

CHAPTER 7

IS THE BIBLE TRUE AND SHOULD IT GENERALLY BE INTERPRETED LITERALLY OR SYMBOLICALLY?

*Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth.
John 17:17 (RSV)*

³*What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? ⁴Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar.....*
Romans 3:3-4(a) (NIV)

⁵*Every word of God proves true;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
⁶Do not add to his words,
lest he rebuke you,
and you be found a liar.*

Proverbs 30:5-6 (RSV)

But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled.
Acts 3:18 (RSV)

*For the Lord GOD does nothing
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets
Amos 3:7 (ESV)*

²⁹ *“Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.*
Acts 2:29-31 (RSV)

You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;
1 Peter 1:23 (RSV)

You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.
Deuteronomy 4:2(RSV)

¹⁸ *I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.*
Revelation 22:18-19 (NASB)

³¹ *And taking the twelve, he said to them, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon; ³³ they will scourge him and kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”*

Luke 18:31-33 (RSV)

For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was reckoned with transgressors'; for what is written about me has its fulfilment.'

Luke 22:37 (RSV)

Why are so few people willing to take the Bible literally and to simply believe what it says?

'*Hermeneutics*' is defined as the art or science of interpretation, especially of Scripture. So, we all need to decide how we are going to interpret the Bible, i.e. with what method or approach. The primary question in that regard is whether we believe the Bible should ordinarily be taken

- a) literally or
- b) figuratively/symbolically/metaphorically/allegorically.

My own position is that our *starting point* when interpreting the Bible is that we should *generally* take it literally. However, most people do not take the Bible literally and do not believe that it really means what it says. Instead, for one reason or another, they substitute some other meaning in place of the plain words that the Bible uses.

In each case, whatever their individual reasons may be, they have got the problem (and the sin) of unbelief. That is they are unwilling, or perhaps unable, to believe what God's Word says. For simplicity, we could separate this problem into three main schools of thought, all of which create this handicap of unbelief and lead to faulty interpretation. We shall examine each of them separately in this chapter.

What they all have in common is that they *don't* have it as their starting point that the plain words of the Bible are generally to be taken as literal fact. However, they tend to adopt that misguided approach for different reasons and there are different parts of the Bible that they each particularly disbelieve or misinterpret.

So, let's look at the three main errors that people make in approaching the Bible, which cause them not to believe it at all, or to take it less literally than they should. At the risk of over-simplifying matters, we could say that most of the people who *don't* believe the Bible, or who don't take accept that it means exactly what it says, fall into one or more of the following broad groups:

- a) ***liberals*** – these tend to reject what the Bible says about social, moral or ethical issues and adopt more permissive views of their own instead. Often these are just the current fashions and views of the secular world which they have absorbed. They also tend to reject parts of the Gospel and don't like things such as sin, judgment and Hell. They also tend to object to the idea of Jesus being *the* only way to salvation and the claims that the Bible makes to being the exclusive truth.
- b) ***sceptics*** – these tend not to believe that the Bible is true, or are not willing to take it literally, in areas which involve the miraculous or the supernatural. Thus they reject, or doubt, what the Bible says about creation, the flood, Noah, angels, demons, and the miracles of Moses, Elijah, Elisha and even Jesus. They also tend not to believe in the spiritual gifts, or they at least deny that spiritual gifts are still in operation and meant to be used today.
- c) ***allegorists*** – these don't believe that the prophecies in the Bible are meant to be taken literally. They believe instead that the prophecies are 'allegorical', or 'symbolic', representing some deeper, hidden meaning, rather than accepting the plain words used.

I have presented these three broad points of view as if they were entirely separate, stand-alone errors. However, the reality is that they actually often overlap and many people make two, or even all three, of these mistakes simultaneously. Actually, the Bible is entirely true and factual and is *generally* meant to be taken literally, whether it is dealing with salvation or with moral, historical, supernatural or prophetic issues.

Therefore, most of the time the Bible is meant to be taken completely literally. It means exactly what it says and says exactly what it means. It sets out what God is telling us on a range of social or moral issues and is very clear, even if we don't like what it says. It also tells us about God's supernatural power and miracles. Finally, it means exactly what it says about what happened historically, and also what will happen in the future.

In all of these areas it is generally meant to be taken literally. At least as our starting point, we are supposed to read the Bible in the same way as we would read a text book, letter or newspaper. We should generally take it at face value and assume that the apparent meaning is the intended meaning, as we do when we read almost everything else.

Once we have understood and accepted the plain, literal meaning of the words used and the factual nature of the events described, whether past or future, we can then go further. We can then be entirely open to look for and accept a number of different layers of meaning and content which are *in addition to* the plain, literal meaning.

We find a lot of '*typology*' in the Bible, whereby one literal, historical event or person is a '*type*' of some later or future event or person. There are patterns in the events described in the Bible and these patterns are very useful. However, they can never be the basis for any doctrine, because any doctrine must be based upon clear words that are plainly stated in the Bible. Nevertheless, such things can help to illustrate and explain doctrines that we already know about.

So, it is right to engage in what the Jewish people call '*midrash*' and to be alert to see types, patterns and figures wherever they arise in the Bible. But they have to be seen alongside, or *in addition to*, the plain, literal facts of the events or people described. The figurative or typological aspects of the Bible do not negate or contradict the plain, literal truth of what the Bible says. Those patterns and types etc are themselves based upon the underlying facts and they fully accept their literalness and historicity.

Before we enlarge on the right way of interpreting the Bible, let us examine each of these three erroneous schools of thought more closely and see why liberals, sceptics and allegorists are all so mistaken and why they each fail to take the Bible as literal truth. We shall look at how easily we can get into a mess if we use any of these wrong approaches and therefore end up not believing what is said, or at least not taking it literally enough.

A. The 'liberal' view of Scripture - not accepting what God's Word says on a wide range of points, but especially about the nature of the Gospel and various social or moral issues.

A liberal tends to hold views on social or moral issues which have more to do with how the world thinks than with what the Bible says. For example, this would include things like marriage, divorce, sexual ethics, homosexuality, gender confusion, the role of women in the church and in the family, female elders, female ministers, etc. They tend not to like what the Bible says about sin and they prefer instead to accept whatever standards, values or practices the secular world currently endorses.

Liberals usually also object to many aspects of the Gospel. For example, they don't like the idea of God's judgment, Hell or the Lake of Fire. Therefore they tend either to ignore or reject these concepts or else they water them down. They particularly tend to object to the idea that Jesus is the only way to be saved. They prefer instead to believe that there are *other ways* to be saved, or even that we are *all* saved, regardless of whether we believe or not.

In short, liberals tend to pick and choose what they like and dislike about what God says. Then, if God's view offends them, or if they 'disagree' with it, they feel free to substitute their own view instead. Sometimes a person will be open enough to say explicitly that they do not accept what the Bible says on a certain issue, and state openly that they have substituted their own view in its place.

However, this editing or filtering process is more often done covertly, and even unconsciously. One thing I have noticed is that very few liberals ever call themselves liberal. At any rate, I have never heard anybody do so. Many are not even consciously aware that they have these features, or think in these ways. As with most other mind-sets, it is largely unconscious and owes much to the way they were taught to think by others and what they have seen others doing.

