



Research article

ISSN 2582-0214

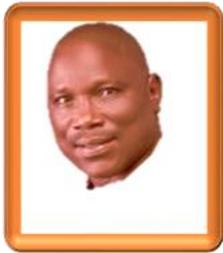
METAPHORS AND MISUNDERSTANDING: UNVEILING LITERAL INTERPRETATION CHALLENGES IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHNJacob T. Hundu ^{ThD}*Minister, Church of Christ, K/Vom, Plateau State, Nigeria & Adjunct Lecturer, School of Biblical Studies.*

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/BSJ.2024.6101>

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

**Article history:**

Received 04-1-2024

Accepted: 08-2-2024

Available online 31-3-2024

The Gospel of John, a cornerstone of Christian scripture, contains a complex tapestry of metaphors that has enthralled both scholars and Christians for centuries. However, within its complex tale is a web of difficulties linked with a literal interpretation. This paper dives into the difficulty of decoding the Gospel's metaphors, as well as the resulting misunderstandings that might occur when readers attempt to interpret them strictly literally. Using an approach based on documentary analysis, this study explores important sections in the Gospel of John to discern the layers of metaphorical language. The paper revealed the intended meanings of the metaphors by investigating the historical and cultural settings around the text, revealing the complicated interplay between literal and symbolic dimensions. The findings of this documentary investigation contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the Gospel's theological and spiritual messages. This study emphasizes the significance of a balanced and contextual approach to interpretation, encouraging readers to navigate the metaphorical landscape with cultural and linguistic awareness. The journey through the metaphors of the Gospel shows not only the complexities of its literary technique but also the profound implications for theological reflection.

Keywords:

*Metaphors,
Misperceptions,
Literal Interpretation,
Gospel of John,
Theology,
Figurative Language.*



Introduction

The Gospel of John stands as a profound literary and theological work, rich with metaphors that have captivated scholars and readers alike for centuries. This study aims to unravel the complex interplay between metaphors and misperceptions within the narrative, shedding light on the challenges inherent in adopting a strictly literal interpretation of the text. While the Gospel of John is revered for its theological depth and spiritual insight, its abundant use of metaphorical language presents a unique set of challenges for those seeking to comprehend its true meaning. The intricacies of these metaphors often lead to misunderstandings when approached through a literal lens, prompting the need for a nuanced exploration of the text's figurative dimensions.ⁱ

A “misunderstanding” occurs when a double entendre, an ambiguous statement, or an ambiguous metaphor, is misinterpreted. The misunderstanding is then resolved either by Jesus or the narrator. J. H. Bernard offers a simple definition: “A saying of deep import is uttered by Jesus; His hearers misunderstand it, after a fashion that seems stupid; and then He repeats the saying in a slightly different form before He explains it and draws out its lesson.”ⁱⁱ A misunderstanding occurs when a hearer selects one meaning for a double entendre or ambiguous metaphor rather than another and assumes that the meaning is correct.ⁱⁱⁱ

Alan Culpepper identifies three parts to a misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel:^{iv}

1. Jesus makes a claim using a double entendre or an ambiguous metaphor.
2. The hearer selects one meaning for the statement over another possible meaning. Usually, the hearer selects a literal meaning when Jesus intends a figurative meaning.
3. Jesus or the narrator clarifies the misunderstanding with an explanation.

Within the pages of the Gospel, metaphorical expressions are woven seamlessly into the fabric of the narrative, contributing to its poetic and symbolic nature.^v This study will delve into key passages, examining the nuances of language and the potential pitfalls of interpreting metaphors in a purely literal manner.^{vi} By unravelling the layers of figurative language employed by the Gospel writer, we hope to illuminate the profound truths and insights that may be obscured by a surface-level reading. This exploration becomes particularly relevant in understanding the Gospel's unique contribution to the broader biblical canon and its impact on theological discourse.

As we embark on this journey through the Gospel of John, it becomes imperative to recognize the dual role of metaphors as both conduits of profound meaning and potential sources of misinterpretation. The recognition of this duality invites scholars and readers to navigate the text with a heightened awareness of the figurative landscape, acknowledging the necessity of a balanced approach that respects both the literary artistry and the theological depth of the Gospel. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding biblical



hermeneutics, emphasizing the importance of discernment in unpacking the layers of meaning embedded in the Gospel's metaphorical tapestry.

