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## Are We Only Interpreting the Bible This Way Because of Our Post-Enlightenment Way of Thinking?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether we're only interpreting the Bible according to authorial intent because of our post-Enlightenment way of thinking and whether Zephaniah 3:17 is being taken out of context when someone takes comfort in it.

\* How should I respond to someone who says, "The only reason you interpret the Bible by going back to authorial intent is that you live in a post-Enlightenment way of thinking, and others might interpret it differently"?

\* Am I taking Zephaniah 3:17 out of context when I take comfort in it?

### Transcript

Hello, and welcome to Stand to Reason's hashtag-STRask podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Kockel. Hello, and welcome. Hello, Greg.

Stand to Reason's. It's your hashtag, whatever it's called. Oh, Greg.

All right, we should get into a question here. This one comes from Jackson. What would you say to someone who says, the only reason you interpret the Bible by going back to authorial intent is because you live in a post-Enlightenment way of thinking.

That might not be the way others interpret the Bible? Well, they're right. That's not the way others interpret the Bible, but it is the way human beings have understood writing from the beginning of time. Okay.

You don't see, now people are going to say, you weren't there at the beginning of time. I'm not sure. How do you know? It's because we have writings that have survived, and we have writings about the writings that have survived, and what we're trying to figure out in those writings that have survived about writings that have survived is what the author is trying to tell us.

The linguistic turn, the post-modern linguistic turn is a new development. Obviously, many people adopt it now. And so there are other people who interpret differently.

Yes, but it is a non-functional way of interpreting things. And the perfect example is the person who says, can you read the claim against, I'll say, the classical way of reading text? The only reason you interpret the Bible by going back to authorial intent is because you live in a post-Enlightenment way of thinking. Yes.

And my take on that line is that this person actually hates pygmies, and thinks all pygmies ought to be executed. That's my belief about what he's talking about. Now, of course, this is bizarre, but what I'm doing is I'm employing their technique.

I'm deconstructing, to use the terminal literary sense, I'm deconstructing their statements in light of my views, not in light of their intent. So the point here is you cannot have any communication that works unless you focus on authorial intent, even the charge against people who have this standard view of understanding how language works cannot be understood according to their post-modern linguistic turn. You have to take their words at face value and try to understand what their intention is.

Otherwise, the phrase, your misrepresenting my words is meaningless. All strawman fallacies, where there's a misconstrual of somebody's view when you attack the strawman, the distortion. Well, that's meaningless because both of those things require an understanding of that that the authorial intent is critical to make sense of language.

There is no other way that language works. So we have a standard way of reading and understanding people's writing, okay, and that's what makes language work. And then we have people who play games.

And that's okay. There are all kinds of games people play with language. That's what puns are all about.

That's a play on words. Or that's what kind of frivolous think of the jobber walkie, you know, the poem, the jobber walkie. This is a bunch of invented words that I'm trying to remember the author of the jobber walkie.

Lewis Carroll. Lewis Carroll, right. Or that that are evocative of certain things.

And so he throws them into this wonderful poem. And then he's playing with language. Okay, you can't, you can't ask about the authorial intent of Brillig twas Brillig, which is the way that starts.

Because what he's trying to do is conjure up a kind of an emotion, not communicate. But Greg, you just did that. You said you can't ask authorial intent.

And then you said what he's trying to do is. Yeah, you're right. But what I'm saying is

there are playful ways to use language.

Okay. And yeah, you're right. When authors use language in a playful right way, they have a different kind of intent.

Good observation. Don't you ever do that again? I'm here. I'm just telling you.

All right. But but but even that's okay. But what these folks want to do is they want to play with language on really important discourses.

And they do that with the Constitution when it doesn't suit them. All right. When the straightforward language doesn't suit them, for example, it's a living document.

What that what does that mean? In my view, it's living with authorial intent, original intent. It still does great work based on the attention of the authors. But when you employ this method to writing important writings like the Constitution or the Bible, then what rules is the imagination of the reader.

