



## Hermeneutics: Literal System Defined; the Amillennialist Challenge; 2d Century Pioneers of Literal Interpretation & Dispensational Theology; the Rise of Allegory

**Baldick, Chris.** *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5:

**Allegory.** A story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning.

A continuous parallel between two or more levels of meaning in a story, so that the persons and events correspond to their equivalents in a chain of events external to the tale. In John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, each character embodies an idea within a pre-existing Puritan doctrine of salvation.

Allegorical thinking permeated the Christian literature of the Middle Ages, flourishing in the morality plays and in the dream visions of Dante and William Langland. Some later allegorists like John Dryden and George Orwell used allegory as a method of satire; their hidden meanings are political rather than religious.

In the medieval discipline of biblical exegesis, allegory became an important method of interpretation, a habit of seeking correspondences between different realms of meaning (e.g., physical and spiritual) or between the Old Testament and the New. Modern critical interpretation continues this allegorizing tradition.

22. The literal system is defined by Charles Ryrie in his book, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 86-87):

**Literal** interpretation gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. This is sometimes called the principle of **grammatical-historical** interpretation since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations. The principle might also be called **normal** interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated **plain** interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech. Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. The *literalist* is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols*, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted according to the received laws of language, as any other utterances are interpreted. (pp. 86-87)

23. In opposition to this method of interpretation is the allegorical method, the system utilized by amillennialists and defined by Mal Couch in his book, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 37):

**AMILLENNIALISM.** The view that the kingdom promises, or prophecies, in the Old Testament are fulfilled spiritually rather than literally in the New Testament church. Those who hold this view believe that Christ will literally return, but they do not believe in His thousand-year reign on the earth. According to the amillennial view, the kingdom of God is present in the church age, and at the end of the church age the second coming of Christ inaugurates the eternal state. The book of Revelation is interpreted as a description of those events that take place during the church age.

24. The key difference between these two systems is that dispensationalists keep Israel and the church distinct.



25. Consequently, deviation away from the literal-grammatical-historical approach to Scripture led to the failure to truly discern the primary purpose of God in creating mankind and in saving mankind. The *sine qua non* of the plan of God is His glory and this can be accomplished only by the believer who through spiritual growth becomes a star witness for the Prosecution in the appeal trial of Lucifer.
26. One of the early proponents of the allegorical method was Origen who was influenced by the school of Alexandria. This school was founded by Clement who applied the allegorical method of Philo to explain passages of Scripture that were in opposition to Greek philosophy.
27. Origen was the first church leader of prominence to challenge the premillennial orthodoxy of the early church. Completely dedicated to the allegorical method of interpretation like his mentor, Clement, Origen spiritualized virtually every Christian doctrine.
28. Under Origen's influence, the blessed hope of the Christian apologists—Christ's imminent return to establish His kingdom—began to yield to the spiritual interpretation of Alexandria.
29. Nevertheless, it was the school at Antioch which maintained the tradition of the literal method practiced by the early church Fathers. Two of these were Theophilus and Diodorus as Mal Couch informs us on page 146 of his book:

**Theophilus** \thē-ăf' a-las\ of Antioch (c. 115-188), stressed historical-grammatical exegesis.

**Diodorus** \dī-a-dōr' as\ of Tarsus (d. 393) made three important contributions: (1) He wrote the first systematic treatment defending and explaining the literal historical-grammatical method. (2) He affirmed the validity of a historical-typological method. (3) He was the teacher of **Theodore** of Mopsuestia \măp-su-es' chēa\ and **John Chrysostom** \kris' as-tam\, who would become the greatest exegetical and expositional exponents of the school of Antioch.

Diodorus's most important publication, *What Is the Difference Between Insight and Allegory*, denounced the Alexandrian method and set forth basic principles of the historical-grammatical method. According to Diodorus, the key to interpreting Scripture was not allegory, but *theōria* [θεωρία]: insight.

Insight is the ability to perceive both the literal historical facts in a text, as well as the spiritual (theological) reality to which these facts point.

30. Whereas the Alexandrians were all allegory all the time, the Antiochians recognized allegory and metaphor when the literal method indicated these were the intent of the writer.
31. Nevertheless, the school of Antioch lost its influence in the fifth century because of a theological controversy having to do with the two natures of Christ defined by the post-Reformation term, "hypostatic union."
32. The controversy reached fever pitch in the early to mid fifth century and had to do with how these two natures were to be defined. Alexandria emphasized the deity of Christ, influenced by the false doctrine of Theotokos, the notion that Mary was the "mother of God."
33. Nestorius of Antioch challenged this idea and stressed that the two natures were independent of each other. This is correct but his emphasis on the separation of the two natures enabled Cyril of Alexandria to wrongly assert that Nestorius denied the deity of Christ.
34. This controversy led to a church council at Ephesus in 431 at which Cyril, with the complicity of Pope Celestine I, was able to railroad Nestorius by charging him with heresy.



35. What Cyril accused Nestorius of writing was indeed a heresy but Nestorius never wrote or these things. Nevertheless, Nestorius was never allowed to defend himself and he was in effect excommunicated.
36. This resulted in the demise of the school at Antioch and with it the dominance of its literal-grammatical-historical system of hermeneutics.