"Is 'Literal' Literally the Best Term for Dispensationalists Moving Forward?"

The Issue with the Term "Literal" in Dispensational Interpretation

In 1965 and later in 2007 Charles Ryrie affirmed, "Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation."[1] This phraseology, "literal interpretation," has been one of the benchmarks of Dispensationalism ever since. However, defining the term "literal" in this context is not without its difficulties. The one significant issue with the term "literal" as a noun modifier for "interpretation" is that it is often further defined by other terms. Ryrie, himself, qualified "literal" by stating that it "might also be called *normal*," or "might also be designated *plain*." While one could understand qualifying a term once, Ryrie did it multiple times.[2] I am not sure Ryrie intended this to become customary among scholars; however, it seems to have become somewhat of a necessity when dealing with the term "literal" in relationship to interpretation.

Writing on "the literal rule of interpretation" Elliott Johnson adds another qualifier: "To put it plainly, the literal, or normal, clear sense is to be chosen…."[3] Later he adds another, "the 'literal sense' or 'normal or simple sense' has been demonstrated in practice to be probably accurate."[4] Robert Thomas adopts Terry's traditional definition of literal interpretation and thus accepts other qualifiers: "Sometimes we speak of the literal sense, by which we mean the most simple, direct, and ordinary meaning of phrases and sentences."[5] A. Berkeley Mickelsen writes, "By literal meaning the writer refers to the usual or customary sense conveyed by words or expressions."[6] Kaiser and Silva compound the qualifiers, "…what we mean by the

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[1] Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago, Moody Bible Institute, 1965),

[2] For instance, see *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, pages 91 (three times) 92 (once), 97 (once).

[3] Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Academie Books, 1990), 268.

[4] Ibid., 304.

[5] Robert Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Kregel 2002), 233.

[6] A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Wm. Eerdmans, 1963), 179.

term literal,… means the simple, plain, direct or ordinary sense."[7] In the early pages of his Bible interpretation book, Roy Zuck seems happy with one qualifier: "…of course the so-called literal or normal approach…." Further in his book he qualifies it threefold when contrasting literal with figurative: "…presenting literal facts that might otherwise be stated in a normal, plain, ordinary way."[8] Hebert Bateman recalls memorizing Ryrie's second point of the *sine quo non* of dispensationalism as "The distinction between Israel and the Church emerges from a hermeneutical system that is usually called literal interpretation, namely the employment of a normal or plain interpretation."[9]

While examples could be multiplied, the problem with the term "literal" as a noun modifier for interpretation seems clear and raises some concerns: 1) "literal" is a term that based on recent academic practice does not seem to be able to be defined by itself. Thus a term that cannot be defined on its own indicates its inadequacy; 2) if the term "literal" needs qualifiers, which ones should be employed and how many?[10] 3) even if a certain qualifier were to replace "literal" (such as "plain" or "normal"), I suspect that "literal" would not be dropped but just moved to a place of apposition to the "new" term;[11] 4) while "we" know what "we" mean by "literal interpretation," the need for one or more qualifiers suggest "our" readers may not; 5) literal interpretation may be confused with literal language and this creates issues in biblical poetry,[12] and 6) even Ryrie recognized that "literal" was not the

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[7] Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994), 33.

[8] Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Victor Books, 1991), 63 & 147.

[9] Herbert Bateman, "Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, Herbert W. Bateman IV ed. (Kregel Publishing, 1999), 35.

[10] If one were to combine the various qualifiers currently in play "literal interpretation" could be defined as the simple, plain, normal, ordinary, direct, basic, face value, and everyday language.

[11] Ryrie does this when speaking of his system of interpretation. He writes, "God communicates in a normal, plain, or literal manner." *Basic Theology*, 17.

[12] Both phrases are not the same. Anyone familiar with the Reformed parody of a "literal" interpretation of the *wasf* of Song of Songs 4 (see pic below) recognizes the misunderstanding the term causes. This is confusion at best or ridicule at worst.

best term for our method of interpretation: "Since the word 'literal' has connotations which are either misunderstood or subjectively understood, labels like 'plain' or 'normal' serve more acceptably."[13]

These lingering observations support the legitimacy of the question: is "literal" literally the best term to describe traditional Dispensationalists' method of interpretation? The short (and humble) answer is "no." While it is important to identify our method of interpretation, "literal interpretation" is literally not the best

The headline of this now common pic reads: "The Song of Solomon illustrated (for our literalist friends.)" http://jimerwin.com/2014/02/06/song-of-solomon-illustrated-literally/ accessed July 26, 2016.

Another case in point is A. J. Jacob's, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (Simon & Schuster, 2008). From his website he states: "*The Year of Living Biblically* is about my quest to live the ultimate biblical life. To follow every single rule in the Bible as literally as possible." http://ajjacobs.com/books/the-year-of-living-biblically/ Accessed August 30, 2016.

