

Responses to Respondents
RESPONSE #1
Why I Reject Exegetical Conservatism

I think all of us can agree that the following exegetical principle, found frequently in fundamentalistic circles, is a mistake: always interpret the Bible literally unless it cannot possibly be taken literally (exegetical literalism). The problem with this principle, regardless of how well-intentioned it may be, is that some passages, if taken literally, would be read plausibly enough, but it would nevertheless be wrong to do so; for the author did not intend his words to be taken literally. If an exegetical principle would lead one to take a text in a manner that misses the biblical author’s intent, then it is NOT a sound exegetical principle—regardless of how rational and sound it may seem by other criteria.

If exegetical literalism is not a sound exegetical principle, why is it so readily adopted by some? I suspect the answer to that is quite complex; and I don’t altogether know. But, at the very least, there seems to be the following mindset behind it: by following this principle, even if I get the meaning of a Bible passage wrong, I cannot be blamed; for I have followed the right rule. Notice, here, that the implicit goal of exegesis has shifted: no longer is the primary goal to discover the author’s intent. Now the goal is to avoid culpability, blame, and criticism for any misunderstanding of the Bible I might have. I think this is an illusion, of course. I think we are always to blame when we misunderstand the Bible—perhaps we are not morally culpable, but it is nonetheless our fault if we have failed to understand the biblical author’s intent. It may be an innocent enough mistake. But it is a mistake nonetheless; and it is MY mistake.

Biblical exegesis just is a risky enterprise. There is always the possibility that I have got it wrong. Misunderstanding the Bible is an ever present possibility. The exegete, in the face of such a risk, has to do the best he can. He must use whatever skill he possesses and must do his task with the utmost integrity and intellectual honesty. But he is not infallible. He may be mistaken; even badly mistaken. But there is no way to eliminate the risk of that. Exegetical literalism is a false attempt to eliminate risk. The illusion is that if I follow the principle of always taking the Bible literally unless it just doesn’t make any sense whatsoever to do so, then any mistake that my principle might lead me to make is NOT REALLY A MISTAKE THAT ANYONE CAN HOLD AGAINST ME. But that is false. Taking a passage that was intended metaphorically as literal is just as wrong and just as grave as taking a passage that was intended literally as metaphorical. The only way to avoid making a mistake is to make the right judgment—judge to be literal what the author

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intended to be literal; and judge to be metaphorical what the author intended to be metaphorical.

Now I think we would all agree with the above assessment of exegetical literalism. I would argue that exegetical conservatism is mistaken in exactly the same way and for exactly the same reasons as exegetical literalism. It is much more subtle and sophisticated—and much more plausible on the face of it—than exegetical literalism, but, in the end, it needs to be rejected for the same reasons.

Let me define what I am calling exegetical conservatism. Exegetical conservatism is the view that it is against sound principle to abandon perceived patterns of usage. Hence, it upholds the following principle: *always interpret the grammar, syntax, and word meanings of a biblical text on the basis of patterns that can be known and demonstrated from extant literature, unless no sense whatsoever can possibly be made of the text by doing so.* (exegetical conservatism).

WHY I THINK EXEGETICAL CONSERVATISM IS A MISTAKE

Hypothetical example >

Let me stipulate all of the following:

- There are 13 occurrences of WORD* in all the literature of which we are aware.
- In 12 of those occurrences, WORD* obviously and incontrovertibly has MEANING—A.
- In the 13th occurrence of WORD*, it was—as a matter of fact—used by its author to mean MEANING—B.
- INTERPRETATION—A of PASSAGE-13 is the most plausible interpretation of the passage where the 13th occurrence of WORD* occurs if one assumes that WORD* must have MEANING—A in that passage.
- INTERPRETATION—B of PASSAGE-13 is the most plausible interpretation of the passage where the 13th occurrence of WORD* occurs if one assumes that WORD* must have MEANING—B in that passage.
- INTERPRETATION—A is a highly plausible interpretation of PASSAGE-13.

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• Everyone involved generally agrees that INTERPRETATION–B is a better interpretation of P; that is, everyone would agree that if INTERPRETATION–B is allowable at all, then it is significantly more likely to capture what the author of PASSAGE-13 intended.

It must be recognized at the outset that this is a completely possible scenario. The nature of language is such that the situation stipulated above could actually occur in principle. It may be unlikely and exceedingly rare, but it is, in principle, possible.