Therefore, as we saw earlier, with the influence of Catholic thinking, this problem of liberal thinking may be affecting you more than you realise. A liberal-minded person does not feel obligated to accept what the Bible says. He therefore 'edits' the Bible as he reads it. If God says something to which he objects, then he simply ignores it, replaces it with his own view, or redefines it to match his own opinions.

In this way a liberal can take what God says about virtually any issue and reject it, alter it, or ignore it, as he sees fit. Moreover, this seems so natural to him that he can easily do it without ever consciously realizing that he is doing so. A liberal comes to the Bible as its critic or judge, to decide whether he agrees with it. Instead he should come to it humbly, like a child, wanting to understand and obey it.

Actually, when one stops to think, one has to accept that the very idea of '*disagreeing*' with God is absurd. We are effectively saying that God is making a mistake and that we are correcting Him. Therefore not many of us would be brash enough to say openly that we disagree with Him. We know that we would sound foolish if we said it explicitly.

It is much easier just to convince oneself, whenever God is saying something unpopular or politically incorrect, that He doesn't really mean what He is saying. Or, we can say that He was speaking only to the people of 2000 years ago, not to our '*more advanced*' society. In each of these ways multitudes of people justify themselves in ignoring, redefining or rejecting what God says.

However, they usually do these things without ever coming clean and admitting it openly to themselves, and to others. If you do not have what the Bible calls '*the love of the truth,*' then such editing, whether conscious or unconscious, will come very easily to you. It will not jar with your conscience.

When a person does have the love of the truth they value truth *for itself*. Therefore they are willing to accept it, whatever it may be, even where the truth brings them inconvenience, cost, unpopularity, or danger. They feel they have no alternative but to do so, because they recognize the obvious fact that if a thing is true then it is true. If so, it must be accepted, regardless of the consequences or implications of believing it.

A person who has the love of the truth simply wants to find out what God really says, *whatever that may be*. Their intention is then to *get into line* with it, wherever that takes them and whatever the implications may be. A person who does not have the love of the truth will feel free to disagree with or ignore God's Word whenever it cuts across their own views. It may be that in some ways you have done this.

Or, perhaps you have bowed to peer pressure and the influence of others who take that '*flexible*' approach to dealing with God's Word. If so, be honest with yourself and openly acknowledge what you are doing. Don't disguise it or call it by any other name. Admit openly to yourself that you are ignoring or misusing God's Word and then repent of it. If you are unsure whether you do any of these things, then ask God to reveal it to you, wherever it applies.

Make a decision that, from today onwards, you will accept and obey *whatever God says* on any issue, however irksome that may be to you, or however unpopular it may make you. It is finding the truth that matters, not justifying our own opinions. If we do not eliminate this problem of liberal thinking, where we sit in judgement on God's Word and pick and choose which parts of it we will and won't believe, then we will be crippled in our walk with the Lord. We will be unable to do His will, or even to read His Word properly.

B. The sceptical or 'higher critical' view of Scripture – promoting doubt and unbelief about miracles and the supernatural in general, and not accepting the book of Genesis in particular

The *sceptical* or '*higher critical*' approach to Scripture is closely linked to the liberal view. There is an equal unwillingness to accept that God's Word is true and that it is generally meant to be taken literally. Yet it is also distinct from the liberal approach. Its main emphasis is on denying or doubting anything which involves God's *miraculous or supernatural* power.

Therefore, those who approach the Bible this way will be plagued with unbelief wherever the Bible speaks of miraculous or supernatural events. In particular, they will be unable, or unwilling, to believe in the Genesis account of the creation of the universe in six literal days, the fall of Adam and Eve, the worldwide flood and Noah's Ark. Indeed, they tend to reject all of the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

They will also tend to reject or down-play all miracles, wherever they occur throughout the Bible, even those that Jesus performed Himself. Somehow they consider God incapable of doing these things. Or, even if they accept that in theory He *could* perform miracles, they prefer to believe that He didn't *actually do so*.

This group of people also tend to reject the supernatural in general, whatever form it might take. They have no place for it and either don't believe in it or don't take it seriously. So their attitude is to insist that everything that happens has a purely natural explanation and is the result of ordinary, physical factors. For them, the supernatural has no part to play in anything that happens, or at least not in anything that happens today, or to them, or to people they know.

Some sceptics are less absolute than that. They may be willing to accept the supernatural *in theory*, but they tend not to accept it *in practice*. So, they can be got to accept that there have been miracles, or that demons have influenced people's lives, but only if you are referring to:

- a) *The past*, not the present. So miracles and healings can occur in the first century, but not in the twenty first.
- b) *Somewhere else*, never their own locality. So people may, perhaps, be miraculously healed in Africa, but not where they live.
- c) *Someone else*, never themselves or anybody they know. So, someone else might be affected by a demon, but never themselves.

Therefore there are many gradations and variations of this sceptical approach. At the extreme end there is the outright sceptic, or so called 'rationalist'. That is something of a misnomer because, although they give themselves that self-aggrandizing name, their thinking is not actually rational at all. That is because they fail to take account of God's supernatural power, which is just as real as anything else in this universe, if not more so.

At their most extreme, they reject every notion of the supernatural for anybody, in any place, and at any time. Others are less dogmatic, but the net effect is broadly the same, even for them. Whatever

level they may be at, the bottom line is that they never seem to be willing to accept that any miracle can happen *to them* or that God or an angel can speak to them today, or that a demon can deceive or afflict them.

At any rate, none of those things ever seem to be accepted as happening now, or here, or to them, or to anybody they know. So, although the less extreme skeptics may be willing to concede that supernatural things could occur, to somebody else, somewhere else, or at some time in the past, it makes very little practical difference. The point is that in their own day to day lives, the supernatural is not accepted or recognized. It is effectively ruled out as having any part to play.

The miraculous is easy for God, as it is all part of His job description

I have never felt able to identify with other people's skepticism. It always seemed to me, even from an early age, that if God is God, then He can do anything. So, I saw nothing difficult about Him creating the universe instantaneously, just by speaking it into existence. Why should that be any problem at all for God?

The very term '*God*' means that He is, by definition, all-powerful and all-knowing. Therefore He is easily capable of suspending the rules of science and doing anything at all. After all, it was He who formulated all of the rules of science in the first place. Apostle Paul made a similar point to this when he was put on trial before King Agrippa:

***Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?
Acts 26:8 (RSV)***

So, I have always had the opposite difficulty to the one that sceptics struggle with. I have always struggled to see why they struggle to see. The miraculous and the supernatural, including instantaneous creation, are what God specializes in. So, if the god that you believe in is incapable of such things, then what kind of god is he? He sounds rather small and unimpressive.

Whoever he may be, he cannot be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Indeed, your god would be failing to satisfy the very terms of God's 'job description'. That requires, as a minimum, that He be omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all knowing). So, if your god doesn't have these attributes then he isn't the real God. If so, why bother dealing with him at all?