One can guess the issues that arose with such a "literal" experiment. Jacob observes, "I found that fundamentalists may claim to take the Bible literally, but they actually just pick and choose certain rules to follow. By taking fundamentalism extreme, I found that literalism is not the best way to interpret the Bible." (ibid.) After his year living both testaments, he concludes that one cannot live the Bible literally—one has to pick and chose what commandments he or she obeys.

Another issue is that "literal language" may be used to demonstrate the difference between the phrase, "figurative language" which is a legitimate distinction.

[13] Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 111. Unfortunately, "plain" or "normal" would seem to suffer the same misunderstanding as "literal" since neither has captured the fancy of scholars.

term.[14] I suggest "contextual" replace "literal" as the modifier for interpretation. This is a more accurate term for Dispensationalists' hermeneutic moving forward from this point.

Before proceeding to my reasons for adopting this term, the adjective: "contextual" needs definition. "Contextual" encompasses both the historical[15] and literary contexts of the biblical work. By historical context we mean the chronological period in which the biblical author composed his work for his original audience. By literary context we mean the grammatical, syntactical, morphological, phonological and genre aspects of literary communication.[16] Literary is the style by which the biblical writer communicated in written words his intended meaning to his original audience within a certain historical context.

The main reason for this alternative term is that "contextual interpretation" best represents what we do in practice as we study the biblical text. While I am suggesting "contextual" as a replacement term, scholars have already recognized the priority of context in interpretation. Although Elliott Johnson does not use the term, contextual, he certainly recognizes the two main contextual elements: history and literary (although he employs the term "grammar" instead of literary but means the

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[14] It should be noted that I am not jettisoning the noun, "literal." It is still a decent term as a noun as will hopefully be seen in the later part of this paper. I am suggesting abandoning "literal" as a noun modifier before interpretation.

[15] Since the OT is chronologically older than the NT, the ancient context allows one to maintain an OT priority (historically). This is vitally important.

[16] Literary context is as small as a clause or a phrase and as large as the biblical canon itself. Context recognizes where each individual work of the Bible falls into the whole of the progress of revelation (historical context). It is certain that each book of the Bible is a literary part of its whole literary context. However, the immediate literary context in which a word is found determines meaning. Larger literary contexts such as similar genre, historical time period, placement in the canon, etc. will not contradict the immediate contextual meaning. Johnson is correct to note, "The determinative influence must go to the immediate textual context. That context fashions a textual usage which may be clarified and amplified by other supporting contexts." Elliott E. Johnson, "Literal Interpretation: A Plea for Consensus" (Pre-Trib Study Group Conference, 1992). http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/literal-interpretation-plea-for-consensus accessed November 16, 2016.

same as my term "literary"[17]). He writes, "Today, dispensationalists would agree that literal interpretation is a grammatical, historical interpretation…. Thus, *literal* interpretation entails those meanings which the author intended to communicate in the expressions of the text (grammar) in the original setting (historical)."[18] Grant Osborne also recognizes the vast importance of "contextual interpretation": "Two areas must be considered at the beginning of Bible study: the historical context and the logical context[19]…. The historical and logical contexts provide the scaffolding upon which we can build the in-depth study of a passage. Without a strong scaffolding, the edifice of interpretation is bound to collapse."[20] While not using the term, "contextual," Ryrie recognized its importance both historically and grammatically when he summarized his literal, normal or plain interpretation: "It is sometimes called the principle of grammatical-historical interpretation since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations."[21] Ryrie's "considerations" is my "contextual." It is not a stretch to suggest that grammatical-historical interpretation is essentially "contextual interpretation." Therefore, what I am suggesting is not a new interpretive practice, but a more nuanced terminology that communicates more clearly (and without the need for additional nouns in apposition to define it) what "we" actually do when we seek to understand the message of the Bible. "Contextual" interpretation is literally the better word moving forward.[22]

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[17] "Thus grammar that is necessary is that related to what an author has written— including lexicography, syntax, and literary genre." Elliott Johnson, "A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, 65.

[18] Elliott Johnson, "A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, 64. Johnson does use the term "context" when he observes, "…only the literal reading limits the interpretative process to the immediate context…. A literal reading always seeks clues that are either stated in or related to the textual expression in some grammatical and historical sense." Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*, 32.

[19] By "logical context," Osborne intends the language, genre and intention of the author. *Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1991), 21-22.

[20] Grant Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 19.

[21] Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, 91.

