

From Heritage to Apologetic: Literalist Biblical Interpretation within Protestantism and the Rise of Fundamentalist Interpretation

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Abstract

This study examines the historical trajectory of literalist biblical interpretation within Protestantism, tracing its development from a reformation heritage to a fundamentalist apologetic stance. The purpose is to analyse how the Reformers' hermeneutical commitment to *sola scriptura* and biblical inerrancy evolved into the defensive posture of Fundamentalism in response to modern intellectual challenges. Using historical and theological analysis, the paper explores the exegetical methods of Martin Luther and John Calvin, whose insistence on the Bible's clarity and divine inspiration established literalism as the Protestant interpretive norm. The research identifies the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution—particularly Darwinian evolution and modernist theology—as key catalysts that destabilized this interpretive consensus. In reaction, early twentieth-century Fundamentalists reasserted the Reformers' literalist principles as both a theological and apologetic defense of Christian orthodoxy. The study concludes that what began as a hermeneutical heritage rooted in faith and clarity of Scripture was transformed into an apologetic tool aimed at preserving biblical authority amid modern scepticism, marking a significant shift in Protestant interpretive identity.

Keywords: literalist interpretation, fundamentalist interpretation, protestant reformation, evangelicals, infallibility, inerrancy

Introduction

Scholars and theologians do biblical exposition today using different biblical hermeneutics depending on whether the exponent is a Catholic, an Orthodox, a Liberal or conservative Protestant. The Literalist and Fundamentalist method of interpretation is the hermeneutical mode solely accepted by the Protestants and Evangelicals. This paper attempts to explain why Literalist interpretation is the basic hermeneutical approach still in use by the biblical exponents of the Protestant stream. The explanation briefly looked into its origin in Christian biblical interpretation discussing the main characteristics. The fundamentalist method of interpretation is a Protestant apologetic that arose in reaction to three phenomena of the 18th and 19th centuries that almost swept away the Christian core beliefs.

The literalist method of biblical interpretation gained prominence during the Protestant Reformation. Protestant exponents adopted this method as a legacy of the reformation. Though the method promised to free exegetes of unnecessary fancy, dominant in the allegorical method, it still presents certain inadequacies as a hermeneutical mode. The emergence of modernism and the scientific revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries presented a great challenge to Literalist approach. The development gave rise to the liberal theologians who relativized biblical truth. Their exegetical approach nearly eroded the Christian faith to the foundation presenting the Bible as obsolete and inadequate on matters of faith. This led to the reaction from some Protestants of the Evangelical mode who confronted the situation with Fundamentalist interpretation. This method emphasizes the inerrancy of the Scriptures and re-enacts the literalist mode. The writer observe that new hermeneutical mode tends to ignore the best in the

existing methods thereby making the new approach equally inadequate and also promoting the divisive tendencies among protestant exponents and the Christian faith. This paper argues for a wholistic approach to biblical hermeneutics.

Contemporary biblical exponents use different biblical approach to interpret biblical texts based on their denominational leanings. Though various biblical interpretation abounds and no single one is perfect, this study aims at redirecting the Protestant exegetes back to their heritage that was free of the encumbrances of exponent's fancy. The essence is to encourage exegetes adopt a hermeneutical mode that will result in a near perfect interpretation.

The study examined the historical narratives of Literalist and Fundamentalist interpretations looking at the extent they have been useful in achieving the desired goals of biblical exponents.

The approach adopted in this study is a historical analysis of the origin and development of literalists and fundamentalists interpretations. Secondary sources such as articles in journals, books and the Internet were utilized for this purpose. The study alluded into the successes of the allegorical of biblical exposition prevailing with the early church fathers before the Reformation and some development afterwards.

The Literalist Biblical Interpretation

Historical Background

The Literalist biblical interpretation came into being during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.¹ Although the Apostolic Fathers used literal interpretation, it was used discriminately especially in the interpretation of the prophetic

¹ Kathleen C Oberlin and Christopher P Scheitle, "Biblical Literalism Influences on Perceptions of History as a Scientific Discipline", *SOCIUS: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*. V. 5. Accessed, July 27, 2020

portions of the Bible. The prominent method then was oral traditions.² It was noted that,

Before the modern period, Jews, Christians and Muslims all relished highly allegorical interpretations of scripture. The word of God was infinite and could not be tied down to a single interpretation. Preoccupation with literal truth is a product of the scientific revolution, when reason achieved such spectacular results that mythology was no longer regarded as a valid path to knowledge.³

