

## END TIME LESSON 3 | *Methods of Interpretation*

### 1. Introduction.

- a. In eschatology, no question is more important than the question of the *method* of interpreting prophecy. The basic differences between the premillennial and amillennial schools and the pretrib and posttrib rapturists are *hermeneutical*.
- b. A literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as premillennialism pictures. The Jews, including the apostles, were looking for just such a kingdom (Ac 1:6).
- c. As long as there is no agreement on hermeneutics, debate between amillennialists and premillennialists is basically fruitless. It is obvious amillennialism and premillennialism cannot both be right.

### 2. Allegorical Method.

- a. Allegory: “the expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence.”<sup>1</sup>
- b. Dangers.
  - (1) It disregards the author’s language and “foists” onto it whatever whim the interpreter desires. It puts itself beyond all well-defined principles and laws. Eisegesis: “the interpretation of a text (as of the Bible) by reading into it one’s own ideas.”<sup>2</sup>
  - (2) The basic authority ceases to be the written text but the mind of the interpreter. The interpretation may then be distorted by one’s doctrinal positions, the authority of one’s church, or one’s personal background.
  - (3) There is no basis on which the conclusions of the interpreter may be tested. Allegorical interpretations cannot really be refuted. On what basis can we determine which allegorical interpretation is correct?
- c. Refutation.
  - (1) Scripture abounds in allegories (figures, symbols, types), but these do not call for an allegorical method of interpretation that denies the literal or historical antecedent. “[T]he use of allegories is not a justification for the allegorical method of interpretation.”<sup>3</sup>
  - (2) Allegorism violates the principle of *perspicuity*. The Bible is not a secret code to be understood only by those who can crack the code through allegorisation.
  - (3) Allegorical interpreters basically say, “Take my word for it.” It decreases the confidence of lay believers to read and interpret the Bible as good *Bereans*.
  - (4) It fosters a disregard for the plain meaning of Scripture, which has historically proven to be very dangerous for the health of the church.
  - (5) “[T]here is all the difference possible in interpreting a Scripture allegory, on the one hand, and the allegorizing of a plain Scripture on the other hand.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary](#). (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

<sup>2</sup> [Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary](#). (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

<sup>3</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Rollin T. Chafer, *The Science of Biblical Hermeneutics*, 80.

### 3. Literal (grammatical-historical) method.

- a. “The literal method of interpretation is that method that gives to each word the same exact basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking.”<sup>5</sup>
- b. Arguments for.
  - (1) The literal meaning of sentences is the normal approach in all languages.
  - (2) The literal method is the only safe check on the interpreter’s imagination.
  - (3) It assumes, rightly, the Holy Spirit guided men in their use of language according to the ordinary conventions of grammar with the goal of clear communication. Perspicuous: “plain to the understanding especially because of clarity and precision of presentation.”<sup>6</sup>
  - (4) The literal approach does not rule out allegories, figures, symbols, and types. We “go allegorical” when the author, in the text, signals we should, but only then. Otherwise we take the author’s language at face value.
  - (5) “Literal truth is to be learned through the symbols.”<sup>7</sup> Figures are used to teach literal truth more forcefully than the bare words themselves. Biblical prophecy involves plain speech and figurative speech (cf. Da 9:24-27; Re 9:1-19). Both plain speech and figurative speech refer to literal people, places, and events in our literal space, time, matter universe.
  - (6) The Old Testament trains us how to interpret prophetic figures, symbols, and types (e.g., Ge 40-41; Da 2:31-45; 7:1-8, 15-28). Jesus authenticated that training (Mt 24:15-31). That training is to be followed when we get to *Revelation* (e.g., Re 13:1-4). The rules of interpretation for *Revelation* are learned in *Daniel*.
  - (7) Scripture continually points to literal interpretations of what was formerly written. God says he will do X, then, at the appropriate time, he does X. He says he will do Y, then, at the appropriate time, he does Y. He says he will do Z. If Z hasn’t happened yet, it is reasonable to believe, based on God’s record, that Z will happen at the appropriate time in the future (e.g., Ge 15:13-14). Prophecies of Jesus’ first coming were fulfilled literally (e.g., Mt 26:53-56). What reason is there to believe prophecies of his second coming will be fulfilled other than literally?
  - (8) The reason the early church was premillennial was because it interpreted prophecy in a literal manner.
- c. Advantages.
  - (1) It grounds interpretation in fact and objective data. It exercises a control over interpretation, just as experimentation does for the scientific method.
  - (2) It provides a basic authority by which interpretations may be tested.
  - (3) It delivers us from interpretations based on human rationalism, empiricism, intuitionism, and existentialism.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> [Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary](#). (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

<sup>7</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 31.