Background to the Book of John

The Book of John, one of the four Gospels in the New Testament, stands distinctively among the synoptic accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Traditionally attributed to the Apostle John, the authorship remains a subject of scholarly debate. The Gospel is believed to have been written between 90 and 100 AD, making it one of the later texts in the New Testament. Unlike the synoptic Gospels, John is characterized by its unique narrative style, theological depth, and emphasis on spiritual themes. The book is renowned for its poetic prologue, which opens with the profound declaration, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). This introduction sets the tone for the Gospel's exploration of Jesus as the incarnate Word of God, emphasizing his divine nature and the cosmic implications of his earthly ministry.^{vii}

Key themes permeate the Book of John, including the divinity of Christ, the nature of belief, and the transformative power of encountering Jesus. The narrative structure of John often diverges from the synoptic accounts, with a focus on distinct miracles, discourses, and symbolic actions that illustrate deeper spiritual truths. Notably, John presents a series of "I am" statements uttered by Jesus, such as "I am the bread of life" and "I am the resurrection and the life," highlighting different facets of Jesus' identity and mission. The Gospel also features unique events, such as the wedding at Cana, the encounter with Nicodemus, and the extended discourse during the Last Supper, contributing to a rich and comprehensive portrayal of Jesus and his teachings. As readers delve into the background of the Book of John, they encounter not only a historical account of Jesus' life but also a profound theological exploration that has shaped Christian understanding for centuries.

Misunderstood Passages

In John 2:19-21, Jesus makes a profound statement about the temple: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it." The hearers, likely thinking in literal terms, misinterpret his words. They respond in disbelief, pointing out the absurdity of rebuilding the magnificent Jerusalem temple in such a short time when it had taken 46 years to build. However, Jesus is speaking metaphorically about the temple of his body, referring to his impending death and resurrection. The misinterpretation by the hearers underscores the challenge of grasping the spiritual dimensions of Jesus' teachings. It serves as a recurring theme in the Gospels, emphasizing the need for a shift from a surface-level understanding to a deeper, spiritual comprehension of Jesus' mission and the significance of his sacrificial death and resurrection.^{viii}

In John 3:3-5, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council, comes to Jesus seeking understanding. Jesus tells him, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." Nicodemus, however, appears to misinterpret



Jesus' words literally, leading to confusion. He responds by asking how a person can be born again, thinking in terms of a physical rebirth. Jesus clarifies that He is referring to a spiritual rebirth, stating that one must be "born of water and the Spirit" to enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus' initial misinterpretation reflects a common challenge faced by individuals in comprehending spiritual truths, often clinging to a literal understanding rather than recognizing the metaphorical or symbolic nature of Jesus' teachings.^{ix} This episode underscores the importance of discerning the spiritual dimension in interpreting Jesus' words and the need for a transformative, inward renewal to truly understand and enter the kingdom of God.^x

In John 4:10, during the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus says, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman's initial response suggests a potential misinterpretation of Jesus' statement, as she takes his words literally, thinking of ordinary water. Her reply in verse 11 indicates her misunderstanding, as she questions how Jesus, without a bucket, could offer "living water." This misinterpretation reflects a common theme in the Gospels, where individuals often struggle to grasp the deeper spiritual meanings behind Jesus' words, highlighting the need for spiritual discernment and a shift from a purely physical understanding to a more profound comprehension of Jesus' teachings.^{xi}

In John 6:53-54, Jesus declares that his followers must "eat his flesh and drink his blood" to have eternal life. This statement shocked and horrified the hearers, who understood it in a literal sense. They believed that Jesus was asking them to commit cannibalism. This misinterpretation reflects a common human tendency to take figurative language literally. It also highlights the importance of understanding the context in which a statement is made. In this case, Jesus was speaking to a group of Jews who were familiar with the concept of sacrificial offerings. Jesus' statement was meant to be understood symbolically, as a reference to his sacrifice on the cross. Contemporary readers can learn from this passage by being careful not to take everything that they read in the Bible literally. We should also strive to understand the context in which a passage was written and to consider the wider scope of Jesus' teachings.^{xii}