The Allegorical method was the most popular method with the Alexandrian School under the leadership of Origen at the lead.⁴ As the allegorical method took the centre stage in the Apostolic Fathers' hermeneutics, only the Antioch School retained the tradition of literal interpretation of the text especially the historical portion.⁵ This method of interpretation continued to the Medieval period and held sway throughout the era. The commonly known form of biblical interpretation from the Medieval until the Reformation was the tradition of the church fathers as found in the allegorical method. However, with the Reformers' insistence on the self-sufficiency of the Bible to give meaning without the strings of tradition, the literal sense became the acceptable mode of interpretation among the Protestants. Those who championed the literal interpretation then were Martin Luther and John Calvin. Luther renounced allegorical interpretation strongly thus:

² "Biblical Literalism," https://religions.wiki/index.php/Biblical_literalism. Accessed, July 24, 2020

³ Ibid.

⁴ Michael Stallard, "Literal Interpretation: *The Key to Understanding the Bible*," *The Journal of Ministry & Theology*, (Spring 2000, 15). Accessed, July 27, 2020

⁵ Ibid., 16

When I was a monk, I was a master in the use of allegories. I allegorized everything. Afterward through the Epistle to the Romans, I came to some knowledge of Christ. I recognized then that allegories are nothing, that it's not what Christ signifies but what Christ is that counts. Before I allegorized everything, even a chamber pot, but afterward I reflected on the histories and thought how difficult it must have been for Gideon to fight with his enemies in the manner reported.... It was not allegory, but it was the Spirit and faith, that inflicted such havoc on the enemy with only three hundred men. Jerome and Origen contribute to the practice of searching only for allegories. God forgive them. In all of Origen there is not one word about Christ.⁶

John Calvin's famous commentaries on the whole Bible used the historical-grammatical interpretation that is the Literalist method.⁷ The Sola Scriptura (the Bible and the Bible alone)⁸ as the sole authority of the Christian faith position of the Protestants during the reformation lent credence to the Literalist form of interpretation and made it prominent. The Literalist approach of the reformation has continued as the main hermeneutical method among the evangelicals until date.⁹ Therefore, it will not be out of place to say that the Literalist form of biblical interpretation was a by-product of the Protestant Reformation and the heritage of the Protestant

⁶ Martin Luther, *Table Talk* No 335 recorded by Veit Dietrich, Summer or Fall, 1532, Luther's Works, Vol. 54 ed. And trans. Theodore G Tappert, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, n.d.), 46-47. Quoted from Michael Stallard, 18

⁷ Michael Stallard, "Literal Interpretation: The Key to Understanding the Bible," *The Journal of Ministry & Theology*, (Spring 2000), 18. Accessed, July 27, 2020

⁸ Kathleen C Oberlin and Christopher P Scheitle, "Biblical Literalism Influences on Perceptions of History as a Scientific Discipline," *SOCIUS: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*. V. 5. Accessed, July 27, 2020

⁹ Michael Stallard, 18-19. Accessed, July 27, 2020

church. The current literalist interpretation developed in the late 19th centuries¹⁰ as a product of the scientific revolution.¹¹

What is Literalist Interpretation?

Literalist approach to biblical interpretation states that the interpreter should read the Bible in a plain and straightforward manner in order to determine the author or authors' original intention. Biblical literalists believe that the original authors of the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit and drafted scripture in various literary genres and styles of the period. Literalist interpretation is a hermeneutical technique that attempts to discover the meaning of the text considering the grammatical, syntactical, cultural and historical background, and the literary genre.¹² The approach recognizes the relevance of the literary components, genre, or figures of speech contained in the text and holds that biblical texts is to be interpreted literally unless otherwise indicated. Thus, Genesis and the Gospels are historical books; Adam and Eve were real human beings and not metaphors, the worldwide flood actually occurred, Jesus was crucified and he truly resurrected.

Ted G. Jen¹³ et al. sees “Literalism,” as an approach that compels the exponent to take biblical texts without colouration or “any qualification whatever.” Literalist approach is “the theological view that one should regard the contents of the Bible as literally true and inerrant.”¹⁴ This does not preclude *sensus*

¹⁰ Biblical Literalism,” in *Wikipedia*
https://religions.wiki/index.php/Biblical_literalism. Accessed, July 24, 2020

¹¹ “Biblical Literalism,” in *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_literalism. Accessed, July 24, 2020

¹² “Biblical Literalism,” in *Wikipedia*.

