> *"**The word 'literally' is one of the most misused and abused words in the contemporary English language.**"[1] –Craig Carter, professor of theology at Tyndale University College and Seminary*

Currently in its 55th year of publication, the *Creation Research Society Quarterly* journal is the longest running periodical amongst the creationist technical literature. I am certainly in no position to question the scientific research or calculations found in many of the papers in *CRSQ*, most of which are well over my head. Nevertheless, *all* Christians are under the obligation to evaluate every proposition and point of doctrine (cosmological models not excepted) according to the Bible and determine whether or not the relevant Scripture references have been properly exegeted.

One such case of where I believe a failure in interpretation has taken place thus leading to compounding errors (resulting in an astronomical model built upon exegetical sand) is Jake Hebert's paper titled, "Have creationists overlooked an abundance of biblical cosmological data?"[2] Take, for example, Dr. Hebert's eschatological speculations about the physical location of the (physical) New Jerusalem which he bases on a "literal interpretation" of Psalm 48 (and other passages) Hebert writes:

> *"Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King.'…*
>
> *…Taken literally, it would suggest that future Mount Zion will be located at the North Pole! Could this be a clue that during the geological upheaval of the end times, God will reorient the earth's rotational axis so that it passes through Jerusalem? We already know that the earth's topography will be significantly altered in the end times so that Mount Zion becomes the highest of all mountains (Isaiah 2:2; Ezekiel 40:2; Micah 4:1). Such a reorientation of the earth's rotational axis would imply that Jerusalem would be preeminent among the cities of the world in more ways than one."[3]*

Hebert goes on to discuss the dimensions of the New Jerusalem as recorded in Rev. 21:16 (again, taken "literally") and purports that a reorientation of the earth's rotational axis so as

to run through the massive cubic city (located at the North Pole) would solve any "rotationally unstable situation, depending on the mass of the New Jerusalem."[4]

I am no scientist. But I do know that spherical objects do not have "sides", so it is a bit strange that Hebert insists on taking poetic passages like Psalm 48:1-2 and Isaiah 14:2-3 literally, from whence he conjectures about the prophetic significance of the North Pole (perhaps he takes "the four corners of the earth" literally as well).

This problem only scratches the surface of Hebert's over-literalizing hermeneutic.

In similar fashion, physicist D. Russell Humphreys' paper (published in the same issue of *CRSQ*) addresses "Biblical evidence for time dilation in the cosmos"[5] building his eschatological scenario as it relates to a time-dilation cosmology upon a literal rendering of apocalyptic passages about stars falling from the sky.

There are too many specific examples in these two papers that could be scrutinized in detail, but what would be more beneficial would be to see that the real problem lies in the interpretive methodology at play. A recently published book by Craig Carter devotes a very helpful chapter to the issue of literal interpretation and argues for a return to pre-Enlightenment exegesis.

> *"The main point at stake in the orthodox tradition of Christian exegesis is not method, but meaning. It is not the way meaning is conveyed, but what meaning is conveyed. In much of the history of hermeneutics, the meaning of 'literal' is contrasted with 'allegorical' in such a way that to take a text allegorically is to obscure or reject its real meaning. And that surely is a bad thing. But representatives of the Great Tradition, who are opposed to obscuring or rejecting what the text asserts, are not at all opposed to accepting truth conveyed through a metaphor, figure, symbol, or even allegory. The concern they typically have is the use of nonliteral interpretation to silence or reject the real meaning in the text.*
>
> *…We need to let the literal meaning of Scripture control the interpretation of the text, but…doing so does not necessitate ruling out a spiritual meaning that can be described as a sensus plenoir[6]or the spiritual or christological sense of the text.*
>
> *…The Great Tradition, at its best, moved gradually in the direction of viewing the*

> *spiritual sense as contained within, or as an expansion of, the literal sense. The spiritual sense is not read into the text, nor is it a matter of individual subjective opinion. Instead, it is what Calvin, who brings the Great Tradition of Christian exegesis to its peak, calls 'the plain sense of the text.'*
>
> *…For the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy, the 'literal sense' refers to the meaning of the biblical text, whether that meaning is conveyed through literal statements or through some sort of figural language and whether that meaning is what the human author consciously intended or is an extension of the human author's intention implanted in the text by the Holy Spirit through inspiration.[7]*