In John 7, the crowd's responses reveal a consistent misinterpretation of Jesus' identity and intentions. In verses 12, 25, and 27, there is a growing confusion among the people regarding who Jesus truly is and where he comes from. Some question whether he is the Messiah, while others express uncertainty about his origins. The repeated reference to Jesus as "the man" in verse 25 reflects a lack of understanding about his divine nature. In verse 40, even among those who hear Jesus' teachings, there is division and debate about whether he is the Prophet, the Messiah, or merely a prophet. This widespread misunderstanding underscores the challenge of recognizing the true nature of Jesus and the spiritual dimensions of his mission. The crowds' confusion highlights the difficulty of perceiving Jesus beyond a conventional,



earthly perspective, emphasizing the need for spiritual discernment to fully comprehend his identity and purpose.^{xiii}

In John 8:27, 43, and 44, Jesus engages in a discourse with the Jews who struggle to comprehend the spiritual depth of His message. Despite Jesus emphasizing that He speaks what He has seen with the Father and does what He has learned from Him, the listeners remain entangled in a literal understanding, questioning Jesus' legitimacy. Their misinterpretation arises from their failure to recognize Jesus as the divine Son of God. In verse 43, Jesus points out their inability to understand His speech because they cannot bear to hear His message. Furthermore, in verse 44, Jesus bluntly accuses them of being of their Father the devil, highlighting their spiritual blindness. The hearers' misinterpretation stems from a refusal to acknowledge the divine nature of Jesus and persistent adherence to a worldly perspective, leading to a profound disconnect between their understanding and the spiritual truths Jesus seeks to impart.^{xiv}

In John 10:19, Jesus uses the figure of speech to describe the division among the people who heard him. The Jews were divided in their opinions, with some receiving the light and others resisting it. This misinterpretation of Jesus' words led to further conflict and division among the people, as they struggled to understand the true meaning of Jesus' message. For contemporary readers, this passage highlights the importance of understanding the context and the intended meaning of Jesus' teachings. Misinterpretations can lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions about Jesus' message, which can, in turn, cause division and confusion among believers. It is essential to read and study the Bible with an open mind and a willingness to seek the truth, as Jesus' teachings continue to challenge and inspire us today.^{xv}

In John 12:9, when Jesus declares that the "hour" for his glorification has come, the crowd misunderstands his statement, believing him to be referring to a literal hour rather than the symbolic hour of his crucifixion and resurrection. This misinterpretation reflects a common tendency among people to interpret prophecies and symbolic language in a literal and simplistic manner. Similarly, contemporary readers may also misinterpret biblical passages if they do not carefully consider the context and symbolism within which they were written. It is important to approach the Bible with a humble and open mind, seeking to understand its deeper meaning rather than simply taking its words at face value.

In John 13:21, Jesus is having a private meal with his disciples when he becomes troubled and announces that one of them will betray him. The disciples are confused and distressed, and each one begins to ask Jesus if it is he who will betray him. When Jesus indicates that it is Judas who will betray him, Judas leaves the room without saying anything. The disciples' misinterpretation of Jesus' words in John 13:21, 26 is a reminder that even the closest followers of Jesus can sometimes misunderstand his teachings. This is because Jesus often spoke in parables and used symbolic language, which can be difficult to interpret. Additionally, the disciples were often preoccupied with their concerns and ambitions, which



made it difficult for them to see things from Jesus' perspective. Contemporary readers can learn from the disciples' mistakes by being careful not to take Jesus' words at face value. Instead, we should strive to understand the context in which his words were spoken and consider the deeper meaning that he intended to convey. We should also be open to the possibility that our understanding of Jesus' teachings may be incomplete or even mistaken.

In John 21:20-23, a potential misinterpretation arises as the disciples misunderstand Jesus' statement about the fate of the beloved disciple. Jesus predicts that this disciple will not die before His return, leading to speculation among the disciples about the nature of this prediction. The misunderstanding is evident in verse 23, where the author clarifies that Jesus did not say the beloved disciple would not die, but rather, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" This misinterpretation among the disciples underscores the challenges of comprehending the full scope of Jesus' words and the danger of speculation. For contemporary readers, it serves as a reminder to approach biblical texts with humility, recognizing the complexities of interpretation and avoiding dogmatic conclusions based on partial understanding. The narrative encourages a focus on the core teachings of Jesus rather than getting entangled in speculative details, fostering a more profound engagement with the spiritual principles conveyed in the text.