And by the way, that's the point. That's the entire point. I read a book in my graduate studies called the theme of the Pentateuch.

Okay. And it was a book all about what this author understood the Pentateuch, the five books that start the Hebrew canon was all about. And at the end, he had a postscript because this was like second edition.

And then what he does in the postscript is he is he goes through he painstakingly explains that the first he wrote the book initially having a different mindset as if there were intention in the text. Now he's completely abandoned that perspective and saying there isn't a right interpretation to anything. This is the author of the theme of the Pentateuch in his postscript of his revised edition.

Now, if I'm to believe him, I cannot make any sense about his postscript. First of all, because if I apply his rules to that, he's not talking to me. I'm talking to myself in his words.

And I can make that we mean whatever I want. But what am I to make of the of the theme of the Pentateuch? He's still selling the book. So apparently I'm supposed to not in a literary way deconstruct the language and read it according to my intent and forget about authorial intent.

I think he still wants me to take seriously his point of view. But maybe he's not so dogmatic as being the correct one. But if I take seriously the words in his postscript that he's added in second or third edition to qualify everything as he's now apologizing for his modernist perspective that he brought to the text originally, then I, why am I spending any money on the entire book? I don't need to write your own book.

I don't have to. I can just think my own thoughts. It's just, it's, it's, yeah, because if I wrote my own book, the meaning of my own book would be sabotaged by that perspective.

It's just so obviously silly and destructive. I actually heard at Biola University, a an assessment of the Sermon on the Mount by a professor that was assessment from the perspective of a liberation theology. So, and this is how this kind of thing works.

So she's a liberation theology Marxist type person. And she's at the Biola chapel, I think it was a graduate chapel, and so she's not reading Jesus' intent in the words. She is adding new meanings in light of her narrative, her perspective as a Marxist.

And, and so she's assessing, she's reading this meaning into the words, which means the text has no authority. The authority is only in the mind of the reader and only one reader. I don't understand why she would expect anyone to take her view seriously when they could deconstruct all of her words in a way consistent with their own view and read new things into it.

Okay. And so you can have a feminist read, you can have a Marxist read, you can have a gay read, you can have all these other things read into the text. That's this idea.

All right. And by the way, I don't know what was she doing at a Biola University chapel? I don't know, but I will say the worst part of this is that it separates people. It makes communication impossible.

Because if I can't tell you what I think and you can't hear what I'm saying and interpret what I'm saying in the way I meant it, there's no way I can communicate with you. And of course, that's what the postmodernists say. Like we're all in our separate little bubbles and we can't really communicate with people.

And linguistic bubbles. Yeah. So all we have to do is go back to the very beginning of the Bible and see what happens there.

Satan says, did God really say? Now, when he says that, what we see there is that there was a communication from God that they had the ability to interpret. But now, Satan's coming in and saying, well, maybe you can just interpret it your own way. And he's taking them away from the meaning of the word.

So there's an example of where God expected that he would give a meaning in words to people and they would be able to interpret it. And that's the only way you can have any sort of real communication. Otherwise, you're just making things up on your own.

And I'm just giving you an example of how literary deconstruction works. And that's what's being advanced here. And as you say, right? By the way, no communications possible if we're consistent with that.

Yeah. And as you said, Greg, it's either that the text is authoritative or we are authoritative. Now, do you want the text from God, his communication, his words, his thoughts, his ideas to be authoritative or do you want your ideas to be authoritative? This is what is at stake here.

Now, one thing I want to point out before we move on is this last part of the question where the person says that might not be the way others interpret the Bible. Well, of course, this is something we see all the time. You know, a lot of people have different religions.

Well, nothing follows from that, but this is a very popular, and I think we've even talked about this recently on the show, this is a very popular relativistic statement to throw out there to make you think, oh, well, if other people think differently, then I can never know, or maybe there isn't a real answer. But of course, that is false. So I would point out there and maybe use some examples of how just because people have different views or do things differently, that doesn't mean they're all equally valid.