Carter provides a very helpful point to remember in such discussions, particularly when we consider Authorial intent:

> *"All meaning is found in the plain sense, which can be understood as a combination of the literal and spiritual senses, which are unified by Jesus Christ as the great theme and center of the Old and New Testaments understood as one book (Luke 24:27)."[8]*

Lacking a grammatical-redemptive-historical approach to any particular text of Scripture, one can easily lose sight of the fact that the Bible cannot be read like any other book, for it is the divinely inspired Word of God ultimately intended to reveal the person and work of Jesus Christ throughout redemptive history.[9]

With the preceding context in mind, what follows is my Letter to the Editor of *CRSQ*[10] in which I address some of these issues as found in the two aforementioned papers.[11]

Concerning Hebert and Humphreys' Eschatological Presuppositions and "Literal

Interpretation”

Over the years, I have benefited from the work of both Jake Hebert and Russ Humphreys appearing in various creationist publications. Nothing herein is meant to be condescending toward them or anyone else holding to their brand of biblical interpretation. It is my intention to offer some thoughts for consideration which might ultimately help sharpen our approach to the Scriptures.

CRSQ contributors like Hebert and Humphreys are working to develop cosmological models starting with the Bible. This is a good thing. The Christian’s thinking in every area ought to begin with Scripture, and I commend their devotion to the infallible Word in their recent papers (*CRSQ* 53(4):286—305). It is no secret, however, that many of the modern creationist movement’s early proponents were devoted in large part to a theological school of thought prominent in the mid twentieth-century, a persisting hermeneutical system also undergirding both Dr. Hebert’s and Dr. Humphreys’ papers. This “unified interpretive scheme” (Erickson, 1998, p. 1168)—while it continues to hold hostage the word “literal”—actually has a history of arbitrariness and inconsistency in its alleged commitment to literal interpretation, as documented by Allis (2001) and evidenced by Scofield’s promotion of the gap theory (Sabato, 2014, pp. 120—21).

Dr. Humphreys informs us at the onset of his paper that he will “take all scriptural passages (most of them being prophetic) at face value, or straightforwardly, a method many people call ‘literal interpretation’” (p. 297). Yet, in *Starlight and Time* (1994), Humphreys acknowledged the danger of “try[ing] to squeeze a metaphor into a concrete straitjacket [since] ‘straightforward’ does not necessarily always mean ‘literal’” (pp. 56—57). I hope to add a bit of clarity with regard to the word “literal”, and offer some long overdue challenges to what I believe to be an erroneous method in biblical interpretation.

Dispensationalism at work

Space does not permit an expanded discussion here, but considering Dispensationalism’s hijacking of the phrase “literal interpretation”, it is noteworthy that Dispensationalists historically have tended to “mix the literal and symbolic in a rather arbitrary manner” (Downing, 2002, p. 210). Allis cautions that

> *While Dispensationalists are extreme literalists, they are very inconsistent ones. They are literalists in interpreting prophecy. But in the interpretation of history, they carry the principle of typical interpretation to an extreme which has rarely been exceeded even by the most ardent of allegorizers. (2001, p. 21)*

In other words, Dispensationalists have a history of imposing typology upon passages where simple literal historical narrative was intended. Oddly enough, their insistence upon literal interpretation is most unyielding in the interpretation of prophecy.

I suspect that if a paper dedicated to eschatology were submitted for publication in *CRSQ* it would be swiftly rejected on the grounds that such does not fit within the parameters of the journal nor comply with the mission of the Society. However, it is clear that an *a priori* subscription to Dispensationalism/futurism plays an important role in the cosmological ideas put forth by these two authors. Hebert admits that he is "writing from a 'premillennial' viewpoint that assumes a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on Earth" (p. 294), and Humphreys references J. Dwight Pentecost in support of his literal interpretation of prophetic events (p. 305).

