The Problem with "Plain Sense" Reading of Scripture

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A question I often hear in Sunday School classes or in discussions about the meaning of Scripture is: Why can't we just take the Bible for what it says, at face value, "literally"? If what it says makes plain sense, can't we assume we have the truth?

This sounds like a good principle, and in "principle" I would agree with it. I understand that the appeal of a "plain sense" reading of the text is to try not to read things into the text. I have found, however, that a "plain sense" reading actually takes far less notice of the actual story itself, and must read far more things into the text or simply ignore many features of the text to make it all "work," than do other ways of interpreting the text. The main reason for this is because what the "plain sense" of the text says to us, it says in the context of a 21st century view of the world. In other words, we read and hear the text from our own perspective of the world, which is far removed from what most of the biblical text says in its "plain sense" from within its own perspective of the world.

I agree totally that we should let Scripture stand on its own and not try to make it say what we want it to say, twist it to support our own pet doctrines or ideas, or ignore those features of the text that make us uncomfortable. One of my frequent appeals is to return to Scripture and take it far more seriously than we often do. But I think that takes far more work and understanding than just reading the text and assuming that whatever we think makes sense to us it what it really means, and so is the Truth.

There are three crucial problems with a literalist or "plain sense" approach to the text.

1. **The first problem** with a "plain sense" reading is the range of knowledge and understanding of Scripture and its background of the one applying "plain sense" to the text.
2. **The second problem** is that in a plain sense approach, we most often assume our own frame of reference for the text and assume that what makes sense to us from our own cultural, social, religious, or emotional context is what the text itself means to say.
3. **The third problem** is that a "plain sense" reading often does not or cannot see features of the text like irony, word play, metaphorical writing, multilevel symbols, or other much more subtle features of communication that go far beyond, or sometimes in direct contrast to, what seems to be the "plain" meaning.

An example of **the first problem** can be seen in a "plain sense" reading of the vision of Psalm 89 (19-28). The plain sense reading tells us that the new king from the line of David will be a military leader who will restore the empire of Solomon and expand his conquests across the sea and the great rivers even though he has suffered a temporary defeat. In other words, the new king will be a conquering military leader like his ancestor David who will "crush his foes, and strike down those who hate him." Even Christians knowing full well the actual life and teachings of Jesus have tended to project military images onto the Kingdom of God, and ended up with fiascoes like the crusades.

But that reading of the text does not consider that all of the symbols in this passage come from the cultural context of the Ancient Near East, and are *creation symbols of peace* not martial symbols of war. The "battle" images refer to God bringing peace and justice into the chaos and disorder of the world (cf. Isa 11:1-9), which is always symbolized by water in such contexts. Note that a feature of the New Jerusalem is that there will be no more sea (Rev. 21:1). That is a theological statement, not a geographical one. But such aspects are not and cannot be obvious from a "plain sense" reading, either in the psalm or in Revelation. It

takes a thorough understanding of the cultural and historical background of the text to understand it correctly. And yet, for everyone familiar with those cultural images in ancient Israel, reading these images as metaphors of peace rather than war would readily be the "plain sense" of the text.

So, if we lived in ancient Israel 3,000 years ago, the plain sense reading would be, well, plain. But to us today, it is not at all plain. In fact, what appears to us as the plain sense reading is actually nearly the opposite of what the text communicated in its own context.

Likewise, the following verses of this psalm (vv. 29-37) seem very plainly to be referring to the covenant with David, echoing 2 Samuel 7 in which God promised unconditionally that David's lineage would always rule over Israel. That is the plain sense of both texts, and is repeated in other places. Yet, we know that historically this did not happen. So either the plain meaning is wrong, which it can't be from an inerrantist perspective (see The Modern Inerrancy Debate), or the text does not mean what it plainly appears to mean to us modern readers. http://www.crivoice.org/

To say that this is really referring to Jesus rather than a Davidic king, which most who advocate a "plain sense" or literalist reading contend, sidesteps the whole issue. This itself violates the plain sense of the text by introducing ideas that are not here, and to which later writings do not refer in retrospect. There are many other examples of this problem in the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament.

The **second problem** is much more difficult to identify without knowing some broader features of the biblical text and biblical theology. How do we know that a verse that appears to make good sense to us means anything close to what we think it means? Or why do we not want to take some verses at face value when their meaning is fairly obvious? For example, I find many discussions of war among conservative Christians interesting in that so many are quite willing to dismiss Jesus' rather clear teaching on non-aggression and non-violence simply because it does not fit with certain ideas from a particular culture or way of thinking. So, they contend, Jesus did not really mean to turn our other cheek to enemies, because that is far too idealistic and not practical in a modern world in which violence is all too common. As a result, the plain sense reading of the text is rejected in this case because it does not fit with other ideas. The problem is the consistency with which this principle can be applied to the biblical text.

I am suggesting that a plain sense approach to Scripture, without some other deliberate and carefully thought out methods of interpreting the text, will most often cause us to see in Scripture what we already think about issues. **That's why it seems so "plain sense" to us!** That "plain sense" tells us that Jesus did not *really* mean for us to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies and persecutors in *all* situations, because that is impractical in our cultural context. And common sense tells us that the command "Do not kill" really only means premeditated murder by people who have no good reason to do so, and could not possibly apply to capital punishment, or war, or killing intruders in our home, or abortion to save the life of the mother. My point is, we do a *lot* of interpretation in terms of our own ideas, even when the "plain sense" seems obvious. If that is true, what do we really think we are doing with the passages in which the "plain" sense is not quite so plain?!

