

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Metonymy

(Jerry Fite)

Do you interpret the Bible literally? Knowing how many people abuse the Scriptures with their fanciful interpretations, completely ignoring the context, we are quick to respond with a resounding “yes”! However, if literal, interpret what was meant by Abraham saying to the rich man regarding his brothers, “*They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them*” (Luke 16:29). In what literal sense did the five live brothers “have Moses”, who had not only died hundreds of years prior, but no man knew where his body was buried (Deuteronomy 34:6, Jude 9)?

We first observe the context which includes hearing the prophets in a similar manner as hearing Moses. Were He and the prophets seeking out the five brethren by audibly talking to them, so they should now “hear them”? More accurately, we recognize the figure of speech called “metonymy” and accurately interpret the passage as the five brethren having what Moses and the prophets wrote preserved in Scripture. They were to hear or heed the writings of Moses and the prophets.

“Metonymy” comes from the Greek, meaning “change” of “name”. In our example the “change of name is naming Moses when his writings are meant. Thus we must interpret the verse “figuratively” if we are to interpret it accurately.

Naming the person when what the person produces is meant occurs in Scripture regarding the Holy Spirit. Focusing on Jesus’ verbal witness, John adds, “*For God giveth not the Spirit by measure to Him* (John 3:34). Since the Holy Spirit is a person, and cannot be divided up or measured out, we understand the passage accurately when the Holy Spirit’s power or bestowed gifts is meant.

Naming the Spirit, when the gifts of the Holy Spirit are meant is what Paul is asking in Galatians 3:2: “*Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?*” The context helps confirm this interpretation when Paul affirms, “*He therefore that supplieth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth it by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith*” (Galatians 3:5)?

Sometimes, naming what is produced when the person producing it is meant is seen when Moses gives commandment regarding the master and slave relationship: “*Notwithstanding, if he continue a day or two, he shall not be punished: for he is his money*” (Exodus 21:21). The master suffers enough punishment for smiting his servant by the servant not working, and therefore not producing money for the master. The servant is his money by metonymy.

Reading that people and animals drank from Jacob’s well, what do we visualize (John 4:12)? Were they all literally pressing their mouths against the stones of the well to drink? No, but my metonymy, we understand the contents of the well, or the water from the well is what is meant.

The same type of metonymy helps us understand what Paul means when he writes, “*for as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord’s death till He come*” (I Corinthians 11:26). Drinking the contents, not the cup itself is the proper understanding.

Do you always interpret Scripture literally?