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APPENDIX B

Literal and Figurative Interpretation

If my interpretation is accurate of even one-quarter of the Scripture passages I've cited in this book, then the Bible says a great deal more about Heaven than many Christians have ever considered. How could this be? A major reason is the interpretive assumptions we bring to Scripture.

For years, I taught biblical interpretation at a Bible college. We studied the different types of biblical literature and how to interpret each—including historical narrative, wisdom, poetry, prophecy, and instruction (especially the Epistles). There's considerable overlap between these literary forms. For instance, the Gospels are historical narrative but include Christ's parables. The letters are instructional but include some history and poetry. Biblical poetry often recalls historical events. Historical books contain prophecy. Prophetic books include history and instruction. Daniel and Revelation are apocalyptic books that contain both history and prophecy. Therefore, it's a mistake to say that every statement in a historical book should be taken literally and every statement in an apocalyptic book should be taken figuratively. We must always evaluate meaning in light of immediate context.

In studying biblical interpretation in the classroom, we'd often go to texts commonly understood a certain way, then try to discern what the original writer was conveying to the original readers. Often we found a striking difference between what the texts actually said and how they were popularly understood. We realized that our minds often weren't open to the meaning of the texts because of the preconceived ideas we were reading into them, ideas we'd heard from others or picked up from our culture, but which didn't correspond to Scripture.

This is why we read in Luke 15:7 that Jesus says there is "rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents," yet we don't believe that people in Heaven are aware of what's happening to people on Earth. We read in Luke 16:9 that we should "use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings," yet we don't believe we'll have homes in Heaven and open those homes to each other. We read passages in the prophets promising that God's people will live forever on a righteous Earth, then assume this must mean a spiritual blessing in an incorporeal Heaven. We read that we will have resurrection bodies and will eat and drink at tables with Christ and fellow believers, yet we don't actually envision this to be true. We read in the last two chapters of Revelation about nations on the New Earth and kings of those nations bringing their treasures into the city, yet we don't believe there will be real nations or kings of those nations. Many doubt there will be a city at all. The examples go on and on—when it comes to the eternal state, we don't let Scripture say what it says.

Then, despite these and innumerable other passages, we say, "The Bible tells us very little about Heaven." The truth, in my opinion, is that we simply don't *believe* the significant amount the Bible tells us about Heaven. Our christoplatonic assumptions have a stranglehold on us and impair our ability to interpret Scriptures that deal with the afterlife. Only by discarding those assumptions and replacing them with the scriptural doctrines of bodily resurrection and life on the New Earth can we interpret Scripture in ways that allow "bodies" to be bodies, "eating" to be

eating, and “dwelling places” to be dwelling places. I’m well aware that many readers will question my interpretations in this book, often because they’ve never heard them before. They sound far-fetched because we’re unaccustomed to them. Though some of my hundreds of interpretations are undoubtedly flawed, I believe most of them are sound. I encourage readers to let the texts speak for themselves—let God speak to you without filtering his words through christoplatonic assumptions.

If we abandon the unbiblical assumptions that predetermine our biblical interpretations, the otherworldly house of cards will come crashing down. In its place we’ll be able to construct a doctrine of Heaven that’s solidly based on revealed Scripture.

To do this, let’s further examine what went wrong—how, historically, the church has embraced false assumptions that distort our view of Heaven.

Scholasticism’s Unearthly Heaven

Prior to the Middle Ages, people thought of Heaven tangibly—as a city or a paradise garden, as portrayed in Scripture. But the writings of twelfth-century theologians such as Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard and thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas led to the philosophical movement known as scholasticism, which came to dominate medieval thought and ultimately took hostage the doctrine of Heaven.

The scholastic writers viewed Heaven in a much more impersonal, cold, and scientific manner than their predecessors. They departed from the Heaven of Scripture that contains *both* the unfamiliar transcendent presence of God, surrounded by the cherubim, *and* familiar earthly objects and personages, including people wearing clothes and having conversations. They embraced a Heaven entirely intangible, immaterial, and hence—they thought—more spiritual.ⁱ They claimed that Heaven couldn’t be made of familiar elements such as earth, water, air, and fire. Instead, they argued, “the empyrean [the highest heaven or heavenly sphere] must be made of a fifth and nobler element, the quintessence, which must be something like pure light.”ⁱⁱ And they ignored almost entirely—or allegorized into oblivion—the New Earth as the eternal dwelling place of resurrected humans living with the resurrected Jesus in a physical realm of natural wonders, physical structures, and cultural distinctives.