The apostle Peter evidently had no difficulty believing that miracles and supernatural events really occur. We know that because in his second letter he refers to the incident in the book of Numbers where Balaam, the carnal and corrupt prophet, was prevented from cursing the people of Israel. The donkey upon which he was riding saw the angel of the LORD (i.e. Jesus in a bodily pre-appearance) and refused to take Balaam any further.

Then, when Balaam came over to beat the donkey it spoke to him with a human voice. That is clearly a miracle, by anybody's standards. Yet Peter accepted it as historical fact, i.e. that it really happened, exactly as the book of Numbers says. He did not explain any of it away as symbolic or as flowery language. He took it all absolutely literally and seriously and we should all do exactly the same as him:

¹⁵ Forsaking the right way they have gone astray; they have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Be'or, who loved gain from wrongdoing, ¹⁶ but was rebuked for his own transgression; a dumb ass spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

Peter 2:15-16 (RSV)

Often a person's skepticism arises out of their conceit, as they imagine themselves to be "too sophisticated" to believe in the supernatural

Those who take a skeptical approach to the Bible tend to view themselves as too sophisticated for 'Sunday school stories'. There is a large amount of arrogance in that. However, it is not all down to pride or a feeling of superiority. It is also the result of getting into the habit of cynicism. However, that mind set only seems to affect them when it comes to the Bible.

They adopt very different standards of appraisal when it comes to believing, or not believing, other things. Skeptics might therefore refuse to accept apostle Paul's word, or even Jesus' word, as being authoritative. Yet they can be remarkably ready to believe, without question, anything they read in newspapers or that they see on the internet or the TV.

One particularly sees this gullibility in the way they accept without question the biased and hostile things that are said about Israel. Most media reporting about Israel consists of lies and misinformation. So, whereas God tells us to believe His Word and to question everything else, a skeptic tends to do the opposite.

They will not accept what the *Bible* says about Israel, but they will believe anything which the *media* says. The BBC, like almost all of the world's media, is deeply hostile to Israel. It consistently presents unbalanced and distorted reports and refuses to report anything that is supportive of Israel or critical of the Arabs or Palestinians. That bias is plain enough to be seen by anybody who loves the truth, but it is invisible to those who don't.

The same applies with the creation -v- evolution debate, another topic about which most of the media is willfully blind. Skeptics refuse to accept the fact that the universe, and everything in it, has been designed on purpose by someone. The fact that there must have been a Creator is self-evident to any five year old child, but not to them. Skeptics will put aside all logic when listening to the arguments for evolution and ignore everything that their eyes tell them about the immense complexity, beauty and orderliness of nature.

They do so because they are not looking for the real truth, but only for confirmation of what they have already decided they *want* to believe. By the way, it is not merely my personal view that it is self-evident that God created the whole world. God Himself says that it is obvious, such that any person who doesn't see that and believe it is a *fool*. I hasten to add that that is not what I say. It is what God says:

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

Romans 1:19-23 (RSV)

Indeed, the book of Job goes even further. We are told that even the animals, birds and fish know what God has done and could teach us about it if we asked them:

*⁷ "But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;*

*⁸ or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,
or let the fish in the sea inform you.*

*⁹ Which of all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?*

Job 12:7-9 (NIV)

What happens if we don't believe in creation and don't take Genesis chapters 1-11 literally?

Chapters 1-11 of Genesis deal with enormously important events in world history such as creation, the fall of Adam and Eve, the worldwide flood, and the subsequent repopulating of the world, leading to the forming of separate nations and languages at the time of the tower of Babel. When we look at the widespread refusal of our society to believe in events such as these, we are also discussing people who purport to be Christians, not just outright unbelievers.

Skepticism and all other forms of unbelief have spread right into the heart of the churches, not just the world outside. That is the scale of the problem. We are looking at how little is believed, even by people who say they are part of the Church, and even by church leaders. In fact, many leaders are more skeptical and unbelieving than their congregations are. That is probably due to the harm done to them in their days at Bible College or seminary, many of which tend to spread unbelief like a virus.

Countless young men have gone off as sincere believers to study at such places but come out as hardened liberals and skeptics with major unbelief issues. That is why seminaries are often referred to as *'theological cemeteries'*. Those which take a skeptical approach generally reject all of Genesis chapters 1-11. They justify themselves in that stance by saying that these chapters are not meant to be taken literally, but only symbolically.

Thus, rather than accepting that God created the whole universe in six literal days, as He says He did, they feel entitled to contradict Him and say that it actually took place over *"billions of years"*. Likewise, instead of accepting that there was a worldwide flood, they say it was just a *local* flood in the area of Iraq, or that it never really occurred at all. The Genesis account is, therefore, reduced to the status of myths and fables.

The whole Bible is undermined if we don't take the book of Genesis literally

Until Charles Darwin published his famous book, *'The Origin of Species,'* in 1859, virtually everybody, whatever their background, believed that God created the world. They did so because it is obvious that it was created, due to its order and complexity. Moreover, they also believed that God created it in six literal 24 hour days, as the book of Genesis says. However, Charles Darwin's book struck a chord, especially with those who were already inclined to have a more skeptical frame of mind.

Therefore evolution slowly began to be accepted, over a period of several decades, in place of the biblical account. Initially this was mainly amongst non-Christians but later it spread into the churches as well. Nevertheless, by the middle of the twentieth century, the theory of evolution had become accepted by very large numbers of Christians, especially liberals and skeptics, but also by many allegorists.

Amongst non-Christians, the theory of evolution was welcomed even more uncritically. It seemed to provide a basis for removing God from the picture entirely and for convincing themselves that the world came into being entirely of its own accord, without any Creator. That conclusion was felt to be a very convenient one, because getting rid of God also removes all accountability.

If there is no God, then we do not need to care what He might think about us, or whether He might judge us and punish us. The very concept of us being answerable to someone higher than ourselves is objectionable to many people. So, the chance to remove God altogether and dispense with all judgment and accountability made evolution even more attractive. Indeed, for many people, it is its main attraction.

However, even amongst Christians, the theory of evolution has come to be widely accepted. Having been told it so often at school and in the media, many assume that the theory must surely have been proved by now and that it has acquired the status of fact. Therefore they feel obliged to make a place for it in their theology.

Actually, the theory of evolution has not been proved at all, nor come anywhere to being proved. As theories go, it is remarkably thin and full of holes. It has never even been effectively argued, let alone proved. It has absolutely nothing going for it and there has never been any credible evidence put forward to support it. At any rate, no scientist would be willing to accept any other theory based on evidence as poor as that which is put forward for evolution.

Actually, 'evidence' is too grand a word to use to describe the pathetically feeble things said in support of evolution. It is not evidence. Neither is it conducted in accordance with the ordinary scientific method, which is used in every field of real science. The theory of evolution is just a set of speculative ideas which are not based on facts but mere guess work and surmising. Indeed, the things they say fly in the face of the real science, rather than being supported by it.

Every argument for evolution that I have ever heard has been inadequate. The reasoning its supporters adopt is circular at best. They also reply to all questions about how creatures can change from one species to another (which is impossible) by simply reciting their favourite phrase. That is they say "*Yes, but over millions of years.....*"

It is assumed that the passage of a very long period of time, by itself, makes everything possible. But an impossible thing does not become possible merely by virtue of the passage of time, however protracted, not even "*over millions of years*", or billions for that matter. If anybody was to try to justify any other scientific theory, or get a drug licensed for use, with the pitiful amount of evidence that has been put forward for evolution, they would be laughed at.

