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Is the Bible the Literal Word of God?

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Recently, the Gallup organization did some polling related to how Americans view the Bible. They asked if people believed it is the literal word of God. The last time they asked this question was in 2017. At that time, the percentage who believed the Bible was the literal word of God was 24%. The high point of belief, since they have been asking the question, was around 50% in 1980 and 1984. But it seems that this belief has now hit a new low. The recent poll indicates that only 20% of Americans now believe the Bible is the literal word of God. Along with that finding, 29% believe that the Bible is nothing more than a collection of "fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man." It seems that the majority (49%) believe that the Bible was inspired by God but not to be taken literally.

Honestly, this question is not a very good one. The reason it is not good is that it doesn't define what is meant by "literal" – and the definition is quite important if you want to come up with any kind of reasonable understanding of what people think. The problem with this question arises for two reasons.

The first reason there is confusion is that it doesn't distinguish between the Bible being the literal word of God and the idea of interpreting the Bible literally (in fact, the choices people were given as possible answers actually lend themselves to the mixup). In hearing the question, some people seemingly picked up on the thought that the Bible was literally given to man by God, and it shares knowledge of who He is and what He desires. Other people heard the question and understood

it to mean that the Bible can be interpreted literally. These two different ways of interpreting the question create a situation where different people end up answering two different questions, even though only one question was asked.

The second reason for the confusion is because the Bible is not made up simply of one type of literature. It is actually not even a single book. Rather, it is an entire library of 66 books comprised of seven genres (narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophesy, gospels, epistles, and apocalypse) written over about a 1500 year period by approximately 35 different authors from different time periods, locations, socio-economic backgrounds, and cultures. You simply can't use a single interpretive method in dealing with the biblical text as a whole. You have to interpret each book according to its own situation. Thus, what it means to interpret the Bible literally is not something that can be legitimately polled the way the Gallup organization is attempting to do it.

What Does it Mean to Interpret Different Kinds of Literature Literally?

If we really want to get at the heart of this issue, we need to have a sense of how to properly interpret the biblical literature (BTW, this not only applies to the Bible, but to the interpretation of ANY kind of literature). So, let's take a look at the kinds of literature we find in the Bible.

Narrative

Narrative is an account of connected events; in other words, a story. To qualify as narrative, the story can be either fiction or non-fiction. Fiction narrative can have various purposes. It can be purely for entertainment,

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or it can be used as a teaching tool to share knowledge in an entertaining fashion. Non-fiction narrative is prose that is informative or factual, rather than fictional. It should be obvious by the context whether a narrative account is intended as fiction or non-fiction.

Poetry

Poetry is a form of literature that uses aesthetic and often rhythmic qualities of language to evoke feelings and meanings. Poetry often uses symbolic language to accomplish its purpose and is not usually intended to be interpreted literally. There is generally some kind of deeper meaning behind the words that need to be taken into account.

Wisdom

Wisdom literature consists of works containing proverbial sayings and practical maxims. This style provides general truths about living life. Care must be taken, though, to interpret it according to its individual purpose. The various expressions of wisdom literature are always given in some context, and it is critical to have in mind that context when interpreting. For instance, Song of Solomon must be interpreted in the context of marriage, otherwise it could be construed to promote promiscuity.

Prophecy

Prophecy is a wide ranging body of literary forms that demonstrate God's interest in human activities. Essentially it reflects communications from God to human beings through prophets. While most people think of the foretelling of future events when they think of prophecy, that is actually only a very tiny portion of the prophetic record found in the Bible. The great majority of prophetic writing was revealed through prophets by God in order to share with them spiritual truth and to steer them in the right direction in

their daily lives. Some of it is written in poetic language and must be interpreted with underlying symbolism in mind. Other is written in a narrative fashion. Legitimate interpretation requires that prophesy be interpreted in its proper context.