The scholastic view gradually replaced the old, more literal understanding of Heaven as garden and city, a place of earthly beauty, dwelling places, food, and fellowship. The loss was incalculable. The church to this day has never recovered from the unearthly—and anti-earthly—theology of Heaven constructed by well-meaning but misguided scholastic theologians. These men interpreted biblical revelation not in a straightforward manner, but in light of the intellectually seductive notions of Platonism, Stoicism, and Gnosticism.

According to Aquinas, neither plants nor animals will have a place in Heaven, the world of light.ⁱⁱⁱ He argued there would be no active life in Heaven, only contemplation.^{iv} Because God is the great object of our worship, Aquinas supposed we would think of nothing and no one but God.

Aquinas was absolutely correct that God is the cosmic center. But his faulty logic reshaped our understanding of Heaven by undercutting the biblical doctrines of physical resurrection, Paradise restored on the New Earth, and the redeemed culture and community of the New Earth’s holy city and nations. His view neglected the eternal nature of Christ’s humanity and immanence, entirely eclipsing them with his deity and transcendence. Scholastic theology requires that we negate or spiritualize countless Scriptures, rejecting the plain meaning.

Though some thinkers later departed from scholasticism, its underlying christoplatonic views never lost their grip on the Western church.

Should We Take Literally What Scripture Says about Heaven?

No one interprets the Bible absolutely literally or absolutely figuratively. Whether we tend more toward the literal or the figurative largely depends on our assumptions. People who believe Christ's body remained in the grave must interpret the Resurrection accounts figuratively. If they believe that Christ literally rose, but that Heaven will be a realm of disembodied spirits, then they will take some of Christ's words literally, but take figuratively Christ's references to Heaven being an actual place, mankind one day inheriting the earth, and the physical universe being renewed. They will take figuratively God's fashioning of the new heavens, New Earth, and New Jerusalem.

Obviously there are many figures of speech in the Bible, such as when Peter is called a rock and Christ is called a door, a lamb with seven eyes, and is said to have a sword coming out of his mouth.

Scripture is also full of accounts that should be taken *literally*, such as Noah's flood and ark, the plagues, crossing the Red Sea, and Christ being born in Bethlehem, calming the storm, healing people, multiplying loaves and fishes, being crucified, physically rising from the dead, and ascending.

I believe that our resurrection bodies wouldn't be called bodies if they weren't actual bodies. They wouldn't be said to be like Christ's body if they won't be, just as Christ wouldn't be portrayed as literally rising from the dead and having a resurrection body if he didn't. Similarly, Paradise wouldn't be called *paradise* if it wasn't Edenlike, at least to a degree. (It need not be identical to Eden, of course.) Similarly, I believe the New Earth wouldn't be called the New Earth if it wasn't earthlike. Kings wouldn't be called kings and ruling wouldn't be called ruling if the meaning didn't largely correspond to those words. (The meaning needn't be *limited* to what these words mean presently, but there must be substantial correlation.)

The detailed literal fulfillment of Christ's first coming and death portrayed in Isaiah 52–53 and 61:1–3 instructs us on how we should interpret Isaiah 60–66's detailed descriptions of a coming life of righteousness and peace on what is called a "new earth." Similarly, I believe that the historical accounts of Christ's life on Earth after his resurrection should instruct us how to interpret Revelation 21–22's account of our lives on the New Earth after our resurrection. It's true that large portions of both Isaiah and Revelation contain figurative and apocalyptic depictions, some of which should *not* be taken literally. Yet we shouldn't make the same mistake many scholars make with Isaiah 52–53, spiritualizing these passages and entirely missing their central—and very literal—points, even in the midst of much that's figurative.

How Literally Should We Interpret the Bible as a Whole?

It's demonstrably true that Revelation, as apocalyptic literature, often shouldn't be taken literally. Will the blood literally flow up to the horses' bridles (14:20)? Will Christians become pillars in the temple (3:12)? Is there really a seven-horned, seven-eyed lamb, and are there seven spirits of God (5:6)? If you took their temperature, would the Laodiceans be lukewarm? Does Christ literally spit them out of his mouth (3:16)? Is Christ actually knocking at the door (3:20)? Is he the lion of Judah (5:5) *and* the lamb with seven eyes? Is the woman literally clothed with the sun (12:1)? Does a great prostitute sit on many waters (17:1)? Is there literally a great red

dragon with seven heads (12:3)? These are figures of speech. They can't be taken literally without contradicting known facts, both observable to us and elsewhere revealed in Scripture.