To be clear, Hebert's particular placement of the "thousand years" of Revelation 20 is not in and of itself problematic since premillennialism has existed for centuries *without* the wooden-literal characteristics of Dispensationalism. The problem I am referring to is a dependence upon an interpretive method which displaces typological shadows and symbolic language, forcibly imposing literalism onto practically every prophetic passage. This coupled with a diminished regard for authorial intent and an unyielding commitment to futurist eschatology necessarily results in poor exegesis (Cooke, 2013).

As biblical creationists, we firmly assert that the authorial intent of the plain, historical record of creation in six days was not to communicate evolution over billions of years. Unlike earlier Dispensationalists as documented by Allis (2001), we reject all attempts to reduce Hebrew historical narratives to mere typology. Can we not afford the Author of poetic and apocalyptic revelation the same courtesy here? J. Dwight Pentecost's defense of this nineteenth century theological system does not justify the literalizing of apocalyptic symbolism, even for the sake of astronomical models.

Since readers of the Spring 2017 *CRSQ* have been subject to these quite popular views of prophecy as perpetuated by Drs. Hebert and Humphreys, it is only reasonable to consider

that the implications of the historic Protestant interpretive method would be devastating to their papers. If one's understanding of a biblical text is faulty, there is no point in proceeding any further. To ignore the importance of careful exegesis is to potentially misread or distort Scripture for the sake of scientific modeling and conjecturing about the future. Our commitment to biblical inerrancy doesn't amount to much if we are blind to our own presuppositions and oblivious to the interpretive reading glasses we wear to read the Bible.

Both Hebert and Humphreys provide a number of biblical passages to support their hypotheses, none of which can be examined in-depth here. With regard to these passages' role in the development of such models, it is my contention that such an overly-literal approach to Scripture which rejects prophetic type and antitype, ignores figure and fulfillment, and manifests a general disregard for literary genre, is, as Allis and Downing assert, both inconsistent and arbitrary. Why, for example, is not this same hermeneutical method applied to the chain which the angel uses to bind Satan in Revelation 20:1-2? Why do we not find articles in creationist technical literature conjecturing about the most suitable element or alloy likely to be used in the composition of such a chain? [see Satan bound and loosed] Or, why not contemplate the anatomical ramifications of having a sword protruding from Jesus Christ's mouth (Rev. 1:16)? Presumably the answer is because Dispensationalists recognize a distinction between the literal and the figurative in at least *some* prophetic passages. Their doing so is in no sense spiritualizing or allegorizing a text intended to be taken at face value but is the recognition that God is permitted to use figurative language in communicating truth, the truth communicated being much greater than the chosen symbol.

> *"The figure 'metaphor' is a comparison by substitution. The Lord is my Shepherd. That is a metaphor. Shepherd is substituted for Lord. It does not mean that the Lord has now become non-existent. It merely emphasizes the shepherd-like qualities of care and compassion which our Lord exemplifies…. Christ is called the Lion of the Tribe of Judah; a symbol of a lion being used to describe Christ. But is not Christ infinitely superior to any lion of the forest? Is not Christ far more real than the symbol used to describe Him? Is unquenchable fire symbolic of overwhelming and eternal destruction? If it is merely a symbol, the reality it represents must be even more terrible. In literary symbolism the reality is always greater than the symbol representing it. The substance is always superior to the symbol used to illustrate it" (Cooke, 1989, pp. 50—1).*

And if it is admitted that "'straightforward' does not necessarily always mean 'literal'" (Humphreys, 1994, p. 56), then it is at least possible that some of the verses referenced by Humphreys and Hebert comprise symbolic language and are therefore unsuitable for use in constructing astronomical models.

There is an immense difference between saying that a word used in Scripture is a symbol or metaphor for something else, and saying that the words in Scripture have no meaning (which may be the fear of some). The substance, fulfillment, or antitype *is much bigger than the metaphor or shadow used to signify it*. Such is the nature of typology (Renihan, 2018).

