Jerusalem represents heaven, our eternal destiny. So when King David says in the 23rd Psalm, that he'll dwell in the house of the Lord forever, he means he'll dwell in heaven, not in Jerusalem in the literal sense.

When the Reformation came along, Protestants and Catholics were arguing about the meaning of Scripture. The arguments became grounded in the literal sense of Scripture, and interpretation, as a whole, was impoverished. But even if one wanted to stick to the strictly literal sense, interpretation, as Augustine said, is still hard.

Mark Powell, a NT scholar with an interest in literary criticism, did a study with evangelical leaders from the United States, Russia, and Tanzania. All of these leaders were from the same evangelical tradition that emphasizes reading Scripture literally. He asked them a question about the parable of the prodigal son, which we heard today. "Why did the prodigal son end up in the pig pen?" He's asking for an interpretation of the parable at this point. Now, all of these leaders consider the Scriptures to be divinely inspired and sacred texts that are authoritative. All of them wanted to present the text to their people as directly as possible, to allow the text to speak for itself. In other words, they were interested in giving a literal interpretation of the text. They had no interest in having readers import their own values into the text, so that it could mean whatever they wanted. So, as I said, Powell asked these pastors why it was that the prodigal son ended up in the pig pen. The Russian pastors said, "That's easy. It's obvious. He ended up in the pig pen because there was a famine in the land." The Tanzanian pastors said, "That's easy. It's obvious. He ended up in the pig pen because no one gave him anything to eat." The American pastors said, "That's easy. It's obvious. He ended up in the pig pen because he squandered all the money that he inherited."

The Russian pastors emphasized the circumstances involved: there was a famine in the land. That's what was happening, and the prodigal son got caught up in those circumstances. The Tanzanian pastors emphasized the implications on the community: no one gave him anything to eat. That's why he was in that pig pen. Others refused to help him. The American pastors emphasized the prodigal son's personal responsibility. It's all on him. He squandered the money that he had inherited.

So which is it? Why is the prodigal son in the pig pen? Is it because of circumstances beyond his control, a famine sweeping the land? Or is it because of a failure of the community, with no one noticing his plight and taking pity on him with a bite to eat? Or is it because of a personal failure of the young man, whose wasteful and sinful habits had brought him to this sad place? Remember, all three of these groups of pastors are from the same evangelical tradition, and all three think that they are telling us the literal, obvious truth about the story. None of them think they are bringing any interpretation to the situation. They are simply telling us what the obvious literal meaning of the story is. But their literal readings of the story are very different! Which is the true literal reading of the story? I guess we should look at the text to figure that out.

In Luke 15:13, the text tells us, "He set off for a distant country and squandered his wealth in wild living." It certainly looks like the Americans are right. It is about personal responsibility.

But hang on. In Luke 15:14 the text reads, “After he spent everything, there was a severe famine in the whole country.” I guess the Russians were right. It is about the circumstances that the young man found himself in.

But not so fast! In Luke 15:16 the text reads, “He longed to fill his stomach, but no one gave him anything.” Looks like the Tanzanian pastors were right after all. It is about a failure of the community to take care of its members.

All three of the interpretations are there in the text, but the very things we choose to notice and pay attention to are shaped by our culture and our understanding of the world. The literal meaning was very different for the pastors in these three countries. So when we talk about reading the Bible literally, it's not entirely clear that that's something we can even do. It's never just the text speaking. It's also what we bring to the text, our cultural assumptions and the things that we notice and pay attention to.

So what are we to do when trying to interpret the Scriptures? As Christians, we clearly have to read the Bible and try to understand it somehow. Let's go back to St. Augustine. Remember him? He's the one who said Bible interpretation is hard. He was right! But Augustine has some help for us. It *is* hard to interpret the Scriptures, he said, but Jesus has shown us the way. Jesus once said that the whole of the Law and the prophets - that is, the whole of the Scripture as he knew it - depended on two great commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. So, Augustine said, if your interpretation makes you love God or your neighbor or yourself more, it's a good one. If your interpretation makes you love God or your neighbor or yourself less, then your interpretation needs some work. It's not so good.

Should we read Scripture literally? If it makes us love God or our neighbor more, absolutely. If it doesn't, well, maybe there's a better kind of interpretation waiting for us out there that does. Amen