[22] By adopting this term one of the benefits would be the elimination of the many and varied qualifiers that plague "literal interpretation." I, also, recognize that replacing the term, "literal interpretation" risks losing the richness of the term that

A Test Case For "Contextual" Interpretation

The pitfall of employing the term "literal interpretation" is most obvious when it is at employed as a label to describe our interpretive process in biblical poetry, specifically Hebrew poetry. Although "we" understand what "we" mean when we talk about "literal interpretation" in poetry, "we" seem to be in need of constant qualifiers when moving to a genre that engages literary devices such as metaphor, simile and the like more frequently. Zuck demonstrates the difficulty: "Perhaps it is better not to speak of 'figurative versus literal' interpretation, but of 'ordinary-literal' versus 'figurative-literal' interpretation. Therefore in this book *figurative* means figurative-literal, and *literal* means ordinary-literal."[23] Although "we" know what he means, his use of qualifiers showcases the problem and hardly clarifies labeling our poetic interpretative process.

When A Vineyard Is A Literal Vineyard And When A Literal Vineyard Is… Something Else

To test both terms, "literal interpretation" and "contextual interpretation" let's take the terms "vineyard" and "vineyards" as found in four verses of the Song of Songs (1:6; 2:15; 7:12; 8:11).

Before we look at the verse in its own immediate context, let's explore the book's context. If we accept literally the first verse of the Song, we are immediately aware of its historical and cultural context. The king of Israel, Solomon, wrote this musical piece circa 9th century BC. The literary context is also crystal clear. It is a song (שִׁיר). But more than just any song, it is Solomon's best song (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים). This pastoral song draws its imagery from the flora and fauna of Israel's historical and geographical context. As such the informed reader expects to encounter a plethora of poetic literary devices that paint mental pictures from this ancient culture to communicate its literary message.

The Song is notoriously difficult to outline. I suggest that it flows from beginning to end through seven movements that each exhibits four themes (separation, desire, obstacle and union) that repeat themselves in each movement.[24] Our first example (1:6) is part of the first movement (1:2-2:7) that expresses the "obstacle" theme.

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established and anchors Traditional Dispensationalism. However, the risk seems worth it in light of the new term's increased clarity and accuracy.

[23] Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 147.

[24] Movement #1: 1:2-2:7; #2: 2:8-17; #3: 3:1-5; #4: 3:6-5:1; #5: 5:2-7:11; #6: 7:11-8:4; #7: 8:5-14.

The female lover speaks:

a) Do not stare at me because I am swarthy,
b) For the sun has burned me.

c) My mother's sons were angry with me;
d) They made me keeper of the vineyards (כְּרָמִים)

e*)* My own vineyard, which is mine, I have not kept (כַּרְמִי) (1:6)

The plural occasion of "vineyard" in line d is speaking of literal vineyards. In short the female beloved was made to work outside tending grape plants in the hot Middle Eastern sun. A contextual reading reveals that she was a common farmhand working in literal vineyards and had the sunburnt skin to prove it.[25] While it is certain the term here could be allegorized by some, reading the term in its immediate verse and the Song's context give no clues as to any reading other than recognizing "vineyards" as literal places where grapes were cultivated. The reason the female lover is "swarthy" or sunburnt is because she had to work outside in vineyards.

In line e the next occurrence of "vineyard" is singular. What are we to make of the use of this term here? Common "literal interpretation" wisdom declares: "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense." It could make normal sense that her brothers kept her from working in her own vineyards because they wanted free sibling labor presumably for their own profit from their own vineyards. So line e is a simple statement of fact that makes literal sense. However, observing the literary context beginning in line a challenges such a reading and the "wisdom" of "literal interpretation." It is clear from the context that the term "vineyard" in line e is being used as a metaphor for the female lover's body. This is evidenced by the empathic use of the first person in this cola, שֶׁלִּי לֹא נָטָרְתִּי כַּרְמִי ("my vineyard, which is mine, I have not kept"). This unusual construction provides a clue that a literal vineyard is not in view. This 1st person suffixed pronoun emphasis combined with the singular use of "vineyard" (in contrast to the previous line's plural use) indicates that the author utilizes a figurative use of the term. Also, line e in literary context is the explanation of the reason why she was sunburnt: it is because she was made to work outside in the hot sun (lines a-d) and thus was not able to care for her body, i.e. vineyard (line e).[26]

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[25] Notice I am not rejecting the term "literal" as a noun. It functions quite nicely in this context and causes no confusion or misunderstanding.

[26] Dan Estes concurs, "In this verse, 'vineyard' is used in two senses, first of the literal vineyard in which Shulammith was compelled to labour, and then as a literary

Even though "we" know what we mean by the phrase "literal interpretation," to suggest that this phrase is literally the best expression for the process we just followed is to invite Zuckian verbiage to label the distinct use of the same terminology in different ways.[27] It is much simpler and clearer to label the process "contextual interpretation" in which the literal and figurative use of the same term in different lines was the intent of the original author to communicate his single, intended meaning.[28]

In the second example (2:15) we again come across two uses of the same term, "vineyards," (כְּרָמִים). This verse occurs in the second movement expressing the obstacle theme (2:8-17).