I am not a scientist, and I have great respect for the members of CRS who are able to work through complicated formulas in proposing their ideas. I am confident that contributors to the *Quarterly* believe that the text of Scripture must be paramount in any endeavor to examine the universe God created. It necessarily follows, then, that the *meaning* of the text is of equal importance to its *authority*. If a passage is not properly exegeted, we do ourselves a great disservice to employ it as a proof-text in support of a futuristic cosmological scenario.

Augustine is blamed by Dr. Humphreys for introducing the allegorical method of interpretation with which Christianity continues to be plagued. Yet it has been shown that such a view is both an oversimplification of hermeneutics and misappropriation of Augustine (Cosner and Sarfati, 2013). It is not sufficient to say that "the Roman Catholic Church of today largely continues to use the [allegorical] method" while "many conservative Protestant churches began returning to the original method of…literal interpretation" (p. 305). It is true that Romanism errs in allegorizing Scripture texts which are meant to be understood literally, but Romanism likewise errs in *literalizing* texts meant to be understood *figuratively*. Recall that Protestants do not regard Christ's words, "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life" (John 6:54) as an invitation to cannibalism. Nor do we depend upon scientific enquiry to determine if such an exegesis is reasonable. Thus, "[we do not] reject Christ's 'real presence' in the eucharist because biochemical analysis fails to reveal hypostatic DNA. One should reject any such teaching on hermeneutical grounds recognizing Christ's use of figurative language" (Sabato, 2017, p. 32 en).

Permit me to emphasize this important fact: The exegetical error foundational to Rome's very existence as a religious institution is its stubborn insistence that Christ's words "this is My body" (Mat. 26:26), and "this is My blood" (v. 28) *be taken literally*.

The grammatical-historical hermeneutic

We do, indeed, believe that Scripture should be taken literally in the sense of ascertaining its actual or straightforward meaning, with consideration given to the authorial intent, literary genre, the analogy of Scripture and the analogy of faith. But this is a very different use of the word "literal" than that to which we are often acquainted. Cosner and Sarfati address this (2013, p. 10):

> *"Modern informed creationists tend to disclaim that their hermeneutical method with the Bible is 'literal'. That's because they recognize that there are many different types of literature in the Bible—historical, poetic, prophetic, apocalyptic; and there are also plenty of figurative sections. So we tend to advocate a 'plain' interpretation, or, in technical terms, the grammatical-historical hermeneutic. The aim of this method is to read Scripture as its human authors and original audience would have understood it (so it could be termed an originalist approach). Nowadays, 'literal' often has the connotation of woodenly literalistic, and detractors of biblical creationists dishonestly knock down this straw man. However, no leading creationist is a 'literalist' in this sense, e.g. reading Jesus saying, 'I am the door', and thinking He had a knob and hinges."*

Cooke also notes that (1982, p. 143):

> *"Although we take the Bible literally, this does not mean that we ignore figures of speech…. To take the Bible literally means that we recognize figurative language. Some people apparently confuse literalism with letterism. Letterism is a wooden type of interpretation in which figures are ignored."*

Even Dispensationalist Kenneth Cooper notes this distinction when he writes that "literal interpretation is not a crude letterism…. Literal interpretation allows room for figurative language and poetic expressions…" (Cooper, 2006, p. 20).

The over-literalized approach is in part to blame on the Fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth-century as it reacted to the liberals of the day. In the battle against modernism which sought to allegorize practically everything in Scripture, "many

fundamentalists went to the opposite extreme and advocated a literalism so strict that they would brook no figurative language whatever" (Mayer, 1961, p. 428).

Hopefully this should clear up some of the misunderstandings surrounding word "literal". A proper exegesis takes these principles into account, which is why none of us insist that Jesus is an actual, physical door (John 10:9) but rather seek to ascertain the theological import of His obviously *figurative* statement. So while it may appear piously 'fundamentalist' in tradition and 'conservative' in methodology, it is misguided to think we must force letterism upon symbolic language and typology in order to keep with "taking the Bible literally".