It's obvious that certain numbers, especially the numbers seven and twelve, and various multiples of twelve, have symbolic significance in Revelation. As I've developed elsewhere, the thousand years of the Millennium have been understood either literally or figuratively by orthodox Christians throughout history.^v (However, those who disagree about the Millennium can nonetheless agree on the New Earth.)

When John the Baptist said, "Look, the Lamb of God," no one should (or does) think he was affirming that Jesus had wool and walked on four legs (John 1:29). Rather, John meant, "Look, this man Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system." Note, however, that this figure of speech alludes to realities with physical correspondence—the actual, literal death of Jesus on the cross. So, the figure of speech had an actual (one might say almost literal) fulfillment in Christ's crucifixion.

Christ's words to the seven churches of Revelation 2–3 contain some figurative language. But shouldn't we believe these were actually seven churches, located in the specified geographical locations? In Revelation, didn't the real apostle John witness certain real events, some past, some present, and some future, including the physical return of Christ to the earth? Revelation, like other books of Scripture, contains passages that must be interpreted according to their context.

Peter, in an instructional letter, tells the church about the new heavens and Earth, with no suggestion that he's speaking figuratively. Isaiah spoke of new heavens and a New Earth in very tangible, descriptive, earthly ways. Hence, when we hear of God creating new heavens and a New Earth in Revelation 21, we would be mistaken to assume it doesn't have a literal meaning corresponding to the Bible's previous references to a New Earth.

When Jesus is described as a lamb with seven eyes, it contradicts known facts to take that literally. But would it contradict known facts to believe that on the New Earth there will be a great city with streets of gold and gates made of pearls (Revelation 21:21), and with trees and a river (22:1-2)?

When Christ is described as riding on a white horse (Revelation 19:11), must this be purely symbolic? When he rode a colt into Jerusalem (John 12:12-16), it had symbolic meaning, but it was also literal—*he was actually riding a colt*. If Christ could descend from Heaven at the Second Coming, why couldn't he just as easily come down riding on a horse? Kings often rode horses into vanquished cities. Thus, commentators say that riding a horse symbolizes a kingly entrance. Of course it does. But that's because *kings really did ride horses into cities*. And they really did sit on thrones that had symbolic significance. Christ has a body suited to sitting on a throne and riding a horse, doesn't he? He created horses and exults in their magnificence (Job 39:19-25). Why should we assume he won't actually return on horseback or sit on a throne?

Of course, I recognize that *thrones* and *horses* can be used figuratively, particularly in apocalyptic literature. But if you look at the passages of Scripture I've cited in this book, you'll find that most of them are *not* from apocalyptic literature. Many of them are from epistles and books of historical narrative where the authors normally expect us to take their words literally.

Because we know that Christ's resurrected body is physical and that our resurrected bodies will be like his, there isn't a compelling reason to assume that other physical depictions of the New Earth must be figurative. The doctrine of resurrection should guide our interpretation of texts concerning the eternal state.

When faced with a decision about whether to interpret a passage of Scripture literally or figuratively, how do we know which is right? One way is to interpret based on what the Bible says elsewhere about the same subject. Consider Revelation 2:7, “I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” A figurative or allegorical interpreter might say that the tree of life stands for eternal life, and its fruit symbolizes that God will spiritually nourish us in Heaven. A literal interpreter would say it means there’s an actual Paradise with a real tree bearing real fruit that will actually be eaten by people with real bodies.

In Genesis 1–3, Scripture tells us about mankind’s nature and about Paradise. Was Paradise an actual place? Yes. Was the tree of life there actually a tree? Yes. Did it have fruit on it that people could eat? Yes. Did the people have actual bodies with which they took bites of fruit, chewed, and swallowed? Yes. If this tree of life is our reference point when we read Revelation 2:7, I see no reason to believe that the tree of life depicted there isn’t a literal, physical tree.

As Francis Schaeffer points out in *Genesis in Space and Time*, it’s essential to a Christian understanding of history that we realize the early chapters of the Bible are not allegory or metaphor. It’s also important that the final chapters of the Bible, which correspond so closely to the first, aren’t stripped of their physical reality.

If after we die we’ll never again be physical beings living in a physical place, then by all means we should not take Revelation 21–22—or any of the other passages about Heaven—literally. But because Scripture teaches us that we will be resurrected beings serving God in a resurrected universe, we should take at face value what it says about the New Earth.

Can Something Be Symbolic and Literal?

