

Read with Luther, literally

He calls attention to the words of the Bible and what they mean



JANE PHILLIPS

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Modern Bible readers fall on a spectrum of beliefs—from accepting that every event in the Bible happened as recorded to considering them as moral tales. Today the term “literalism” applies to the view that biblical events can be verified by history and science. Older literalists like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther hold a different sense of the literal.

By the Middle Ages reading the Bible followed the fourfold method of the *quadrigo*, consisting of the three spiritual senses and the literal, which adds to the three spiritual senses to determine the complex levels of reading and interpreting the Bible.

The three spiritual senses dominate much of the history of the interpretation of the Bible. From time to time the literal sense varies in meaning and in importance. For instance, Augustine understands the literal sense to be love. He thinks clear passages teach love and, through the use of the spiritual senses, obscure passages teach love. Aquinas sees the literal as the meaning God intends in the text. He separates the literal from the historical, believing the historical to be the work of human authors.

Luther doesn't so much shift these positions as enhance them. First, he focuses on the plain sense of the passage, sometimes called the grammatical. The words of the page carry meaning and should not be avoided in search of a spiritual idea not written on the page.

Second, Luther redefines the literal sense of the text as Christ: the words bring Christ to the reader and point the reader to Christ. As a literalist, Luther's concern lies not so much on verifiable history as on an encounter with Christ. His literalism lies in Christ—not in whether something really happened.

As a biblical scholar, Luther calls attention to the words of the Bible. He pays attention to meaning, syntax, grammar and construction as the first point of entry in determining meaning.

Reading the Bible, for Luther, means reading the words without, at first, assigning an otherworldly meaning to them. This would mean asking what the words mean in their plain sense without any symbolic content.

Of course, we need to note that words don't hold the same meanings over time. The discovery of the plain sense of the Bible lies not in what makes sense for us but for the ancient writers.

Consider Genesis 1. To ask whether one day in creation means 24 hours or eons makes sense in our scientific age but appears meaningless in a prescientific age that doesn't measure time by hours or ages. That a week consists of seven days makes sense to the Genesis writer, a small detail that modern scientific minds miss. And we miss it because we focus on the origins of creation because that's what makes sense to us.

This writer wants to make sense not so much of the creation—but of the Sabbath. Genesis 1 proves not how and when the Earth was created but, rather, the Sabbath. In the creation of the Sabbath, Luther sees Christ as God's ongoing creative Word. While the Sabbath marks the cessation of God's work in creating the world, it also points to God's sustaining the created order through the Word—namely, Christ. As Jesus says to those who criticize him for healing on the Sabbath: “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (John 5:17). Luther connects this Christ at the literal level.

In Luther's thinking, the literal reading of the Bible brings one to Christ. Christ is represented in the words. This literalism in Luther makes real not the past but the present. The preoccupation to make past events real to make our faith valid misses the point of Scripture: Through the word, God presents the Word, Christ. □

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