¹³ Ted G. Jen, Clyde Wilcox and Corwin E Smidt, “Biblical Literalism and Inerrancy: A Methodological Investigation, Sociological Analysis,” *Research Note. Downloaded from Socrel.oxfordjournals.org*, 308 (July 21, 2011). Accessed, July 27, 2020

¹⁴ “Literal Interpretation,” in *Wikipedia*: <https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Bible>, Accessed, July 24, 2020

plenior i.e. “fuller sense” in the interpretation of text. “*Sensus plenior*,” according to Brown, “is that additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text, (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation.”¹⁵ It declares that biblical text is to be interpreted according to the meaning conveyed by its grammatical construction and historical context that is the original author’s intention.¹⁶ Stallard said that the evangelical calls it “grammatical-historical interpretation” to show “there exist both a grammatical-language context as well as a historical context which must be taken into account to read a passage.”¹⁷ Other Evangelicals calls it grammatical-historical-literary interpretation to indicate the need to examine literary structure.

The three ways in literal interpretation:

- a) “First-thought” meaning describing different ways words and phrases of a sentence or discourse are viewed separately.
- b) “Flat interpretation” whereby a passage is taken as literal as possible noting only explicit figure of speech.
- c) Grammatical-historical interpretation used in the sense of the term, *sensus literalis (literal sense)* to designate all that is involve in the term.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M. “Faith, Hermeneutics, And The Literal Sense of Scripture,” (Jesuit School of Theology at Berkley), 726

¹⁶ “Literal Interpretation,” in *Wikipedia*: <https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Bible>, Accessed, July 24, 2020

¹⁷ Michael Stallard, “Literal Interpretation: The Key to Understanding the Bible,” *The Journal of Ministry & Theology*, (Spring 2000), 19-20. Accessed, July 27, 2020

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19

Literal hermeneutic stresses the primary importance of the historical realm that God's original revelation was stated.

Basic Features of Literalist Interpretation

Literal approach to biblical interpretation works on certain proposition. They are:

- **Inspiration of the Bible:** the reformers' insistence on sola scriptura during the Protestant Reformation is rooted in the belief that the Bible is inspired. Since the Bible is inspired through the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16-17), it is the word of God and is the only trustworthy rule of faith and practice for the Christians, "the only basis of religious authority".¹⁹ God reveals himself to every believer who study the Bible through the Holy Spirit because the Bible interprets itself. The correct way to interpret the Bible through the guidance of the Holy Spirit is the historical-literal method.²⁰ Sproul stated that the best way to interpret the Bible is literal and not to treat it as a "secret code book" because God accommodated himself to the known genres while giving his word.²¹
- **Infallibility of the Bible:** the reformers believe that the Bible is God inspired and as God's expressed word, contains the whole truth. The bible's truth is self-sufficient containing everything humanity needs to know about salvation and the cosmos.²² This claim

¹⁹ Ted G. Jen, Clyde Wilcox and Corwin E Smidt, "Biblical Literalism and Inerrancy: A Methodological Investigation, Sociological Analysis," *Research Note. Downloaded from Socrel.oxfordjournals.org*, 308 (July21, 2011). Accessed, July 27, 2020

²⁰ Izak Spangenberg, "Perspectives on the Bible: God's Word in Ordinary Language," (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2002), 17

²¹ R C Sproul, "Interpreting the Bible Literally," <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/interpreting-bible-literally/>. Accessed, July 24, 2020

²² Didier Pollefeyt and Reimund Bieringer, "The Role of the Bible in Religious Education Reconsidered: Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible," *IJPT, vol. 9, Walter de Gruyter, ed., (2005), 119*

of the infallibility of the Bible as a result of inspiration is behind the declaration of *sola scriptura* which is paramount to literal biblical interpretation.

- **Clarity or Perspicuity of Biblical Text:** the Protestants of the Reformation era held that biblical texts are clear and that the average person can understand its basic teachings without the rigours of hermeneutical procedure. The teaching of clarity of biblical text does not exclude the necessity of interpretive principle or assume that there is no gap between the culture in which the Bible was written and the culture of the modern reader. Rather it uses hermeneutical and exegetical processes to bridge the gap. However, it rejects the historical-critical method of interpretation.²³ The clarity of the Bible was one of the cornerstone doctrines of the Protestants. They held that the Bible interprets itself (*sola scriptura sui ipsius interpres*).²⁴ They also believed that the Bible is so clear that a believer guided by the Holy Spirit can read and understand the Bible correctly.”²⁵ This legacy is a major strength of literalist interpretation.