To cite just one example from the two papers under consideration, note that Hebert's speculations about the physical locations of "the heavenly Mount Zion" and the New Jerusalem (pp. 292—95) are not worth exploring if his exegetical groundwork is faulty. Consider briefly one of Berkhof's observations with regard to the use of these terms in Scripture (1958, p. 713):

> *"The contention that the names 'Zion' and 'Jerusalem' are never used by the prophets in any other than a literal sense, that the former always denotes a mountain, and the latter, a city, is clearly contrary to fact. There are passages in which both names are employed to designate Israel, the Old Testament Church of God [or God's covenant people], Isa. 49:14; 51:3; 52:1, 2. And this use of the terms passes right over into the New Testament, Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 3:12; 21:9."*

A.W. Pink provides additional examples where the word "Jerusalem" is clearly not referring to a physical city in the Middle East (2016, pp. 344—47). Perhaps, then, it is at least possible that the word "Jerusalem" as it is found in certain passages is being employed as a symbol, and has more to do with theological content communicated typologically and less to do with a 1380 mile high cube protruding from the face of the earth.

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of such over-literalized interpretations as found in Hebert and Humphreys recent papers. The primary issue is that of interpretive method, my concern being that careful exegesis has been sidelined in the zeal to explore the science behind presumed and unqualified futuristic scenarios. It is my opinion that such interpretations are not the result of sound exegesis but of twentieth-century American evangelicalism's general acceptance of a particular eschatological system.
For too long Dispensational futurism has been regarded as merely the fruit of "taking the

Bible literally", and the knee-jerk reaction toward those who object is that such persons are mere liberals and allegorizors. The history of interpretation says otherwise. Such overly-literalized interpretations of prophecy had no precedent amongst Protestants until the rise of Dispensationalism (Cooke, 2013; Fairbairn, 1976; Guinness, 2008; Waldron, 2003).

My point is this: It is the grammatical-historical hermeneutic that ought to govern our exegesis, not a prior commitment to Dispensationalism's inconsistent literalism and futurist eschatology. As a former Dispensationalist, I caution that taking our theological traditions for granted is not something those committed to *sola scriptura* can afford to do. Coming to grips with our presuppositions and focusing greater attention on interpretive principles takes a great deal of effort and humility. But doing so would inevitably improve the work of biblical creationists, and save us all a lot of time.[12]

[1] Carter, C.A., *interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 162.

[2] *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 53(4):286-296, 2017.

[3] Hebert, ref. 2, p. 294.

[4] Hebert, ref. 2, p. 295.

[5] *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 53(4):297-305, 2017.

[6] From monergism.com:

"Sensus plenior" is a Latin term which means, literally, "fuller sense," or "deeper meaning". The term "sensus plenior" is used to refer to those passages which, at their most obvious level speak of one person or event, but which also have a deeper meaning hinted at through that specific event in question. In other words, "sensus plenior" is the term which acknowledges that some historical persons and events in the Old Testament are really "types," and that the passages treating of those persons and events speak not just of themselves alone, but also of the "antitypes" (i.e., the fulfillments of the types) which they foreshadow.

A good example of a case in which the principle of "sensus plenior" must be applied is

Moses' striking the rock in the wilderness, so that water flowed out to nourish the people. This passage relates a very real historical event, and its most basic level of meaning refers simply to a physical rock that flowed with physical water; but this event was also a type of how Christ, the Rock of our Salvation, was struck with the rod of divine justice, and henceforth there flowed from his wounded body the forgiveness and spiritual life that we need. In other words, there is a "sensus plenior," or deeper meaning to this event than just the real, historical occurrence. In 1 Corinthians 10:4, Paul gives express instruction for us to see a "sensus plenior" in this passage; and a little later, he says that all the things recorded in the Old Testament were written as "types" for our instruction (1 Cor. 10:11), thus giving us warrant to see a "sensus plenior" in all the scriptures.

[7] Carter, ref. 1, pp. 163-167.

[8] Carter, ref. 1, p. 176.

[9] For a brief but helpful discussion about this, check out the Theology in Particular podcast, episode 4: A roundtable discussion on hermeneutics with Dr. Richard Barcellos.

[10] Letter to the editor: Concerning Hebert and Humphreys' eschatological presuppositions and "literal interpretation", *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 54(4):272-275, 2018.