However, there is an unspoken convention amongst the supporters of evolution whereby it is agreed not to ask any awkward questions about it and not to allow anybody else to do so either. Therefore, in the media, those who don't accept evolution are given little or no air time. Nevertheless, despite the weakness of the theory, and the absence of any evidence for it, evolution was an idea whose time had come.

Most of its supporters never really examined it. Evidence was not felt to be necessary. They felt they just had to accept it because others were accepting it. Today we are told so frequently that evolution is "*proven scientific fact*" that many of us passively assume that it must be so and ask no further questions. This has meant that even within many churches, the account of creation in the Bible has been pushed aside.

A lot of Christians are actually afraid to say that they believe in creation, even to other Christians, in case they might look foolish for believing it. Instead of rejecting the Bible's account outright, many Christians felt more comfortable arguing that what the Bible said about God creating the universe in six days was just "*poetic language*".

Thus, allegorical thinking, which had previously been directed mainly towards the prophetic parts of the Bible, (see below) was put to wider use to help explain away the Genesis account as well. There are all sorts of variations and combinations of views. Many people who take an allegorical approach to prophecy would not doubt the Genesis account or the miracles, though a lot of them might doubt the supernatural generally, as skeptics do.

Many people from a Reformed background adopt a confused and contradictory stance. Some take the creation account literally, but don't believe in the Flood. Most of them don't take Bible prophecies literally. Others from Reformed churches don't take *any* of these things literally. Some will accept

the biblical accounts of miracles but refuse to believe that any miracles could occur *today*, in particular, most of them don't believe that spiritual gifts are still in operation.

However, when people refuse to believe in the miracles, whether past or present day, most are doing so because of their *skeptical* mind-set, not due to taking the *allegorical* approach. Nevertheless, for our purposes, when looking at Genesis 1-11, we shall combine these three schools of thought together. Ultimately, if a man ceases to take the Bible literally, or to see it as fact, then he is in unbelief and is mishandling the Scriptures. That is so whether he does it because he is a liberal, a skeptic, an allegorist, or all three combined.

Facts and doctrines which are undermined by not believing Genesis chapters 1-11

The following key facts or doctrines are undermined if we do not take Genesis chapters 1-11 literally:

- a) that God created the Earth and the universe.
- b) that he did so in six literal days.
- c) that this culminated in God creating Adam and Eve as fully formed, mature adults on day six.
- d) that they were created sinless and perfect with no sin nature.
- e) that they fell into sin by their own free choice.
- f) that their sin meant they died spiritually, acquired a sin nature and began, from that moment, to die physically.
- g) that all their descendants inherited a sin nature from them and, in due course, became sinners themselves, who must likewise die, both physically and spiritually. This is the position for everybody who has ever lived, including ourselves.
- h) that the evil of mankind became so intense, and so widespread, that God chose (about 1600 years after the Creation) to wipe out all life on earth, except for those who were saved in the Ark that Noah built.
- i) that God flooded the whole planet, also causing massive geological changes in the process and forming the things we now see, such as fossils, rock strata, oil, gas, and other metal or mineral deposits. The Flood also involved the movement of the continents and the formation of separate land masses and islands. In fact, all such things are actually *explained by* the Flood rather than being obstacles to our believing in it.
- j) that prior to Adam and Eve there was no death, not even for animals. Adam and Eve were originally vegetarians, as were all the animals, even the ones we now know as carnivores. (This contradicts one of the key elements of evolutionary thinking. They say that there were millions of years prior to Adam and Eve, assuming they are willing to believe this couple ever existed at all. During those ages of time, according to them, countless people and animals supposedly lived and died while 'evolving' into us.)
- k) that there was a Tower of Babel and a wicked man called Nimrod who founded what came to be known as *Babylon*, which later became a major theme throughout the whole Bible. He sought to be the first world ruler and was thus a type, or forerunner, of the future antichrist.
- l) that God frustrated Nimrod's plans by creating a multitude of languages and dividing the world into separate nations. Until this point the whole world spoke one language (probably Hebrew).

From the time of the Tower of Babel onwards, God wanted nations to be separate and distinct from each other. That fact has great relevance to the nations of Europe today. They are being joined together in a Federal Union with the aim of becoming one single super-state. In addition to that, the whole world is moving towards the formation of a one-world Government, of the type sought for unsuccessfully by Nimrod, but which *the* antichrist will finally achieve.

So, one can see, even from this brief list, that the whole of the rest of Scripture depends on Genesis chapters 1-11 being literally true. If the biblical account is not true, such that Adam and Eve didn't sin, and didn't pass on their sin nature to us, then it would follow that we do not have a sin nature. But we do, and that matters, because it puts us on a collision course with God and in line for His judgment.

More importantly, if we don't believe Genesis 1-11 about how our sin problem began, then why should we believe anything else that the Bible says? For example why believe what the Bible says about how our sin problem can be dealt with by Jesus' death and resurrection? Above all, we should be guided by how Jesus handled the Bible. You will notice that He always accepted it at face value and took it literally.

Examples of occasions where Jesus took the Bible completely literally

God told Noah to build a very large ship. It took him about 100 years. It was not a little boat with a giraffe's head sticking out of the top as it is portrayed so inaccurately in the pictures in most children's books. On the contrary, until the late nineteenth century (AD) with the advent of modern metal ships, nobody had ever built a ship as big as the Ark. So, that is the right way to picture it.

God told Noah to build it so that he and his family, and breeding pairs of all the animals, could survive the worldwide flood that was coming. By the way, God *sent* all the animals and creatures to the Ark. Noah didn't have to go out and catch them, or even herd them together, as some people assume.

Noah was a real man who existed in history. He was born in approximately the year 2948 BC. Many people, even in churches, now assume the account of the Flood to be a mere children's story or a fable. But Jesus didn't. He took it completely seriously. These are His own words:

²⁶"And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: ²⁷they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

Luke 17:26-27 (NASB)

Jesus ought to know whether the worldwide Flood really happened and whether Noah really built the Ark. Jesus was alive and saw it all happen at the time. He was an eye-witness. He therefore knows for certain whether or not it is true. So, the fact that Jesus spoke of the Flood in such literal terms, and accepted it without any reservation as an historical event, is a profoundly important indicator for us.

Now look at how Jesus also took completely literally the account in the book of Genesis of the destruction of the town of Sodom and the rescue of Abraham's nephew, Lot and his family:

²⁸"It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; ²⁹but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. ³⁰"It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.

Luke 17:28-30 (NASB)

Jesus is saying that the past judgment by the Flood, and then the fiery judgment on the town of Sodom, were real historical events and so will be the future judgment of this world. Therefore He is warning us to take that future judgment seriously and not to be like Lot's wife. She perished because she looked back.

She hankered after the world as it was and was reluctant to leave Sodom, despite what the angels had said about the judgment that was coming on the city. Note again that Jesus viewed Lot's wife as a literal person who really lived, not as a myth or fable. Moreover, He wasn't embarrassed to say so:

³²"Remember Lot's wife. ³³"Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.