One of the frustrating aspects of christoplatonic interpretation is the tendency of interpreters to assume that because something is symbolic it can’t also be literal. Earlier I referred to thrones. A throne is rightly regarded as a symbol of power and authority. When Jesus says that his disciples will sit on thrones and rule a kingdom on the earth (Luke 22:30), some regard this as purely symbolic. But every earthly king sits on a throne. His throne is, of course, symbolic of his power and authority, but it’s also *an actual physical object*. Nevertheless, interpreters often understand the throne in the New Jerusalem as purely figurative (Revelation 21:3, 5). They read the word *city* and think “relationship,” *walls* and think “security,” *gates* and think “access to God.” Personally, I believe in all these symbolic meanings, but I also believe there will be a real city (the New Jerusalem) with real walls and real gates.

Suppose you travel to Switzerland. After returning, you tell others about what you saw. You describe the Alps, the jagged peaks and slopes, the beautiful rivers and trees, the shops and the city streets. What would you think if someone said, “When he speaks of the peaks, he’s speaking of the lofty, transcendent nature of Switzerland, which he experienced in a disembodied state, floating in the spiritual realm. By *streets*, he means that one may journey there into deeper spiritual truths. By *waters*, he means the place is pure and life-giving, a source of refreshment. By *trees*, he means the place is alive with a beauty which can’t be put in human words.”

How would you feel? Frustrated? How might God feel when he tells us about the New Earth and the New Jerusalem—a huge city with a river going through it, and the tree of life bearing fruit, and people living there, coming and going through its gates—and we take it as nothing but a collection of symbols, without substance? Both in Genesis 1–3 and Revelation 20–22, in order to generate “spiritual” meanings, interpreters too often strip the text of its literal meanings.

Is the New Jerusalem a Literal, Massive City?

In describing the New Jerusalem, the apostle John writes, “The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass” (Revelation 21:21). The pearls John describes are gates set in walls that are two hundred feet thick.

Commentators routinely suggest, “Of course, these are not actual streets of gold.” But why do they say that? In part, at least, because of their christoplatonic assumptions. Disembodied spirits don’t need streets to walk on. Incorporeal realms don’t have real cities with real streets, real gates, and real citizens. But isn’t John’s description of gates and streets further evidence that Heaven is a physical realm designed for human citizens? Why wouldn’t a resurrected world inhabited by resurrected people have actual streets and gates?

Likewise, most books on Heaven argue that the city cannot really be the size it’s depicted as being in Revelation 21:15-17: “The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. . . . He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man’s measurement, which the angel was using.”

Twelve thousand stadia equates to fourteen hundred miles in each direction. According to one writer on Heaven, “It would dishonor the heavenly Architect to contend that its dimensions were meant to be taken literally.”^{vi} He doesn’t say *why* it would dishonor God, and I have no idea why it would. But, as usual, taking Scripture allegorically or figuratively is considered the high ground, whereas literal interpretation is considered naive or crass.

If these dimensions are not literal, why does Scripture specifically give the dimensions and then say “by man’s measurement, which the angel was using” (Revelation 21:17)? The emphasis on “man’s measurement” almost seems to be an appeal: “Please believe it—the city is really this big!”

Suppose God wanted to convey that the city really is fourteen hundred miles wide and deep and high. What else would we expect him to say besides what this passage says? Is it possible for God to make such a city? Obviously—he’s the creator of the universe. Is it possible for people in glorified bodies to dwell in such a city? Yes.

I have no problem believing that the numbers have symbolic value, with the multiples of twelve suggesting the perfection of God’s bride. However, most commentators act as if we must choose between literal dimensions and ones with symbolic significance. But we don’t. My wedding ring is a great symbol—but it’s also a real object.

Some argue, “But this city rises above the earth’s oxygen level.” Can’t God put oxygen fourteen hundred miles high on the New Earth if he wishes? Or can’t he make it so we don’t have to breathe oxygen? Such things are no problem for God.

Some argue that nothing could be that big. It would cover two-thirds of the continental United States. If the great pyramids of Egypt or the Great Wall of China amaze you, imagine a city that extends five miles into the sky—let alone fourteen hundred miles! Envision the city disappearing into the clouds.

Some claim anything that big would weigh so much it would disrupt the earth’s orbit. Of course, the New Earth could be much bigger than the present one. In any case, issues of mass and gravity are child’s play to the Creator.

That the dimensions are equal on all sides is reminiscent of the Holy of Holies in Israel’s Temple (1 Kings 6:20). This likely symbolizes God’s presence, because the city is called his new dwelling place (Revelation 21:2-3). By suggesting there’s symbolism, am I contradicting my

suggestion that the measurements are literal? Not at all. Many physical objects, including the Ark of the Covenant and the high priest's breastplate and its stones, had symbolic significance.