Now, consider the exegetical situation that an interpreter faces when he comes to PASSAGE-13. Consider, especially, the situation that the exegetical conservative faces:

The exegetical conservative could not, as a matter of principle, ever arrive at the correct interpretation of PASSAGE-13. Exegetically conservative reasoning must reason like this: In every other occurrence of WORD* of which we have any awareness, WORD* means MEANING–A. Therefore, we have no evidence of WORD* meaning MEANING–B. It follows, therefore, by the principles of exegetical conservatism, that we must interpret Passage #13 in accord with WORD* having MEANING–A, and not MEANING–B. Therefore, we must interpret P as meaning INTERPRETATION–A and not INTERPRETATION–B.

On the assumption that no other evidence could possibly be forthcoming that would change the data from which one is reasoning (the data that we stipulated above), an exegetical conservative could never, on his own principles, embrace INTERPRETATION–B of PASSAGE-13. But, we stipulated above that INTERPRETATION–B conformed to what the author of PASSAGE-13 intended. Therefore, an exegetical conservative could never, on his own principles, embrace the correct interpretation of PASSAGE-13—even in face of the fact that he knows that INTERPRETATION–B (the correct interpretation) makes more sense than INTERPRETATION–A if it is possible for him to endorse INTERPRETATION–A at all.

Note that this would be the situation with *monogenes* if we only had the New Testament evidence to judge from. Look at the evidence in Appendix L. There are only two uses of *monogenes* in the New Testament: (i) the passages in question where it is used to describe Jesus, the Son (these are the passages whose meaning we are interested in understanding); and (ii) passages where it describes an “only-begotten” child. An exegetical conservative would, as a matter of principle, interpret *monogenes* Son as only-begotten Son (or some equivalent), for outside the texts in question, there is a clear pattern of usage: *monogenes* denotes an only-begotten child of a parent.

Exegetical conservatism would, on its own principles, be a “principled” exegetical decision. However, that exegetical decision would be wrong! That is not what the New Testament means when it uses the word *monogenes* to describe Jesus, the Son. The pattern of usage one sees if he expands his literature to include the Old Testament and Apocrypha only serves to confirm that that decision would be wrong. But, my point is

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this: if the only evidence we had available was the pattern of its occurrence in the New Testament, we would be **WRONG** to interpret *monogenes* Son as only-begotten Son. Why? Because we would have failed to achieve an accurate understanding of what John (the author who uses it) intended.

The exegetical conservative may very well maintain that he was just trying to “objectively follow the evidence.” Be that as it may, that does not make his interpretation right; nor does it validate the “principle” he was using to arrive at it. Indeed, such an attitude and principle completely misunderstands the nature of language and the nature of the exegetical task. It is based on the false assumption that one arrives at the meaning of a sentence by “establishing” the meaning of the words in the sentence externally (in some sense) and then deducing the meaning of the sentence from those word meanings. The reverse is actually more in line with what language is and how it works. We arrive at what the words in a sentence mean (or, more accurately, what it is that the words are being used by the author to mean) by “grasping” the meaning of the sentence and then seeing how the words are being used to mean that. Accordingly, if from all the clues an exegete has, he understands a sentence and then he finds that, within that sentence (in order to say what he intends to say), the author must be using a word in a completely novel and unprecedented way, then that is the appropriate thing for the interpreter to conclude. He would **NOT** stop himself from drawing such a conclusion—on the grounds that there is no “evidence” that the word can mean that. The very sentence he is interpreting is his evidence!! Why would I say to myself: I simply cannot interpret Sentence A to mean what I know it means, because I have not discovered a pattern of usage for *word-#1* that can serve as evidence that *word-#1* can mean what it would have to mean in order to interpret Sentence A that way? **THAT** would be irresponsible and ill-informed exegesis.

