

Should We Take The Christian Bible Literally?

When anyone asks you the question, “*Do you take the Christian Bible literally?*” you will be well advised to pause and consider your reply.

The sceptic believes you will answer “*yes*” or “*no*” to the question.

If you answer “*yes*” then they will quite rightly point to various Biblical statements or verses that, if taken literally, have a clearly dangerous or even absurd result. For example ...

Mark 9:42-48 [New King James] “*But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched, where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched, where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire, where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’*”

If you take this literally you would engage in self-mutilation, the act of an unsound mind.

On the other hand if you as a believer say you do not take the Bible literally, then the sceptic will retort that the believer has implied that the Bible means whatever you want it to mean.

Hence, any person’s interpretation is as good as anyone else’s.

So where does this leave us? How should we reply?

Let us look at a day-to-day example.

Suppose your friend just brought a sports car and tells you that they drove it at 90 miles an hour down the motorway. You could take that statement literally.

But if your friend said that they flew down the motorway at 90 miles an hour, unless you believed their car actually left the ground like an aeroplane, you would not take the statement as literal.

You know your friend was driving fast, and they were speaking figuratively to emphasise what they did.

Dictionaries will tell us that figurative language is language used that is non-literal in order to add emphasis.

While it is not critical to know and understand the definitions of all such figures of speech to interpret everyday conversations, it can help.

It is important to know that the Christian Bible uses many figures of speech.

One study Bible, the Companion Bible, lists and explains about 180 figures of speech that are found in the Christian Bible, explaining how each figure is to be understood.

Making the right interpretation –

Usually we discern the difference between literal and figurative speech automatically, without even thinking about it.

Often the literal interpretation does not make sense so we switch our mind to the figurative interpretation.

Another way to avoid misunderstanding and ensure you correctly interpret someone's statement is to ask them for clarification.

Of course, in the case of the Christian Bible, the writers are all dead and cannot be questioned nor give clarifications, so we must use other methods to interpret what they mean.

What are these “other methods”? –

Are we free to pick whatever meaning we wish to believe as a sceptic does in regard to the Christian Bible?

Of course not.

We know that to understand a scripture we need to make a careful inquiry and objective analysis of the historical background to the statement as well as the original use of the words written. This is called hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics can be defined as *“the theory and methodology of interpretation of statements, especially of scriptural text.”*

One essential tenet of hermeneutics is that figures of speech are not licenses to insert whatever meaning you want.

Figures of speech are linguistic devices that are known and understood by linguists to convey truths in a certain way once we have learned about them.

Even with this explanation, we should not conclude that everyone will agree on the exact meaning of every statement that the Christian Bible makes.

People do **not** agree on the meaning of every single statement of Shakespeare or any political leader, even state laws which are virtually always made to be crystal clear.

Even if people do agree with the meaning of every scripture, they may **not** agree on every doctrine, because scriptures have to be most often combined to understand a single doctrine.

The correct response to the understanding of scripture is to take the literal statements literally and the figurative statements figuratively.

I use my common sense, my experience and my knowledge of language and grammar to know the difference and to determine what the figures of speech are intended to convey.

When asked *“do you take the Christian Bible literally?”*

The correct and sound answer is “I take the literal parts literally, the figurative parts figuratively and use common sense, experience of language and grammar and the techniques of hermeneutics to know the difference and help me interpret the statements.”

This is the same way any Bible sceptic will, every time they read or hear any statement made by anyone about anything.