Examples of Churches with Literal interpretation

Literal interpretation is not a hermeneutical mode limited to a denomination. It is a hermeneutical principle identified with the Protestant churches that still hold the ideals of the Protestant Reformation. In other words, conservatives Protestants such as: the Baptist Church, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. The Anglican, though a Protestant Church, does not practice

²³ “Biblical Literalism,” in *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_literalism. Accessed, July 29, 2020

²⁴ Izak Spangenberg, “Perspectives on the Bible: God’s Word in Ordinary Language,” (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2002), 17

²⁵ *Ibid.*

literalism again. Other churches of the Liberal descent practice higher critical interpretation.

The Fundamentalist Interpretation: Origin

While the Literal interpretation began during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century opposing the traditional view of allegorical interpretation that stripped the scriptures of its face value sense, the Fundamentalist Bible interpretation is a principle of the conservative Protestant that arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.²⁶ Fundamentalist interpretation was a hermeneutical principle that confronted the pervading influences of three phenomena teachings that relegated the biblical message to near insignificance.

The first among these was the scientists' discoveries in various fields like biology, psychology, etc.²⁷ that denied the existence of God and tend to disprove biblical teachings thereby eroding the basis of the Christian faith. These discoveries caused serious stir and divisions among churches. The second resulted from the first, which was the rise of modernism with its rationalism that rubbished the biblical claims as it debunked miracles and other strong biblical tenets. The developments gave rise to the coming of liberal theologians teaching biblical relativity. In other words, the truth of the Bible is not absolute and universal so also the God it reveals. The likes of Rudolf Bultmann endeavoured to demythologized areas of scriptures he considered as archaic worldview.²⁸ To them, the primitive people received the Bible; therefore, biblical claims are obsolete and irrelevant or merely relatively applicable to the modern industrial society. The Christian Fundamentalists

²⁶ "Christian Fundamentalism," in *Wikipedia*: en.wikipedia.org > wiki < Fundamentalism. Accessed, July 24, 2020

²⁷ "What is Biblical Fundamentalism." <http://www.Icdiocese/the-catholic-difference/85-what-are-the-basic-beliefs-of-the-catholic-church>. Accessed, July 24, 2020

²⁸ Andrew Village, "Factors Shaping Biblical Literalism: A Study Among Anglican Laity," *Bangor*: a.village@bangor.ac.uk. Accessed, July 27, 2020

rose to confront all forces of higher criticism that claim biblical texts were filled with errors; liberal theology that deny the atoning death and bodily resurrection of Jesus; and Darwinian evolutionary claim to origins of things without God.²⁹

The Christian Fundamentals originated with the publications of a series of pamphlets entitled, “The Fundaments: A Testimony to the Truth,” between 1909 and 1915.³⁰ These publications written by conservative Protestant theologians was a twelve-volume set of essays, apologetic and polemic to defend Protestant orthodoxy.³¹ Though the British and American Protestants began the movement, it became well-organized among the United States of American Protestant churches in the 1920s. The term, Fundamentalism was coined by Baptist editor, Curtis Lee Laws in 1920 designating Protestants prepared ‘to do battle royal for the Fundamentals.’³² The Fundamentals uphold all the core Christian beliefs including the historical accuracy of the Bible and all the events recorded in it together with the second coming of Jesus.

Characteristics of the Fundamentals

The following are the Fundamentals basic features that form the basis of their interpretation.

1. **Inerrancy:** central to Fundamentalist biblical interpretation is the notion that the Bible cannot err and any seeming mistake found in interpretation should be accounted as human error.³³ God inspired the Bible writers, therefore, the scripture contain no

²⁹ Ron Julian, “Fundamentalism and Biblical Interpretation”.
<https://gutenberg.edu/2003/09/fundamentalism-and-biblical-interpretation/>. September 24th, 2003. Accessed, July 27, 2020

³⁰ “What is Biblical Fundamentalism.”