One might object that one cannot use a sentence in which *word-#1* is used as evidence to establish that *word-#1* has **MEANING—A**. One must find a pattern among **OTHER** uses of *word-#1* in order to have an evidential basis for interpreting it as **MEANING—A**. But, this objection will never do. If no sentence can ever serve as evidence, in and of itself, for *word-#1* meaning **MEANING—A**, then it would never be possible to have a basis for interpreting *word-#1* as **MEANING—A** at all. Indeed, one could never have any basis for knowing the meaning of any word. At least some sentences have to be self-revealing with respect to what the words that constitute them mean. Otherwise, the exegetical conservative could not possibly have any basis for knowing what any word means. But, in fact, all sentences are ultimately self-revealing and self-determining with respect to what their constitutive words mean. Some sentences are easier to understand than others. Therefore, it is easier and more straightforward to understand the meanings of some words than others. But, in principle, I can always determine what a word means in a sentence by grasping the meaning of the sentence and, then, from that, determining how the words in that sentence are being used.

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I can outline the difference between my perspective and that of exegetical conservatism this way: in negotiating the hermeneutical circle, my contention is that the meaning of the sentence (or paragraph or larger context) in which a word occurs is *of greater exegetical weight* than how that same word is used in other passages. To be exegetically conservative by insisting that I limit my interpretations to the pattern of word usage in OTHER contexts—and to be conservative in this way against the evidence of the meaning of the sentence (and paragraph and larger context) itself—is unsound exegesis. It fails to give due weight to the fact and nature of the hermeneutical circle. It is a method that ultimately makes sense only if the meaning of a sentence was determined and necessitated by the *prior* meanings of and understandings of the words of which it is composed. This, I have argued, is a mistake.

The above considerations explain why I do not adopt the principles or strategies of exegetical conservatism. But a further point is important. Exegetical conservatism, if taken to its logical consequences and applied consistently, would result in exegetical paralysis. An exegetically conservative interpreter would frequently be forced to adopt an agnostic stance with regard to how to interpret a text. Ultimately, it would encourage a sort of exegetical skepticism—"it just isn't possible to know what the Bible means."

Exegetical conservatism has a different goal from mine. My goal is to directly and fully grasp the meaning of the biblical author. The exegetical conservative's goal is to arrive at an interpretation of the biblical author's meaning that has minimized the possibility of its being criticized by himself or some other critic for being without grounds. The exegetical conservative may tell himself that he is guarding against mistakes. But that is as much an illusion as exegetical literalism is. Exegetical conservatism may indeed be somewhat successful in guarding against the criticism that my interpretation has no basis; but it cannot successfully protect me from getting the passage wrong. In other words, exegetical conservatism may make my interpretation unassailable by critics; but it does not remove my risk of being mistaken. An unassailable interpretation can be wrong—at the same time that it is unassailable by my critics—if it does not capture the author's intent.

Accordingly, it seems to me that the only advantage of exegetical conservatism is in keeping my critics at bay. It does not reasonably eliminate the risk of missing the author's intent. Accordingly, what one sets as one's goal will dictate which is the better and sounder exegesis: getting at the author's intent; or keeping my potential critics at bay.

Exegetical conservatives may very well counsel me that I am being exegetically irresponsible to go with an interpretation that—on the nature of the (external) evidence—could be wrong. But, the fact is, the same people commit to an interpretation that—on the nature of different (internal) evidence—could be wrong as well. Why the double

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standard? Why is it alright for them embrace an interpretation that may in fact be wrong; but it is not alright for the non-conservative to do so? In other words, why is it irresponsible or unsound for the non-conservative to take exactly the same sort of risk in committing to an interpretation of a biblical text that the exegetical conservative is taking when he commits to an interpretation? The reason the exegetically conservative Trinitarian thinks that his risk is less is because his interpretations are in doctrinal conformity to the Creeds. This is why the Creeds are so crucial to Trinitarianism. Without the Creeds, their interpretations are just one among many ways to construe various texts in the Bible. With the Creeds, there is felt justification for rejecting and condemning every other interpretation.

However, Trinitarians are no less at risk than I am of being wrong in our interpretation of the relevant passages. Trinitarians handle that risk like this: "Well, I suppose I could be wrong. But, if so, there are millions of Christians for thousands of years who have made the same mistake. Even though there is a risk that I am wrong, I share that risk with a great horde of people."

Trinitarians are inconsistent. They propound exegetical conservatism—on the grounds that it is the only responsible way to manage exegetical risk—when it comes to explaining why they will not accept a non-Trinitarian interpretation of a passage. But how do they respond when faced with the very real exegetical risk that, through their exegetical conservatism, they have unwittingly foreclosed on the very interpretation the biblical author intended? Suddenly, the need to eliminate risk does not enter into their consideration.