Luke 17:32-33 (NASB)

On another occasion Jesus was speaking about the prophet Jonah. He was swallowed by a huge fish, having already drowned and died under the water. Jonah's dead body was brought to the shore by that huge fish and God then brought him back to life, so that he could preach to the people of Nineveh and urge them to repent. Note again how Jesus takes the account of Jonah's experience completely literally. He says nothing to doubt or contradict any part of it:

²⁹As the crowds were increasing, He began to say, "This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah. ³⁰"For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.

Luke 11:29-30 (NASB)

The "sign of Jonah" to which Jesus refers is the fact that Jonah was raised from the dead. Jesus meant that He Himself, like Jonah, would be raised from the dead. Likewise, Jesus also takes literally the account of how the Queen of the South (the Queen of Sheba) came to visit King Solomon. Some people today doubt whether she really existed, but Jesus views her as a real historical figure:

³¹"The Queen of the South will rise up with the men of this generation at the judgment and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. ³²"The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Luke 11:31-32 (NASB)

Jesus took *all* the historical facts of the Old Testament literally. There is no example of Him ever doing otherwise. That ought to be conclusive, even by itself. We should therefore do exactly the same as Jesus did when the Bible speaks about past events.

If Genesis chapters 1-11 are not literally true, then why should we believe anything else in the rest of the Bible?

If we don't believe in Genesis 1-11, then we undermine the whole of the rest of the Bible too. If the accounts of creation and of the lives of Adam, Noah etc are not literally true and factual, then why did Jesus believe in them and speak of them all as fact? If they are not real, then it must follow that Jesus was either mistaken or lying. If so, He would not be God and we ought not to listen to Him at all.

If evolution is true, and these events described in Genesis 1-11 really are just fables and myths, then what confidence can we have in Jesus, or the apostles? How can we believe *any* of what they say about sin, judgment, Hell, the Lake of Fire, salvation, the future fulfilment of Bible prophecy and so on? Everything else in the Bible becomes unreliable if we can't trust the book of Genesis.

Many people in churches who claim to be Christians do not believe in miracles either. Some are embarrassed by anything supernatural and they ignore it or try to explain it all away. The Bible commentary writer, the late William Barclay, was a classic example of that. In many ways he was sincere and he did have some valuable insights into the Bible. However, his faith was undermined by his background, and by the skeptics and so called 'higher critics' who had taught him.

As a result, he could not bring himself to believe in the miracles, not even those performed by Jesus Himself. He argued, for example, that when Jesus fed the 5000 it was not a miracle at all. Barclay's theory was that the people were inspired, or ashamed, by the boy's example in offering to share his lunch with the crowd.

Therefore he believed that all the other people simply got out their own packed lunches, which they had been hiding, and shared them with each other. So, William Barclay taught that the 'miracle' of Jesus feeding the multitude was actually just an allegorical account of the 'real' miracle, which was how He taught the people to share. That is so lame it is pathetic. Yet, many believe it, because they have been taught, by word and by example, not to believe in miracles, mainly due to the unbelief of their leaders.

One is reminded also of the apocryphal story of a liberal/sceptical theologian. He was preaching about Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea, to enable the people of Israel to walk across the dry sea bed to escape from the pursuing Egyptian army. He explained that it was not really a 'sea' as such, but merely a reed bed, with shallow water, about two feet deep.

Therefore, he said, the Israelites were able to 'paddle' across it, and that it should not really be called the Red Sea at all, but the 'Reed' Sea. As he said this, an elderly black man in the congregation cried out "*Praise the Lord. What a miracle!*" The liberal/skeptical preacher looked at him patronizingly and said "*Didn't you hear me? I said that the water was only two feet deep.*"

The elderly black man replied "*Yes - praise the LORD! What a miracle that God was able to drown the whole Egyptian army in two feet of water*". The story may be apocryphal, but it illustrates how silly it is to try to explain away the miraculous or the supernatural. All you do is create problems for yourself elsewhere.

Ultimately, you have to make your choice and decide whether you are going to believe God's Word or not. However, if you choose not to do so then, like the sceptical preacher above, you will create far more problems for yourself than you solve.

C. The allegorical view of Scripture - not accepting that the prophecies in the Bible are meant to be taken literally

As we saw earlier, our English word '*hermeneutics*' means the approach we take to interpreting the Bible. Ordinarily, we don't find this very difficult when reading every other kind of literature. We use our common sense and it is usually fairly obvious how a text book, business letter, contract or any other document, should be understood.

However, when it comes to the Bible, many of us operate without any of that common sense, especially with prophecy. A number of misguided methods of interpretation have been developed. Each of these are based on not taking the Bible at face value, and instead assuming that in some way it is being symbolic and means something other than what it says.

It is a disastrously mistaken approach and leads to many errors. Sadly, it is the method now used by most churches in the Western world. If the plain words of, the Bible say "ABC", the allegorical method or approach urges you to interpret it as actually meaning "XYZ" instead. This secondary

meaning which is assumed to be there, hidden beneath the surface, is usually something obscure and indirect which you would never think of for yourself unless someone told you that it meant that.

People who attend churches which take the allegorical approach are taught not to rely on the ordinary, plain meaning of the words of the Bible. Instead they are told to seek a “deeper underlying meaning” that some teacher says those words have. He then becomes the Bible’s interpreter, rather than the Bible speaking for itself. On that basis, without him and his colleagues to tell us what the allegories mean, the Bible cannot be understood at all.

The allegorical approach would be fine if the Bible ever *told* us to understand it that way, but the point is that it doesn’t. Likewise, it would be less of a problem if there was only one consistent way of interpreting what the supposed symbols mean, as opposed to the countless variations which people have dreamed up.

Some very specific prophecies about the city of Tyre, which were literally fulfilled

One of the strongest arguments in support of the plain/literal interpretation of prophecy is the fact that all of the prophecies that have been fulfilled so far have been fulfilled literally, with real, tangible events. For example, let’s look at some prophecies by Zechariah and Ezekiel concerning Tyre, the proud, wealthy, principal city of Phoenicia.

It was a coastal city and was in two parts. The largest section was on the mainland, but there was also another, smaller part of the city which was on an island, half a mile out to sea. Let’s look first at what Zechariah prophesied about Tyre:

*³ For Tyre built herself a fortress
And piled up silver like dust,
And gold like the mire of the streets.
⁴ Behold, the Lord will dispossess her
And cast her wealth into the sea;
And she will be consumed with fire.
Zechariah 9:3-4 (NASB)*

Now let's look at a much more detailed prophecy from the book of Ezekiel. The people of Tyre had been taking pleasure in the misfortunes and sufferings of Israel. Their lack of compassion grieved God, which is a lesson to us not to do as they did. As a punishment for their callous attitude towards His chosen people, God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel in 586 BC. He said that Tyre was going to experience the following specific judgments from God:

- a) Nations (plural) will come and destroy Tyre. The King of the first of these nations is actually named, i.e. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.
- b) King Nebuchadnezzar will break down the walls and towers of Tyre
- c) The debris will be scraped away, so as to make Tyre a bare rock.
- d) The stones and timber will be thrown into the sea.
- e) Tyre will cease to be a city and will be uninhabited.
- f) It will never be rebuilt.
- g) It will become a place where fishermen spread their nets (to dry them).

