

# Introduction: On Biblical Literalism

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The trouble with many “literal” readings of scripture is that they ignore the letter of the text. These readings are literal only in a figurative sense. Biblical fundamentalism, for instance, rather than being conservative and literal, often depends on highly selective, thoroughly modern, and strikingly liberal readings of key texts. Why, then, is biblical fundamentalism associated with scriptural literalism?

In debates about scriptural interpretation, the word literal often just functions as shorthand for the claim that the text refers to something real. In such cases, the word is used without regard to how something is referenced—the designation of how a text refers being the kind of work the word literal is meant to do—and instead is used to stake a position on the success of a referential connection. In these debates, literally just means “really.” Or, even more crudely, the word literal becomes shorthand for “true” and, conversely, the word figurative becomes shorthand for “false.” To be literally true is to be really true. Then, saying that something is “only” figurative sounds like an attempt to dodge the question of reference or to soften or sugarcoat the verdict that what’s being talked about is make-believe.

One basic problem with this way of talking is that it confuses two distinct issues. How a text refers—be it literally or figuratively—is no measure for the success of its referential connection. First, with respect to how reference works, it is important to recognize that all referential connections work by way of detour. Rather than connecting directly with a referent (with the object or idea in question), we connect with it indirectly by way of a web of words. We detour through language. Reference always involves this layer of indirection and third-party mediation. Terms like literal and figurative are meant to roughly measure the size of the detour that a given referential connection takes. The more common and familiar a referential detour is, the more literal we say the language is. The more circuitous and unconventional a referential detour is, the more figurative the language becomes. The difference between literal language and figurative language is one of degree, not kind. Both are complex, both are oblique, and both involve layers of mediation and redirection. Literal references that work by way of ordinary and familiar detours require minimal interpretive work. Figurative references that work by way of more complex detours may loop through several semantic layers and then require a recursive interpretive gesture. But whether the interpretive gesture is relatively simple or recursively complex, the capacity for real referential connection is the same.

The advantage of more literal language is that it can often hit its referential target with a minimal amount of fuss. But this simplicity is also its weakness. Figurative complexity can also be an advantage—otherwise we wouldn’t bother with it—and this advantage isn’t just window dressing. Figurative language can often pack more referential punch than literal language because its route is unfamiliar and because the wider arc of its complex detour loops more things into the referential grid from which it draws power. Because its detour is bigger, figurative language involves more elements. And because it involves more elements, it can gather a bigger crowd of witnesses. When successful, figurative language can often draw more power and precipitate a more substantial semantic cloud. Literal references, while simpler, tend to be thinner and less substantial.

Problems arise, though, when the ordinary and familiar detour of a literal reference depends on a referential terrain that we no longer share with the source material. This happens when, for example, the words we’re reading come from a world that diverges from ours because it belongs to a foreign way of life, to a place that is far away, or

to a time that is long past. A literal mode of reference gets both complicated and attenuated when what was ordinary and familiar to its original audience is no longer ordinary and familiar to us. A reference that functioned with relative simplicity and minimal detour in its own time and place may start to look more and more complex and figurative to our eyes.

This is the thing to watch for. And this is where the two senses of the word literal diverge. On one hand, we have literalism (as it's co-opted by biblical fundamentalism) as shorthand for the claim that there are no worlds but the ordinary one present and familiar to us and all serious modes of reference refer only and directly to our familiar world. On the other hand, we have literality as a name for just one among many modes of real reference that all operate by way of detour, a mode whose relative simplicity depends on its successfully connecting with one specific member of the set of possible worlds.

Fundamentalism co-opts literalism by denying the possibility of multiple worlds, of historical heterogeneity, and, in the end, of history itself. Fundamentalism ignores the letter of the text by ignoring the divergence of worlds. It treats past worlds as if they had not passed. It treats everything in the present tense: the only world in which real reference takes place is our present world. In this sense, fundamentalism is ahistorical. It tries to cheat the demands of time—and the delays and detours required for real referential connection—by imposing an illusion of temporal homogeneity. Fundamentalism denies that texts themselves have a history, and so, ironically, it ends up denying, in practice, the real historicity of the past worlds referred to in those texts.

Consider a literal reading of Genesis 1. What does the letter of the text claim? What kind of world does it show?

In the beginning, there is a watery chaos. God divides these waters in two by inserting a “firmament,” a kind of solid dome that creates a bubble of air—the sky—between the water above and the water beneath. But sometimes the water above the dome still leaks through. This is rain. (In general, this biblical world looks something like a snow globe and heaven sits atop its sturdy dome.)<sup>1</sup> Then God gathers the water that remains on the floor of the dome into one place so that dry land can appear. Lights, like the sun and the moon and the stars, are installed in the roof of the dome and, set in intricate patterns, spin across its face. As God calls them into being, vegetation covers the dry land, fish swarm the sea, birds fill the air, and creeping things roam the plains.

Now compare this narrowly literal reading of the letter of the text with what popularly gets described as a “literal” reading. Take, for example, the highly imaginative and ahistorical way a contemporary film (like Terrence Malick’s beautiful 2011 film, *The Tree of Life*) might visually represent the Genesis text. The setting will be dramatically different. Here, in the beginning, would be outer space, and space is filled with stars and nebulae and planets. The earth is a piecemeal ball of molten matter suspended in a vacuum. Its crust is dark and cooling, and it orbits a star against a backdrop of uncountable galaxies. The scene is volcanic. The planet’s transformation is incremental, and it fills a nearly immeasurable amount of time as, gradually, life creeps into view and fills the earth.