As an example of the **third problem**, we can note that irony is a feature that a plain sense reading will almost always miss. For example, I have seen Habakkuk 1:13 quoted as an ontological description of God, telling us what God is really like ("Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrong doing"). That is then sometimes used as a way to interpret Jesus' quotation of Psalm 22 from the cross ("Why have you forsaken me?"). This is combined with a certain theory of the Atonement to produce a very hybrid "plain sense" reading. As Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world on the cross, since God is too pure to look upon evil, he turned away from Jesus prompting Jesus' so-called cry of dereliction. The problem is that the verse is Habakkuk is heavily ironic, and in fact, means exactly the opposite of what the words say. It is a statement made for the purpose of demonstrating that it is not true since God is, indeed, looking on evil in the world by allowing the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem! That rather seriously undermines this reading of Jesus' words from the cross.

The same is true of the people's first response to Joshua (Josh 24:16) or the apparent prayer of repentance in Hosea (6:1-3). Both appear to be sincere, but more careful study and an understanding of how the biblical writers use irony to make a point reveal that they are both insincere and betray the people's misunderstanding of faithful response to God. The words say one thing, but the context makes it clear that exactly the opposite is the meaning. There are many other examples.

The issue, then, is **how** we go about deciding whether something is a literal statement to be taken in its plain sense or is a figure of speech. For example, how many of us have ever misunderstood someone who was joking and we thought they were being serious? How we perceive the comments makes a great deal of difference in how later conversation unfolds!

Because of certain ideas about the nature of Scripture, we have had a hard time seeing Scripture in terms of *people* writing, and so easily misunderstand more subtle forms of writing. And so we think we are listening to one thing when in fact the writer is saying something quite different. That simply calls us beyond a "literal" mode of thinking to distinguish what kind of writing with which we are dealing. It is often easy to think a certain text is a statement about the ultimate reality of God, and that seems to us to be its plain sense because that is what we have always been taught or believed. Yet, if it is really a biblical writer making fun of someone's false ideas about God, we're going to end up with some very wrong conclusions! That kind of decision about the text is very hard to come by with a literal, plain sense reading.

The same applies in different ways to other features of the text such as literary context, original language, cultural and historical context, etc. As each of those aspects of the text is examined, we have moved further away from a "plain sense" or a "literal" reading of the text, and closer to an exegetical analysis of the text to hear the theological message.

Now, it is true that some of the great Reformers, such as John Calvin and John Wesley, advocated a "plain sense" reading of the text. Moderns who have wanted to avoid much critical examination of the text in favor of a literal surface reading have often quoted them. However, we need to note two crucial elements of the context in which they were advocating a "plain sense" reading, and what they meant by that.

First, this classical plain sense approach was a product of the Reformation, a major tenet of which was to recover the authority of the Scripture for the people. For centuries, interpretation of the Bible had been under the control of the dogmatic systems of the church and was used to promote those systems. In some cases, Scripture was used as little more than proof texts for a doctrinal system that had been built from centuries of practice and philosophical speculation. The primary authority for the church was the church's own traditions, supported only in a secondary way by Scripture. The Reformers, beginning with Martin Luther, insisted on replacing the authority of the dogmatic systems of the church with the authority of Scripture. In this context, "plain sense" meant biblical study apart from those creedal determiners of meaning.

Second, since the early centuries of the church, biblical interpretation had been influenced by the categories of Greek philosophy. One of the early debates of the church concerning Scripture was how to relate the Old Testament to the New Testament. Since the early church had struggled to distance itself from Judaism, there was reluctance to make the connection historically. So, using the categories of Greek idealistic philosophy, the connections were made on the level of typology and allegory. The Old Testament was seen as the shadowy images of the true reality of the New Testament. This often led to a nearly complete dismissal of any historical setting or meaning for the Old Testament in favor of a spiritualized and Christianized symbolic meaning. In this context, "plain sense" was a modest call for a return to seeing the Old Testament in different ways than the sometimes fanciful allegories that had become popular in the early church.

This simply says that while the Reformers did, indeed, advocate a "plain sense" reading of the text, it did not mean quite the same thing to them that it does to modern advocates who equate a "plain sense" reading with virtually no biblical study. The Reformers who wanted a plain sense reading took great care to do

biblical study, most writing detailed commentaries on the Bible. To them, "plain sense" meant that there was a lot of work to do in understanding the biblical text rather than simply accepting what the church had always said the text ought to mean.

So, many people want to be able to assume a "plain sense" of the text. Unfortunately, there is a high risk of misunderstanding the biblical text with such an approach. In some cases it is simply because we assume that the text means what we already think. In some cases we do not realize the historical distance between the text and us. For some, it is not being able to see the biblical text in all its richness and diversity. And for some, it is simply a matter of not wanting to spend the time studying to understand what the text might actually say beyond the words on the page. In any case, the responsibility of students of Scripture is to hear to text for what it says theologically. And that often takes a great deal of time and effort in moving beyond the physical words on the page.