

# Voices: What does it mean to read the Bible ‘literally?’

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For some Christians, reading the Bible “literally” is a point of pride and a matter of faithfulness. For other Christians, reading the Bible “literally” is an unhelpful and even potentially harmful approach to the Scriptures.

From the early centuries of the church until now, Christians have been arguing over the appropriate ways to read Scripture. And even before the time of Christ, Jews were debating how best to interpret the texts we Christians now call the Old Testament.

Should Christians read the Bible literally? Are we even capable of doing so? Here is a brief response.

## Defining ‘literally’

Since reading the Bible “literally” is such a contested idea, there are numerous different and confusing definitions of “literal interpretation” with which people operate.

By “literal interpretation” I mean using historical and linguistic analysis to determine what the original words of Scripture most likely meant to their original human authors and audiences, then accepting this meaning as absolutely true and universally binding over and against all other meanings of the text.

On this definition, literal interpretation allows for metaphor, symbolism and other literary devices. Literal interpretation is not the same as literalism, which ignores or rejects metaphorical language, symbolism and other

literary devices.

## **The self-interpretation of the Bible**

The most significant challenge to literal interpretation of the Bible is the Bible itself. Our Scriptures frequently cite, comment upon, and otherwise interpret texts from elsewhere in the canon in ways that are not “literal.”

One example may be found in Galatians 4:22-31. Here Paul cites the story of Hagar, Sarai and their children to explain why Christians are not bound under the covenant given to Moses and Israel on Mount Sinai. Paul says Hagar “is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children” (4:25 NASB).

This statement is representative of the interpretive approach Paul takes with several Old Testament texts that, when we interpret them literally, have little or nothing to do with the relationship between Gentiles and the Mosaic covenant.

Galatians 4 is just one case among innumerable others where the Bible interprets itself non-literally. How could Christians insist literal interpretation is the best or only way to understand Scripture faithfully when Scripture itself clearly plays by different rules? Are we more faithful readers of the Bible than Paul or Jesus?

## **The traditions of the church**

Insistence on strictly literal interpretation of the Bible also cuts against the grain of how most Christians read the Bible prior to the modern era. Even a cursory overview of Christian biblical commentaries and sermons from the 100s A.D. and onward demonstrates a remarkable range of interpretive approaches beyond literal interpretation.

Origen of Alexandria, for example, was one of the most prolific and influential Bible commentators of the early church. He went so far as to say, in some cases, God deliberately inspired the literal sense of the biblical text to be *wrong* in order to prompt readers to seek deeper spiritual or allegorical meanings in the text (*On First Principles*, 4.2-3).

Even the Reformers, often lauded as champions of literal biblical interpretation, did not embrace the literal interpretive approach fully that we so often assume they did. Consider John Calvin, who argued Joseph in Genesis represents Christ. In an [article](#) for *The Gospel Coalition*, Jeffrey Fisher shared “a few cases where Calvin offered symbolic interpretations [of the Old Testament] not explicitly identified in the New Testament or connected to historical matters.” In reality, there are more than a few.

To insist on strictly literal interpretation of the Bible requires us to ignore or reject much of historic Christianity’s biblical interpretations as simply wrong and methodologically illegitimate. I would hesitate taking such a strong stance against our ancestors in the faith.

## ***Ad absurdum***

Finally, strictly and thoroughly literal interpretation of the Bible leads to absurd readings of the text no reasonable Christian today would accept.

I have written before on [Joshua 10:13](#), one Old Testament text among many that assume a geocentric cosmos. I pointed out geocentricity is not the main point of Joshua 10:13, but if we read and believe that verse precisely according to what the original human author meant to say, we nevertheless would have to believe the sun revolves around the Earth.

If you asked the original author of Joshua if he meant to say the sun revolves around the Earth, he would have said, “Yes.” When Christians who [opposed](#) Copernicus cited the Bible to attack his theories, those Christians

did indeed have the literal sense of Scripture on their side. But we now know they were wrong.

## Better ways of reading

There are many layers of meaning in the Bible, and Christians must use a variety of interpretive methods to discern what they are. We must use these various methods carefully and prayerfully, of course, but we cannot limit ourselves only to literal readings of the text.

Literal interpretation has a place at the table, but it cannot stand alone. Christians have much to learn from historic methods, such as allegorical interpretation. Even more contemporary approaches—such as postcolonial and Black hermeneutics—offer important insights into Scripture, as well.

Some may object, arguing we might make the Bible mean simply whatever we want it to mean if we do not prioritize literal interpretation over and against all other approaches. However, even various Christian groups who claim only to read the Bible “literally” still disagree sharply with one another on what Scripture means. Literal interpretation never has provided the objectivity many assume it does.

We are finite and fallible beings. There simply is no way to guarantee our reading of the Bible is the singular, “correct” one. But this does not mean we should embrace pure relativism. Rather, we should embrace humility, subject our own readings to regular scrutiny, and saturate our studies with prayer.

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