[11] Dr. Humphrey's did not respond to my letter, and Dr. Hebert offered a very brief response such that would indicate he did not seem to understand my concern primarily over his hermeneutical method. For instance, he writes:

"…The passage I cited (Psalm 48:1-2) *explicitly* refers to Zion as 'the city of the great King,' so I am on very solid ground in assuming that this is indeed a literal city that will be on 'the sides of the north.' I don't see why this should be controversial. Even amillenialists believe that Jesus is coming back. And when He does, His headquarters will be located *somewhere* on either the Earth or the New Earth (or both). So why can't His capital be located at the North Pole?"

He goes on to say that he "cited *five* passages that seemed to be pointing in this direction (pun intended!): Isaiah 14:12-13, Psalm 75:6-7, Ezekiel 1:4, Job 37:22, and Psalm 48:1-2. Likewise, I have since found a *sixth* verse that seems to suggest this, as well as another verse of Scripture that seems to say that the abode of God is indeed above the 'waters

above.’” (*CRSQ* 54(4):275, 2018).

This information offers very little in the way of clarity, first because neither of us is disputing the fact that “Jesus is coming back”. That eschatological reality does not serve to establish his contention that terms like “Zion” and the “New Jerusalem” can only be read in a literal, physical sense. If Dr. Hebert thinks that the Psalm 48 reference to “Zion” secures his interpretation on “very solid ground”, would he be as consistent in applying that method of interpretation to anthropomorphological language in Scripture? I certainly hope not.

Furthermore, the five passages he cites (and presumably the sixth undisclosed one) all come from books that clearly utilize poetic and metaphorical language. Without a justification as to why a hard literal interpretation should be imposed on such passages, referencing them contributes very little to the discussion at hand.

[12] **References**

Allis, O.T. 2001. *Prophecy and the Church* (1969). Wipf and Stock Publishers (reprint), Eugene, OR.

Berkhof, L. 1958. *Systematic Theology*. The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, UK.

Cooke, R. 1982. *A Survey of Biblical Interpretations*. Truth International Ministries, Max Meadows, VA.

Cooke, R. 1989. *In Defense of Historic Bible Protestantism: Modern Man and the Wrath of God*. Truth International Ministries, Max Meadows, VA.

Cooke, R. 2013. *The Effect of the Jesuit Eschatologies on America Today*. MethodEvangel Press, AR.

Cooper, K. 2006. A survey of the case for literal interpretation of the Scriptures. *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 10(30):17—33.

Cosner, L., and J. Sarfati. 2013. Non-Christian philosopher clears up myths about Augustine and the term ‘literal’. *Journal of Creation* 27(2):9—10.
Downing, W.R. 2002. *Biblical Hermeneutics*. PIRS Publications, Morgan Hill, CA.

Fairbairn, P. 1976. *Prophecy: Its Distinctive Nature, Its Special Function, and Proper Interpretation* (1865). Guardian Press, Grand Rapids, MI.

Erickson, M.J. 1998. *Christian Theology* (2nd ed.). Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.

Guinness, H.G. 2009. *Romanism and the Reformation: From the Standpoint of Prophecy* (1887). Wipf and Stock (reprint), Eugene, OR.

Humphreys, D.R. 1994. *Starlight and Time*. Master Books, Green Forest, AR.

Mayer, F.E., 1961. *The Religious Bodies of America* (4th ed.). Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, MO.

Pink, A.W. 2016. *Divine Covenants*. Parables: Pathways to the Past (reprint).

Renihan, S.D. 2018. *From Shadow to Substance*. Regent's Park College, Oxford, UK.

Sabato, N. 2014. A theologian's disappointing departure from biblical creation. *Journal of Creation* 28(3):120—127.

Sabato, N. 2017. Faltering between two opinions: The epistemological conundrum of old-earth creationism. *Journal of Creation* **31**(3):28—32.

Waldron, S.E. 2003. *The End Times Made Simple*, Calvary Press.

[Photo by Greg Rakozy on Unsplash]

Share this:

- Share on X (Opens in new window) X
- Share on Facebook (Opens in new window) Facebook