Now consider verses 1-14 below and pick out each aspect of Ezekiel's prophecy:

¹ Now in the eleventh year, on the first of the month, the word of the LORD came to me saying, ² "Son of man, because Tyre has said concerning Jerusalem, 'Aha, the gateway of the peoples is broken; it has opened to me. I shall be filled, now that she is laid waste,' ³ therefore thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I am against you, O Tyre, and I will bring up many nations against you, as the sea brings up its waves. ⁴ They will destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers; and I will scrape her debris from her and make her a bare rock. ⁵ She will be a place for the spreading of nets in the midst of the sea, for I have spoken,' declares the Lord GOD, 'and she will become spoil for the nations. ⁶ Also her daughters who are on the mainland will be slain by the sword, and they will know that I am the LORD.'"

⁷ For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will bring upon Tyre from the north Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, king of kings, with horses, chariots, cavalry and a great army. ⁸ He will slay your daughters on the mainland with the sword; and he will make siege walls against you, cast up a ramp against you and raise up a large shield against you. ⁹ The blow of his battering rams he will direct against your walls, and with his axes he will break down your towers. ¹⁰ Because of the multitude of his horses, the dust raised by them will cover you; your walls will shake at the noise of cavalry and wagons and chariots when he enters your gates as men enter a city that is breached.

¹¹ With the hoofs of his horses he will trample all your streets. He will slay your people with the sword; and your strong pillars will come down to the ground. ¹² Also they will make a spoil of your riches and a prey of your merchandise, break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses, and throw your stones and your timbers and your debris into the water. ¹³ So I will silence the sound of your songs, and the sound of your harps will be heard no more. ¹⁴ I will make you a bare rock; you will be a place for the spreading of nets. You will be built no more, for I the LORD have spoken," declares the Lord GOD.

Ezekiel 26:1-14 (NASB)

What Zechariah said above about Tyre, plus all of the points (a) - (g) that were prophesied by Ezekiel, were fulfilled literally and exactly, not just metaphorically. To begin with, the part of the city that was on the mainland was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. He laid siege to it for 13 years until 573 BC. He tore down the land-based part of the city, but did not destroy the rest of it, which was on the island.

However, 254 years later in 332 BC when Alexander the Great was passing by, conquering the known world, the people of Tyre resisted him. Instead of surrendering, they all took shelter on the small island a short distance out to sea. Nebuchadnezzar had never managed to reach that little island all those years before when he had attacked Tyre. The people of Tyre had used it on other occasions in the past as a place to escape to.

Therefore they thought they would be safe there from Alexander's attack, as their ancestors had been with previous attacks. But they were wrong. God arranged for the remainder of the prophecies to be fulfilled by Alexander, who was a pagan. So, without having any idea that he was fulfilling a prophecy, and knowing nothing of the Hebrew Scriptures, he got his armies to take the rubble and timber of the ruined city of Tyre and throw it all into the sea.

It was exactly as both Zechariah and Ezekiel had prophesied. In that way he built a half-mile long causeway, all the way out to the offshore island. He used all the rubble and debris of Tyre for this purpose, even the dust! How amazing is that? If we had time, we could give many more such examples, from the other prophets, where their various prophecies are literally and exactly fulfilled, just as these were.

The Bible does sometimes use figures of speech, but they are not allegories. They just need to be understood correctly and then taken literally in terms of what they actually mean

The Bible, like any book, does sometimes use figures of speech and colourful, poetic phrases. There can be no doubt about that, because Jesus says so Himself:

²⁵“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.

John 16:25 (ESV)

However, even when figures of speech are used, they still mean exactly what the figure of speech is intended to convey. So, when Jesus says "*I am the vine; you are the branches*" He simply means that He is the source of our life and power and that we must be attached to Him and draw our strength and wisdom from Him, or else we can do nothing.

It's not complicated. Even an unsophisticated person can recognise it as a helpful figure of speech. It doesn't need to be "de-coded". So, even on those occasions when the Bible uses such vivid expressions or poetic phrases the meaning is still easy to see. However, it is only easy to see if you are being plain and uncomplicated, and are using your common sense.

If you aren't, then even the simplest statements can be misunderstood. Consider this passage from Isaiah. It contains a figure of speech, but the meaning is plain enough. It refers to the way in which the line of succession of King David, the son of Jesse, will be cut but that in the future David's line will be restored by the Messiah, Jesus:

*³³ Behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the great in height will be hewn down,
and the lofty will be brought low.
³⁴ He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe,
and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.
¹ There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
² And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.*
Isaiah 10:33 – 11:4 (RSV)

This was a prophecy made by Isaiah about how the Messiah would arise like a shoot from the stump of Jesse, i.e. as if the kingly line of Jesse was a tree which had been chopped down. Obviously, that kingly line of Jesse/David isn't a tree and Jesus isn't a shoot, but the metaphor is clear and expresses Isaiah's point very well.

There are also some more difficult figures of speech that are harder to understand, for example the expression "a good eye".

The expression "a good eye" is used by Jesus in Matthew chapter six. Very few versions of the Bible translate it correctly, because it is a Jewish figure of speech, or slang expression, which most English speaking translators have not understood properly. That is probably because they didn't ask a Jewish believer to help them to translate it.

The translators of the New King James Version (NKJV) presumably don't understand the meaning of the phrases, 'good eye' and 'bad eye'. But they have at least been honest enough just to translate them literally, word for word. They appear to have done that rather than try to guess at their real meaning, which has to do with being generous or stingy. They express it as follows:

²² "The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

Matthew 6:22-23 (NKJV)

The question is what does Jesus actually mean by saying: "If your eye is good, or "..... if your eye is bad....."? Over the years I have heard a number of preachers struggle with that passage. They have generally assumed that Jesus was talking about our "spiritual eyesight", or having "clear vision" or "the ability to see things spiritually".

Most Gentiles have never heard of the Jewish figure of speech "a good eye". Therefore that particular phrase makes no sense to them if translated word for word, without any explanatory footnote. Therefore, most translation committees choose to alter or expand it in translation to try to get it to make some kind of sense.

The problem is that they get it wrong, because they simply don't know what the slang expression actually meant. Let's look at a few other examples of the translation of Matthew 6:22-23 which all elaborate upon it wrongly. They each use embroidered phrases along the lines of how "a pure eye lets sunshine into your soul" and about having a "clear eye" or a "healthy eye" etc.

They go wrong because they alter Jesus' words to try to force them to make some kind of sense, rather than just make enquiries with people who understood the Hebrew language and Jewish slang phrases as to what Jesus actually meant. Had they done so they would have discovered that Jesus was not speaking about eyesight at all, but *generosity*.

At any rate, here are some of the attempts to translate the phrase by a number of translators who did not realise that it was a Jewish figure of speech:

²²"Your eye is a lamp for your body. A pure eye lets sunshine into your soul. ²³But an evil eye shuts out the light and plunges you into darkness. If the light you think you have is really darkness, how deep that darkness will be!