Is it possible that the city's dimensions aren't literal? Of course. The doctrine of the New Earth certainly doesn't stand or fall with the size of the New Jerusalem. However, my concern is this: If we assume the city's dimensions can't be real, people will likely believe the city isn't real. If it doesn't have its stated dimensions, then it's a short step to believing it doesn't have any dimensions at all. Then we think of the New Earth as not being a resurrected realm suited for resurrected people.

Christoplatonism produces certain interpretive assumptions, which in turn reinforce the Christoplatonism that Scripture argues against.

Subjective Interpretation

An interpretive approach that makes everything symbolic also makes everything subjective. It will never allow us to break free of our assumptions and see what the Bible really says about Heaven, our bodily resurrection, and life on the New Earth. If we assume that our heavenly bodies won't be real, and Heaven itself won't be a tangible, physical place, and we won't really eat in Heaven, live in physical dwellings, or rule over actual cities or nations, then we'll automatically interpret all Scripture references to these things as figures of speech—which is exactly what interpreters often do.

What happens in figurative interpretation? The river going through the New Jerusalem becomes God's grace, the tree becomes Christ, the city walls become security. Or the river becomes Christ, the tree God's grace, and the city walls God's omnipotence. Or river, tree, and walls all become Christ. Or the fruit from the tree of life becomes the fruit of the Spirit or the attributes of God, and so on. But if the text can be said to mean *everything*, it ceases to mean *anything*. One cannot have serious interpretive discussions with those who interpret all references to the New Earth figuratively. Why? Because as soon as you cite a passage depicting anything tangible, they will dismiss it by saying, "You can't take that literally."

Suppose someone believes that the tree of life symbolizes the cross of Christ, and its fruit is a blood-colored liquid. They decide that the tree bearing fruit means Jesus hangs on the cross every day in Heaven, his blood drips from the fruit and flows into the river, and we go to the river to drink daily of his freshly shed blood.

I don't believe this heresy—I just made it up to illustrate the point that once we allow symbolism and allegory and figurative interpretation to reign, "making it up" becomes routine. Anyone can believe and defend anything they want. Interpreters can twist any passage into heresy, as Origen and those of his interpretive school often did. Cults are built on this approach to biblical interpretation as people are taught "hidden meanings." "Experts" teach people hidden meanings, which conveniently correspond to whatever the expert believes or wants others to believe. Even within the church, people may be intimidated into believing that they're not smart enough to understand a text's "real meaning."

Interpreters end up doing exactly what Revelation warns us not to do—taking away from and adding to the words of the prophecy (Revelation 22:18-19). We take away from Scripture by denying its apparent meaning. We add to it by supplying new meanings not supported by the text. When I mentioned the tree of life in Revelation 22, someone told me, "But the tree of life is Jesus, not an actual tree." Was the tree of life in the Garden of Eden also Jesus, and not an actual tree? When Adam and Eve ate its fruit, were they picking Jesus or eating him? If it was a real tree on the original Earth, why wouldn't it be a real tree on the New Earth? If the rivers that ran

through Eden were actual rivers, why wouldn't the river flowing through the city in Revelation 22 also be an actual river?

That we'll forever enjoy a resurrected life on a New Earth isn't true because we want it to be. It's true because God says it is. Paying attention to context and taking other Scriptures into account, we need to draw God's truth from the text, not superimpose our preconceived ideas onto it.

ⁱ Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 80–81.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 84.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 89.

^v Randy Alcorn, "Additional Thoughts on the Millennium," Eternal Perspective Ministries, <http://www.epm.org/millennium.html>.

^{vi} John Gilmore, *Probing Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 114.



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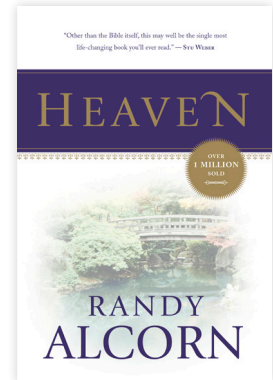
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About Randy Alcorn

Randy is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries and the best-selling author of over 50 books (over nine million in print) including *Heaven*, *The Treasure Principle*, and the Gold Medallion winner *Safely Home*.

Randy resides in Gresham, Oregon with his wife, Nanci. They have two married daughters and five grandsons. He enjoys hanging out with his family, biking, tennis, research, and reading.



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Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM) is a nonprofit ministry dedicated to teaching principles of God’s Word and assisting the church in ministering to the unreached, unfed, unborn, uneducated, unreconciled, and unsupported people around the world. The common element in all of our writing and teaching ministry is an emphasis on seeing life through the eyes of eternity, and thereby learning to live now to the glory of God.

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