Gospels

Gospels are unique writings composed of genealogies, narrative story telling, historical facts, proverbs, parables, commands, and even some apocalyptic sections. They are historical in nature, but they are not mere recitations of historical facts and figures. They are a testimony about the life of Jesus. It is an intersection where history and theology meet. In a real sense, gospels can be properly classified in the genre of ancient biography that serves the purpose and theological aims of the writers who wrote the various gospel accounts.

Epistles

Epistles are essentially letters written in free verse. They are usually addressed to a person close to the writer, but it is also not unusual for some to be written to a group of people. There are no particular limits regarding the content of epistles. They may address moral and philosophical topics, or they may be intimate and personal expressions (or a combination). In interpreting epistles, it is helpful to understand as much as possible about the writer, the recipients, and the particular situation the writer is writing about.

Apocalypse

Apocalypse is a type of Jewish and early Christian literature. The majority of apocalyptic literature was written from the years 200 B.C. to 100 A.D. This type of literature uses extremely vivid imagery and symbols originating from visions or revelations from God. The subject matter generally concerns the imminent coming of the end of the present evil age, and the final advent of God's kingdom. There is wide disagreement about the proper way to

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interpret apocalyptic literature, so it is wise to become as knowledgeable as possible concerning the options before presenting dogmatic interpretations.

What Is the Hangup about a Literal Interpretation of the Bible?

The very fact that this question is being asked by Gallup in nationwide polling tells you that there is a negative stigma in some circles associated with the idea of interpreting the Bible literally. The percentage of the population that claims to not believe in a literal interpretation, and the trends from previous polling, confirm that thought.

So the question arises, "Where does this negativity come from?" After all, America's founding fathers were mostly Bible believing Christians, and the entire structure of American society was created based on principles and values that came from the Bible. And the short answer to the question is, "Society has changed in a way that now largely dismisses biblical principles and values in favor of a relative approach to both." In fact, virtually all of the institutions of modern society are now dominated by atheistic Naturalism – which is overtly hostile to Christianity. And since the Bible is the authority source for Christian beliefs, the hostility toward the Bible is probably to be expected.

There is, of course, a significant contingent who express their hostility overtly. Interestingly, there is another segment of people who actually claim to be Christians, but have adopted an approach to biblical interpretation that allows them to interpret the Bible in ways that give an entirely different meaning to various words – and even to the redemptive narrative itself. Both of these groups generally assert that the Bible is nothing more than a collection of "fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man."

Typically, people in this category do not even attempt to discover what the Bible teaches based on a natural reading of the text. Rather, they begin with the assumption that God does not exist the way He is described in the Bible (if He exists at all), and that the entire focus of the biblical message is something different entirely. This contingent has now become large enough that polling on this topic has become meaningful.

Is the Bible the Literal Word of God?

So what have we discovered so far? We have discovered that not every kind of literature can be legitimately interpreted literally, and that there is a significant contingent of people who don't want the Bible to be true. With that established, we are at a place where we can begin to answer the question in the article's title: Is the Bible the literal word of God?

The answer to the question is: What is written in the Bible is true.

- What is portrayed as factual narrative is true.
- The message delivered poetically is true.
- The message conveyed through the wisdom literature is true.
- The revelation given through prophesy is true.
- The message of the gospels is true.
- The communications expressed in the epistles are true.
- The message expressed through biblical apocalyptic literature is true.

Not everything written in Scripture can be read literally because certain genres of literature are not of a nature such that literalism is appropriate. But every bit of Scripture conveys a message from God (is the literal word of God) – and when interpreted properly, within its proper context, is true.

As such, using the word "literal" in asking this poll question is totally confusing – in fact it is misleading and doesn't even get at the information it is attempting to survey.

The real question Gallup should be asking does not actually focus on whether or not the Bible can be taken literally. Some genres within Scripture can be read literally and other parts must take into account various kinds of symbolic meanings. Rather, the real focus should be on whether or not it is true. And when interpreted accurately and correctly, it is definitely true.

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