Right. Nobody lives that way. I mean, there are people who still believe in a flat earth and that the earth is the center of the solar system.

So now what? The earth has no shape. Nobody's correct. Just because they have a different point of view.

The way I've dealt with this before is the way I dealt with it right out of the shoot. And I actually did this with a large audience once and a woman asked about interpretation. And then I asked her, well, why do you hate gay so much? And there's a dead silence.

You hear a pin drop and she said, well, I never said anything like that. I said, well, that's the way I interpreted your question. You know, and then everybody starts laughing because, well, always, this is taking the her system for a test drive and showing how it works.

And look, we may be mistaken about our understanding of the author's intent, but we find that out by looking closely at the way they use the language in the flow of thought of the context of words and sentences and paragraphs. That's how we figure things out. And that's what we have always advanced.

Obviously, it's the reason with the clever little aphorism never read a Bible verse is the idea. Let's read the context and we'll fare much better than when we do that. This is just, I mean, if you look at a spiritual perspective, Amy's right.

This ploy goes right back to the garden, okay, right back to the beginning. It's just gussied up in academic language, but it can't be lived out, obviously, and it destroys all communication. The beautiful thing about having a text from God is that we have something objective and we have something that's public.

Third person public, right? So we can appeal to this objective public information and we can all talk about it and we can see who is closest to it and we can use it as a standard. If there's no standard that we can meet together at, then there's no way to resolve differences, there's no way to work any differences out. It's just my way, I like this way, you like that way, well, what are we going to do? Let's fight.

There's nothing else you can do except resort to violence. This goes back to something I said a couple of years ago at a piece. I think it's included in the street smarts.

Two things are going to rule, either truth or power. If it's not truth, some display of power is going to be the thing that decides what happens. And not surprisingly, we're certainly seeing an increase in political type violence in this country because people are feeling frustrated like they can't work out their differences and I think a lot of this has to do with our relativistic culture, which is making that really difficult.

Okay, Greg, let's go on to a question from Barbara. Zephaniah 3:17, the new King James version, has been a great comfort to me personally. I know you warn against taking verses out of context.

Is this one of them? Amy, you should have given me a warning on this because Zephaniah is pretty small. Yeah, it's a little one. I got to look up the content table of content.

It's before Haggai. Oh, what the heck is that? All right, I'll find your song. I can read it for you in ASB.

Let me let me oh, it's towards the end. 1321. Okay, I'm cool.

Three three seventeen. Yeah, let me read it while you're looking for it. It says the Lord your God is in your midst of victorious warrior.

He will exalt over you with joy. He will be quiet in his love. He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.

Well, when we go to a text, particularly in the Old Testament, sometimes the text is speaking to a more precise set of circumstances that God is speaking into. This is classically Jeremiah 29:11. I am so bugged about that verse.

I can't even recall the numbers sometimes like a mental block. And there, of course, there's a very specific message to a very specific group of people under very specific set of circumstances and related to a very specific covenant. Okay, there are other times we have passages that tell us about the nature of God and how he treats his people.

And so it's speaking of the character of God. Okay. And this is why I've often said, instead of taking a text from the scripture, Hebrew scriptures and going from the text to

Christians, it generally it's better to go from the text up to God.

And I mean, if that's where the text takes us and then see what does it say about God and how does that apply in this covenant circumstance that we're in at the moment, okay? So let's say Jeremiah 29 11, when he says, I will fulfill my good word to you. That's part of that reference. He's making a reference to an earlier promise that he's made.

And you can find the wording of that promise in Deuteronomy chapter, well, it's 20 to 30. It's the blessings and cursings, but the details there about after the blessing and the cursings that are going to happen that God is going to return if the people return. And the language there in Jeremiah is almost exactly the same as the Deuteronomy passage.