Matthew 6:22-23 (New Living Translation)

²² "The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

Matthew 6:22-23 (NASB)

²²"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

Matthew 6:22-23 (ESV)

None of these attempts convey the correct meaning. The phrase '*to have a good eye*' just means to be generous, whereas to '*have a bad eye*' means to be stingy or mean. It's as simple as that. The meaning comes over most clearly in the Jewish New Testament, translated by a Jewish believer, David H Stern.

He keeps the literal, word for word translation, but then helpfully includes the meaning in brackets afterwards. He does so because he knows that most Gentiles have no idea what the meaning of those phrases is:

²²The eye is the lamp of the body. 'So if you have a 'good eye' [that is, if you are generous] your whole body will be full of light; ²³but if you have an 'evil eye' [if you are stingy] your whole body will be full of darkness.

Matthew 6:22-23 (Stern Version)

All we need to do is realise that the phrases 'good eye' and 'bad eye' have to do with being generous or being stingy. Then all the rest of the passage makes sense. Jesus is saying this in the wider context of talking about financial giving and laying up treasures in Heaven. He then goes on to speak of how we cannot serve both God and money, and how we must not be anxious about money and provision etc.

Against that backdrop, it makes perfect sense for Jesus to speak of being generous or stingy and the effect it has on us. The whole passage fits together perfectly once you realise what the figures of speech mean. That example of a translation problem illustrates the fact that where the Bible contains a figure of speech in the original Hebrew or Greek, we just need to find out what that expression actually means in their culture/language.

After that, we must either use some other phrase which conveys the same meaning in English. Or, we could set it out word for word but include a footnote explaining its meaning. Then, from that point on, we should accept the meaning of the expression and believe what it is saying. So, in this example, Jesus intends us to realise that he is not talking about eyesight but generosity or stinginess.

Once we have grasped that, He then wants us to take Him literally, i.e. to believe that the effects of being generous or stingy really will be as He describes them. This point will be dealt with further below when we come to consider right and wrong ways to translate the Bible. We shall examine the differences between the approaches of literal translation, which is done word for word, and '*dynamic equivalency*' which is a looser way of translating.

There are some genuine allegories in the Bible, but when they occur it is usually made very clear that they are allegories

The central belief of those who take the allegorical approach to interpretation is that all, or virtually all, prophecy is assumed to be an enormously long series of allegories. I will freely concede that there are some instances where the Bible does present allegories. Indeed, we shall look at an example of this below, from the book of Ezekiel where the Bible tells us expressly that what is being said is an allegory.

However, the point is that that that is unusual. Therefore, far from giving us any basis for assuming that the rest of the Bible is *generally* meant to be taken as an allegory, this example from Ezekiel suggests the direct opposite. What I mean is that when the allegory is used in Ezekiel we are told so plainly.

That suggests that the rest of the time, unless it is obvious, or where we are explicitly *told* that it is an allegory, then it is *not* intended to be taken as such. That is usually the case. So, allegories are the

exception, not the norm. At any rate, look how on this occasion God uses an allegory to make a vivid but clearly understandable point:

¹ *In the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, the word of the LORD came to me:* ² *"Son of man, write down the name of this day, this very day. The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day.* ³ *And utter an allegory to the rebellious house and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Set on the pot, set it on, pour in water also;* ⁴ *put in it the pieces of flesh, all the good pieces, the thigh and the shoulder; fill it with choice bones.* ⁵ *Take the choicest one of the flock, pile the logs under it; boil its pieces, seethe also its bones in it.* ⁶ *"Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Woe to the bloody city, to the pot whose rust is in it, and whose rust has not gone out of it! Take out of it piece after piece, without making any choice.* ⁷ *For the blood she has shed is still in the midst of her; she put it on the bare rock, she did not pour it upon the ground to cover it with dust.*

⁸ *To rouse my wrath, to take vengeance, I have set on the bare rock the blood she has shed, that it may not be covered.* ⁹ *Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Woe to the bloody city! I also will make the pile great.* ¹⁰ *Heap on the logs, kindle the fire, boil well the flesh, and empty out the broth, and let the bones be burned up.* ¹¹ *Then set it empty upon the coals, that it may become hot, and its copper may burn, that its filthiness may be melted in it, its rust consumed.* ¹² *In vain I have wearied myself; its thick rust does not go out of it by fire.* ¹³ *Its rust is your filthy lewdness. Because I would have cleansed you and you were not cleansed from your filthiness, you shall not be cleansed any more till I have satisfied my fury upon you.* ¹⁴ *I the LORD have spoken; it shall come to pass, I will do it; I will not go back, I will not spare, I will not repent; according to your ways and your doings I will judge you, says the Lord GOD."*

Ezekiel 24:1-14 (RSV)

In the above passage, God tells Ezekiel to present the people of Jerusalem with this allegory (or parable) about a boiling pot. It was intended to symbolize how Jerusalem would be besieged by the king of Babylon and 'boiled,' as if the city was a pot with meat in it. The meaning of this, and the fact that it is an allegory, is already obvious enough to begin with.

Nevertheless, for the avoidance of all doubt, it is then directly stated to be an allegory. Consider how very different this is from the multitudes of other passages that are *not* allegories but are wrongly assumed to be so. In this next example the Bible goes even further. The passage is not only expressly stated to be an allegory, but the meaning of the allegory is then carefully explained. It leaves us in no doubt that that is what we are dealing with:

¹ *The word of the Lord came to me:* ² *"Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak an allegory to the house of Israel;* ³ *say, Thus says the Lord God: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar;* ⁴ *he broke off the topmost of its young twigs and carried it to a land of trade, and set it in a city of merchants.* ⁵ *Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil; he placed it beside abundant waters. He set it like a willow twig,* ⁶ *and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine, and brought forth branches and put forth foliage.*

⁷ *"But there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage; and behold, this vine bent its roots toward him, and shot forth its branches toward him that he might water it. From the bed where it was planted* ⁸ *he transplanted it to good soil by abundant waters, that it might bring forth branches, and bear fruit, and become a noble vine.* ⁹ *Say, Thus says the Lord God: Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots and cut off its branches, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither? It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots.* ¹⁰ *Behold, when it is transplanted, will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it—wither away on the bed where it grew?"*

Ezekiel 17:1-10 (RSV)

¹¹ Then the word of the Lord came to me: ¹² “Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, Behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon. ¹³ And he took one of the seed royal and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath. (The chief men of the land he had taken away, ¹⁴ that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and that by keeping his covenant it might stand.) ¹⁵ But he rebelled against him by sending ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Can a man escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?

¹⁶ As I live, says the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die. ¹⁷ Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. ¹⁸ Because he despised the oath and broke the covenant, because he gave his hand and yet did all these things, he shall not escape. ¹⁹ Therefore thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely my oath which he despised, and my covenant which he broke, I will requite upon his head. ²⁰ I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treason he has committed against me. ²¹ And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind; and you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken.”

Ezekiel 17:11-21 (RSV)

Our general approach to prophecy should be to take it literally. That should always be our starting point, before we begin to look for patterns or types or engage in any midrash.