Challenges of Literal Interpretation

Literal interpretation of religious texts, such as the Book of John, poses significant challenges that can hinder a nuanced understanding of its message. One primary challenge arises from the rich use of metaphors throughout the text. For instance, when Jesus declares, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), a literal interpretation might lead to a superficial understanding that misses the deeper spiritual significance. Without recognizing the metaphorical nature of this statement, individuals might focus solely on the literal aspect of bread, overlooking the intended symbolism of spiritual nourishment and sustenance.^{xvi} The challenge lies in discerning when the text employs figurative language to convey abstract truths, requiring readers to transcend a purely literal mindset and engage in a more interpretative, metaphorical reading.^{xvii}

Additionally, the historical and cultural context presents another hurdle for literal interpretation. The Book of John, written in a different time and cultural milieu, employs idioms, customs, and linguistic nuances that may not directly align with contemporary understanding. A failure to consider the cultural backdrop can lead to misinterpretations. For example, when Jesus proclaims, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), a literal interpretation may miss the cultural resonance of light as a symbol of guidance, truth, and spiritual illumination. Without delving into the cultural nuances of the time, readers risk oversimplifying the metaphor and overlooking the profound spiritual truths the text intends to convey. The challenges of literal interpretation, therefore, underscore the importance of incorporating historical and cultural context to grasp the intended depth and complexity of the metaphors within the Book of John.^{xviii}



Theological Implications

Theological implications of literal interpretation challenges in the Book of John are profound and can significantly impact doctrinal understanding within Christian theology. Misinterpretations arising from a literal approach to metaphors may lead to a reductionist understanding of complex theological concepts. For instance, when Jesus states, "I am the vine; you are the branches" (John 15:5), a literal interpretation might focus solely on the botanical imagery rather than recognizing the metaphor's intended theological depth. The metaphor emphasizes the intimate spiritual connection between believers and Christ, illustrating dependence and unity. A failure to grasp this metaphorical richness could result in a superficial understanding, potentially affecting doctrines related to the believer's relationship with Christ and the concept of spiritual vitality through that connection.^{xix}

Moreover, the challenges of literal interpretation in the Book of John can influence broader theological frameworks, particularly in the understanding of the nature and character of God. For example, when Jesus declares, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6), a literal interpretation might limit the comprehension of Christ's role in salvation to a mere directional guide rather than recognizing the profound theological truth of Christ as the exclusive path to God and eternal life. Theological misunderstandings stemming from a failure to engage with the metaphorical layers of such declarations can have far-reaching implications on doctrines related to salvation, the nature of Christ, and the exclusivity of Christian faith. Consequently, a nuanced appreciation of metaphorical language is crucial for preserving the theological richness embedded in the Book of John.^{xx}

Solutions and Approaches

Addressing the challenges of literal interpretation in the Book of John requires the application of sound hermeneutical principles and a commitment to contextual understanding. Hermeneutics, the art and science of biblical interpretation, provides a framework for approaching the text with sensitivity to its literary forms, historical context, and cultural nuances. Emphasizing the importance of hermeneutics in theological study encourages readers to go beyond a surface-level reading, fostering a deeper appreciation for the metaphors employed in the text. Engaging with commentaries and scholarly resources that provide insights into the historical and cultural context of the Book of John can be instrumental in guiding readers away from overly literal interpretations and towards a more nuanced understanding of the metaphors used by the author.

A vital approach to overcoming the challenges of literal interpretation involves recognizing the interconnectedness of scripture and the necessity of interpreting individual passages in light of the broader biblical narrative. This holistic approach ensures that isolated metaphors are understood within the context of the entire biblical message, preventing the extraction of verses from their intended theological framework. By considering the overarching themes and consistent theological principles presented throughout the Bible,



readers can better discern the metaphorical nature of certain passages in the Book of John. This approach not only guards against doctrinal misunderstandings but also reinforces the idea that biblical interpretation is an ongoing, communal endeavour that benefits from a comprehensive understanding of the entire biblical canon.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the challenges of literal interpretation in the Book of John underscore the importance of adopting a nuanced and context-aware approach to biblical study. Metaphors woven throughout the text, such as "I am the bread of life" and "I am the light of the world," demand a departure from a rigidly literal mindset to appreciate the spiritual depth they convey. The theological implications of misinterpretations can have far-reaching effects on doctrines related to salvation, the nature of Christ, and the believer's connection with the divine. To navigate these challenges, employing hermeneutical principles, considering historical and cultural contexts, and recognizing the interconnectedness of scripture offer fruitful avenues for a more accurate and profound understanding of the metaphors in the Book of John. By doing so, readers and theologians alike can unlock the richness embedded in these metaphors, preserving the intended theological truths and enhancing the depth of their engagement with this sacred text.

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