So it's tied to a covenant. Basically, what we learn about God there is that God is faithful to his covenant, not that God is going to house the verse to give you a future to hope and restore whatever he says there, all of that stuff. I know the plans that I have to you, blessing and not whatever, cursing.

Now, what's odd below that about four verses, he does pronounce curses on other members of the Jewish community and people just sees that little one. So what we learn about that going up and then over is that God keeps his covenant. Now, we're under different covenant than the Jews were.

We're in the new covenant, but God has said God's covenant faithfulness is a consistent theme of the Old Testament. And so this is the application we can take, not that we're going to have prosperity, but rather that God is going to be faithful to the covenant that he is made with us. Okay, no, that's all background information.

Now back to this passage of Zephaniah 3 17, the Lord your God is in your midst of victorious warrior. He will exalt over you with joy. He'll be quiet in his love.

He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. Okay. Now, those to me are telling us about the character of God.

Okay. And this is one instance of the way God is going to be towards his people, the Jews in this circumstance, because this is coming from his character. Now, Haggai is you, I'm reading through just finished Jeremiah.

I'm in Ezekiel right now, and I've been going through the Psalms and there is a tremendous amount of judgment that is declared over the same people that are being described by Haggai in this passage 3 17. All right. So again, this tells us something about God's character, but in other passages, we also learn that when God's people, his covenant people, the Jews, under a covenant that's conditional violate their side, this is going to be trouble.

But nevertheless, there are always these, these echoes of mercy and hope that are

coming in the future because God has made an unconditional provision through Abraham to save the world through his seed. Okay. And so you get these different messages.

I think Christians can take comfort in this because it tells us about God. Okay. It is a statement about God over Israel right now, but I think it also expresses the way he reflects his favor on his children.

And frankly, you can see similar kinds of things in the New Testament as we read about God's care for us now that we've been rescued and how he looks at casting all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you. That's in 1 Peter 5. So there are, it's not exactly the same, but there are, there are elements of this that we see in New Testament language. Yeah, he doesn't, he hasn't stopped feeling this way about his people.

This still reflects the way his care for his people, his desire to do good for them. That's something we see constantly throughout the Bible. So I agree, Greg, I think anyone can take, can take comfort in this if they're in covenant with God.

And as for another portion, I'll just finish with this. Here's, here's, you know, of course, like you said, there are plenty of places in the New Testament. He's working all things together for good.

He's, you know, the cross was him doing something for our good. It certainly shows us how he feels about us. But I just wanted to read Ephesians 2, 4 through 7, but God being rich and mercy because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

So that in the ages to come, he might show the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. So on that note, yeah, I do have one other qualifier. And I think even in a verse like this, we have to be careful how we understand it.

It always has to be understood in terms of new covenant theology. And so we could read the Lord, your God is in your midst of victorious warrior. And so we think, okay, I'm going through a difficult time, knowing that God is in my midst is good.

Jesus said, lo, I'm with you always even to the end of the age. A victorious warrior, he's going to get me out of this trouble. Oh, not that isn't how it applies in the New Testament.

He is a victorious warrior, but he's going to be victorious to his purposes. That doesn't mean he's going to remove you from the troubles that you're in. And if that's the way people are reading it, then that's going to be in this world.



You have tribulation, right? Okay. But I've overcome the world. We still have to go through that kind of thing.

So we don't want to misread these passages and exult over you with joy. If we are living in sin and rebellion, you know, we're going to get so we just want to be careful that we don't distort some of these lines here. There's good stuff in there for us.

But you also have to keep in mind the qualifiers of the new covenant circumstances that might change their application for us. That's a great point, Greg. And ultimately, we just have to be familiar with more than just that one verse.

That's what it comes down to. Well, thank you, Jackson. And thank you, Barbara.

We appreciate hearing from you. We love to hear from you with your question. You can send it on X with the hashtag STRS or you can go to our website at [str.org](http://str.org). We look forward to hearing from you.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.