We saw above that when Ezekiel used these allegories he *said* he was doing so. He even explained their meaning. In other cases the allegory is usually so obvious that it doesn't need to be pointed out. At any rate, what we can say very clearly is that there is no instruction, or even permission, given anywhere in the Bible for us to approach the bulk of Scripture as if it was *generally* symbolic, or as if it *usually* contained secondary, allegorical meanings.

That is not the way that Jesus, or the apostles, or the prophets, approached the Bible. They assumed that a passage was *not* an allegory unless they were specifically told that it *was*, or unless its allegorical nature was totally obvious. Examples of that would be where Jesus spoke of Himself as being a 'door' or a 'Shepherd' or of us being *sheep* and so on.

That consistent example of how Jesus and the prophets and apostles approached the Bible ought, even by itself, to convince us of the wrongness of the allegorical approach, whereby the presence of an allegory is assumed, almost across the board. We hardly need any additional reasons to reject it. Nevertheless, there are plenty of other reasons to say that the allegorical approach is mistaken, some of which we will examine below.

The mistakes and confusion that the allegorical approach causes

The mistake of treating the Bible as allegorical, in instances where the Bible does not instruct us to do so, is mainly made in relation to prophecy. Therefore, the most obvious book which tends to get wrongly allegorized is Revelation. However, it is also done with all the other prophetic passages in both the old and New Testaments, especially Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah and Matthew. Prophecy as a whole adds up to about 30% of the Scriptures and is spread all over the Bible.

However, let's look firstly at an example from the book of Revelation. It shows how people can go badly wrong, and end up with wildly inaccurate beliefs, if they adopt the allegorical approach and assume that passages are allegories when, in fact, they aren't. Then, later in this book, we shall

examine five more specific examples of doctrinal errors that come from assuming a passage to be an allegory when it actually isn't.

The error of not accepting that the 1000 year millennial reign of Jesus Christ on the Earth is literally what will happen

Perhaps the most obvious error made by those who allegorize the prophetic Scriptures is in relation to the period called the '*Millennium*'. This is the 1000 year reign of Jesus Christ. It is going to happen on this physical Earth, not in Heaven. Revelation chapter 20 speaks of this future period, but so too do most of the prophetic books in the Old Testament.

The main difference is that Revelation goes further and specifies the *length* of this Kingdom. It tells us six times that it will last for 1,000 years. How many times does that need to be said in the Bible for us to be willing to believe that God means exactly what He says, and that He is not using the device of an allegory?

Due to so many preachers misguidedly treating this passage from Revelation, and other passages from other books, as if they were allegories when in fact they aren't, most people in Britain still don't believe in a literal Millennium, whatever length it may be. Most people do not even know that Jesus will reign on the Earth at all.

Yet it is frequently spoken about, and in great detail, by most of the prophets, not just by apostle John. However, for now, let's read part of Revelation chapter 20 and then pick out some of the other key features of what will happen before, during and after those 1000 years:

¹Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ²And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; ³and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. ⁴Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection.

⁶Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. ⁷When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, ⁸and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. ⁹And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Revelation 20:1-10 (NASB)

While Jesus is reigning as King on the Earth, Satan will be put into a prison so that he is not able to deceive people. He will stay locked up until just before the end of that 1000 year period. Moreover, we see that believers who have died are raised from the dead at the start of the Millennium. They will then live on the Earth, in their physical resurrection bodies, and reign with Jesus during the whole period.

We see from verse five that unbelievers, i.e. unsaved non-Christians, are not resurrected until later, at the end of the 1000 years. We learn elsewhere, in various other passages, that at the end of the 1000

years all the unbelievers are also physically raised from the dead. They too are then given resurrection bodies, in order that they can be judged at the Great White Throne judgment.

Before that, towards the end of the 1000 years, Satan will be released for a short period. He will then take his last opportunity to deceive as many people as he can, and to lead a worldwide rebellion against the King, Jesus. He will even attempt to attack Jerusalem. But that revolt will be snuffed out very abruptly by Jesus. After that, Satan himself will finally be thrown into the Lake of Fire, which was prepared for him so long ago.

Now, let us look at how very differently Revelation 20:1-10, and other related passages, are dealt with by those who believe that we are meant to allegorize the Scriptures. Their various misinterpretations produce all sorts of different sequences of events. But none of them are anything like what the text actually says.

The allegorical view of Revelation 20:1-10 and other related passages, and the various mistakes which that approach produces

Those who take the allegorical approach to Bible prophecy look at this same passage, and many other related passages, but come up with a very wide range of mistaken beliefs. We shall now set out some of the most common errors:

- a) They don't believe that there will actually be a 1000 year reign of Jesus on the Earth. They assume instead that that is just a 'metaphor' for Jesus "*reigning on the Earth now, through His body, the church*". They mean that He reigns through us.
- b) Therefore they believe that the 'reign' of Jesus is not in the future, but is already happening now.
- c) So, according to them, the Church is already 'ruling and reigning' now on this Earth. If they are right, then one has to say that it is all a very disappointing damp squib, or anti-climax, in comparison to the glowing terms in which the Bible describes what that time will be like.
- d) They believe that the stated length of Jesus' reign, i.e. 1000 years is not to be taken literally. Instead it is viewed as 'poetic language', just meaning "*a long time*". It is usually taken to refer to the whole Church age, which is already nearly 2000 years.
- e) Amazingly, they also believe that Satan is *already in prison*, even now as you read this. So, they believe that the deception and chaos that we all experience today is not caused, or even increased, by Satan or his demons. It is assumed that if Satan and his demons play any part in our lives at all, then it is only very minor. It therefore follows, in their view, that nobody is 'demonized.' So, according to them, nobody is oppressed, deceived or tormented by demons. Moreover, nobody needs to have any demon cast out of them.
- f) So, the allegorists' specific errors about Bible prophecy also affect their general understanding of the various things that are done by demons, here and now. So, their mistaken 'eschatology' (the study of the end times) also distorts their 'demonology' (the study of demons). This is a good example of how misunderstanding Bible prophecy can spill over and distort all the rest of your theology too. I emphasize that, because the errors and confusion caused by the allegorical approach are by no means confined to the area of prophecy.
- g) Most of those who take the allegorical approach do not believe that resurrected Christians will ever be brought back to live on this physical Earth again. Instead, most of them believe that believers will go to Heaven and stay there permanently. Thus, most Christians who accept the allegorical approach do not believe that we will ever live again on this Earth. There is no place in

their thinking for any future role for this physical Earth. Future events after we die are generally assumed to be purely '*spiritual*' and to take place in Heaven.

They do not believe that any literal, military attack will ever be mounted by Satan on King Jesus, or on the city of Jerusalem. Indeed, those who take the allegorical approach basically see no role for Jerusalem at all, either now or in the future. They see no role for Israel or the Jewish people either. These are all assumed to be irrelevant, and to have no further part to play in God's plans. So, Israel is relegated from centre stage, which is how the Bible views it. Instead it is assumed to have little or no part to play in anything. That profound mistake leads them on to all sorts of other related errors in both doctrine and practice. See below and see also later books in this series which deal with Israel and '*replacement theology*', i.e. the mistaken idea that the Church has replaced Israel.