Here, in this second case, the letter of an ancient Hebrew cosmology gets paired with high-end, twenty-first-century, CGI-powered renderings of a contemporary pop cosmology. Were it to zoom across the film’s frame, the starship *Enterprise* and its crew would look perfectly at home. Now, noting the odd pairing involved in this juxtaposition is not the same thing as objecting to it. But we shouldn’t kid ourselves that it is a literal rendering of what the text communicates. It is, rather, a highly figurative transposition of an ancient cosmology that, by way of this transposition, makes a bid for contemporary relevance.

Contemporary relevance is not to be eschewed. But when reading old and exotic texts like the opening chapters of Genesis, it is the nature of that relevance that is at issue. Referentially, the text has two distinguishable targets: (1) its account of God's grace actively at work in the ordering of the world and (2) its account of the world that God's grace ordered. The very modern and highly imaginative fundamentalist reading takes the second target—that ancient Hebrew account of the world—as the thing that must be made present and relevant. But, because our world has diverged from that of the ancient Hebrews, fundamentalism can force a “literal” reading of the text only by systematically ignoring the letter of the text and supplying, instead, a reading that is extremely figurative. The worry is that if their ancient texts don't straightforwardly refer to our present world, then the reality of God's intervention in both worlds will be suspect. The irony is that, in their zeal to save the possibility of referential success for the second target (and then, by implication, the first), they risk compromising the text's ability to successfully connect with the first target: God. It is neither our place nor within our power to save that ancient Hebrew world from passing away. And, moreover, we need not save it in order to save the claim that God was willing to show himself in it. God can show his grace at work in whatever kind of world and in whatever span of time he likes. It's the showing of his grace that is decisive, not the continuity of worlds. And, more, it is the discontinuity of past worlds that weighs in favor of their actual historicity.

If, though, we are willing to let the text refer to a world that has passed away (to a Hebrew understanding of the world that is no longer given to us), then the text can become relevant to our redemption. No longer expending energy on downplaying the text's real history by pretending that the ancient Hebrews' world is straightforwardly assimilable to ours, we're free to focus our efforts on connecting with the referential reality of the first target: God's grace. The critical point of real referential continuity between the manifestation of God's grace in their world and the manifestation of God's grace in ours is not the continuity of our worlds but the continuity of God's grace. We don't have to fret about whether we share the same world. Rather, we have to worry about whether we share the same God.

This is the pivotal question: can an account of the real manifestation of God's grace in their lost world help make the reality of that ongoing grace more visible in ours? The degree to which this grace is manifest is the degree to which the text has revelatory force. Grace is the measure of a redemptive revelation.

Further, it is crucial to note that, often, figurative language can display the reality of God's grace with more referential force than literal language can and, importantly, that figurative language may move more easily between worlds. We may no longer think, as the Hebrews did, that the world is flat or that the sky is a solid dome, but there are aspects of how they lived in that world—the fabric of love, loss, anger, affect, light, sensation, and vulnerability—that remain common ground. And these aspects of life are often both the hardest to talk about and the most receptive to grace. Trying to connect with these translucent aspects of life, and trying to convey with real referential and revelatory force the nature of that connection, can require us to bend language into unusual shapes and employ it figuratively. But this resort to more figurative language is not a failure of reference. It is not a flight from truth into consoling poetic fantasies. Rather, it is a triumph of language's capacity to handle real truths by way of complex detours through thick semantic webs that can, as a result, fittingly represent something of the complexity and thickness of God's own grace as it quietly weaves its way through the fabric of worlds and lives.

The papers presented in this volume demonstrate a keen awareness of this complexity and are finely tuned both to the divergence of our world from the world of Genesis 2–3 and to the manifestations of God's grace that are nonetheless common to each of them. The specific set of papers included here is the product of a larger project called The Mormon Theology Seminar. The seminar is an independent scholarly forum dedicated to organizing

short-term, collaborative readings of Mormon scripture that (1) offer close readings of key texts and (2) experiment with the potential theological implications of these readings.

This particular seminar took Genesis 2–3 as its text. The six seminar participants—three women and three men with diverse academic backgrounds—worked on a weekly basis through the details of Genesis 2–3, verse by verse and word by word, for three months. At the conclusion of the seminar’s intensely collaborative work, the participants each chose an angle specific to their interests and training and drafted a conference paper based on that approach. A public conference presenting these papers was held at Utah Valley University in June 2013. The essays that follow are polished and expanded versions of these conference presentations. The essays clearly show both a common core of understanding won through close collaborative effort and a wide diversity of methodological approaches and areas of interest. They range from a grammatical and philological examination of key technical terms in the Hebrew text, to a philosophical investigation of the story’s existential comedy, to practical reflections about the implications of the text for environmental stewardship. On the whole, they demonstrate the vitality of contemporary work in Mormon theology.

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## NOTES

1. I touch on this same topic from a less philosophical perspective in *Letters to a Young Mormon* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 51–56.