³¹ “Christian Fundamentalism,” in *Wikipedia*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Kathleen C Oberlin and Christopher P Scheitle, “Biblical Literalism Influences on Perceptions of History as a Scientific Discipline,” *SOCIUS: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*. V. 5, 2

error since God cannot make mistake. One of the ardent theologians, Charles Hodge of the Princeton Theology, asserted that “the Bible is inerrant because God ‘breathed’ his exact thoughts into the biblical writers (2 Tim. 3:16).”³⁴ The Fundamentalist biblical exegetes must interpret the scripture maintaining this principle striving to discover the author’s original intention. This belief in inerrancy actually served to unite the Protestant churches on Protestant orthodoxy of the reformation era rebuffing the incursion of worldliness or secularism of the Liberal theologians and modernists’ cultural changes together with scientist denial of godly origin of things and biblical inaccuracies.

2. **Infallibility:** the Fundamentalists interpreters hold that the Bible is the infallible expression of God’s word.³⁵ In this principle, Fundamentalist treats the Bible as if God dictated the words of the scripture to the human author. Since God gave the scripture, it is self-sufficient. Everything humanity needs in matter of faith has been given and nothing more. This is responsible for advocating a literal interpretation of the Bible or historical-grammatical method to dig and discover original meaning God intended.
3. **Inspiration:** the Fundamentalist believe in the “verbal inspiration” of the Bible. A belief that presumes that the words of the Bible were dictated to the human author. The human author was a mere copyist.³⁶ According to them, whatever is not in the Bible is not

³⁴ “Christian Fundamentalism,” in *Wikipedia*, p. 3

³⁵ Didier Pollefeyt and Reimund Bieringer, “The Role of the Bible in Religious Education Reconsidered: Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible”, *IJPT*, vol. 9, Walter de Gruyter, ed., (2005), 119

³⁶ “Biblical Interpretation: Fundamentalism”, 2; See also “What is Biblical Interpretation?”

relevant to the Christian faith. Therefore, the biblical text is to be interpreted literally.

4. **Literal Interpretation:** the hermeneutical mode advocated by the Fundamentalist is literal. This is due to their belief in the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. This literal interpretation comprises of “genre criticism, structure of the text, its themes, and plot development.”³⁷ The Fundamentalist believe and accepts the scripture at face value since God-breathed it; and thus interpret it in a way to discover the original intended meaning of author.

Examples of Churches

The Fundamentalist is not a denomination but was a 20th century movement that fought to restore the Bible to its ideal place as the sole authority in matter of Christian faith. Their principle is “the absolute centrality of the Bible, as well as its complete inerrancy and infallibility.”³⁸ Their concern is to restore the *sola scriptura* the Reformers left as a legacy for the Protestants. Fundamentalist is not a church or a method of biblical interpretation per se but a movement advocating the literal interpretation of the Bible. In Britain, fundamentalist principle is represented in the teaching and practice of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF formerly called Inter-Varsity Fellowship or IVF).³⁹ In America, the churches representing the movement are: Independent Fundamental Churches of America (later known as, IFCA International, in 1996), Independent Fundamental Baptist and Independent Fundamental Churches of America.⁴⁰ Others that sprang up in the Southern United States churches are the

³⁷ “Biblical Interpretation: Fundamentalism,” 3

³⁸ Michael Fallon, “Fundamentalism: A Misunderstanding of Religious Experience,” (1992), 3

³⁹ John Goldingay, James barr on Fundamentalism, 295

⁴⁰ “Christian Fundamentalism,” in *Wikipedia*, 1

fundamental Methodist denominations like Evangelical Methodist Church and Fundamental Methodist Conference.⁴¹

Conclusion and Recommendation

The Literalist biblical interpretation is a hermeneutical methodology emphasizing the literal or plain sense of biblical texts. It is a legacy of the Protestant hermeneutic of the Reformation. The principle arose from the Protestant Reformation insistence on *sola scriptura* (bible alone). The strong belief in *sola scriptura* stemmed from the belief in the inspiration of the Bible. The principle holds that the Bible is infallible because it is God-breathed. The current literal interpretation however, developed in the 20th century.

Fundamental biblical interpretation is not a hermeneutical principle per se but a movement advocating the literal interpretation as a reaction against the degenerating influences of modernism, liberal theologians' relativity and scientific denial of God. Fundamentalist hermeneutic is a renaissance of the literal biblical interpretation of the Reformation. The Fundamentalists insisted on *sola scriptura* and tenaciously upheld the inerrancy, infallibility and inspiration of the Bible.

This writer recommends a wholistic model of interpretation taking cognisance of the best in each hermeneutical approach. This is necessary because no hermeneutical mode is perfectly adequate in the long run.

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