The female lover speaks:

a) Catch for us the foxes (שׁוּעָלִים),
b) The little foxes (שׁוּעָלִים קְטַנִּים)

c) The ones ruining the vineyards, (כְּרָמִים)
d) While our vineyards (כְּרָמִים) are in blossom (2:15).

After a very steamy encounter in 2:3-6 the adjuration refrain (2:7) transitions the reader to this second movement (2:8-17). Here the reader overhears the female lover's quoting her beloved's desires (2:10-14). In short he wanted her, alone, in private and naked (2:14). While not squelching his desire, the female lover responded by pointing out that she wanted the numerous small foxes that were threatening havoc to their vineyards captured (2:15).

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figure for her physical body." Daniel J. Estes, "The Song of Songs," in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2010), 308.

The same three-fold use of the 1st person suffix pronoun in relationship to a vineyard which is a metaphor for the female lover's body is found in 8:12, כַּרְמִי שֶׁלִּי לְפָנָי   ("my vineyard, which is mine, before me").

[27] I.e. "figurative-literal" vs. "ordinary-literal"

[28] While I imagine one could argue to maintain a "literal" reading of 1:6e that the female lover was overworked and thus not able to work on her own literal vineyard, contextually such a reading does not clarify or advance the three verses (5, 6, 7) of this stanza.

While it is possible to understand these lines as the female lover literally imploring her beloved to get his fox traps or his 9th century BC equivalent 12 gauge, such a literal reading grates against the literary context before (2:8-14) and after (2:16-17). While "a common sense" reading makes perfect literal sense: i.e. to be concerned about the agricultural damage that young Middle Eastern omnivorous mammals may cause to vineyards in flower, it does not fit contextually his expressed desire (10-14) or her request to enjoy his "prancing" on her peaks in the following verse (2:17)! An ordinary, normal, literal reading makes plain sense but simply does not make contextual sense.

Contextually, it is best to understand that "foxes" (2:15) are functioning as a metaphor for some type of unnamed problems that are creating some level of havoc in the couple's "vineyards." While the reader feels she wanted to grant his request (2:14), the unnumbered multitude of furry pests needed to be dealt with before they mature in size causing greater destruction to their "vineyards."

Like the use of the 1st person singular suffixed pronoun in 1: 6, here the 1st person plural suffixed pronoun (כְּרָמֵינוּ) gives the reader an indication that these may not be ordinary or literal vineyards. Contextually "vineyards" should be understood as a metaphor for the various areas of a couple's relationship. It seems these relationship areas are in "bloom" (סְמָדַר) i.e. growing; however, there are unidentified "foxes" (i.e. obstacles) that are dangerous to these vineries bearing fruit. If these "small obstacles" were not dealt with while they were of manageable size, the couple's relationship (i.e. vineyards) would suffer harm.

For these two metaphors ("foxes" and "vineyards") to work, various aspects of literal "foxes" and literal "vineyards" need to be understood. As Ryken observes, a "metaphor is a bifocal utterance that requires us to look at two levels of meaning or two spheres of experience."[29] The first level is certainly the "literal" one. For the metaphor to communicate we need to be able to "see" literal ancient Middle East foxes (i.e. small one) and vineyards in bloom. Ryken also recognizes, "At a literal, grammatical level, a metaphor always states an untruth."[30] This "untruth" leads to the second level, which is the figurative one. Hopefully, we understand that Solomon does not mean literal "foxes" or literal "blossoming vineyards." He employs these literal images to paint a picture on the mental canvas of his reader as a point of comparison. Solomon takes the concrete, foxes in vineyards, to visually picture the abstract, obstacles in relationships. It is certainly easier for the original reader to visualize the destruction small foxes would do to a blooming vineyard, than envision the damage that certain obstacles cause in a marriage relationship.

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[29] Leland Ryken, *Literary Forms in the Bible* (Crossway, 2014), 124.

[30] Ryken, 124.

Although "we" would all understand what "we" mean if "we" labeled this process "literal interpretation," we appreciate that it is literally not the best term. "Context interpretation" that recognizes the historical and literary contexts of this verse seem to be a less problematic and a clearer representation of what we actually did with this verse.

Our next example is in the sixth movement and advances the theme of desire. Echoing his expression of desire to be alone with her in the literal rugged outdoors (2: 14), here the female lover voices her longing to be alone in a more pastoral setting with a very erotic purpose.

The female lover speaks:

a) Let us rise early *and go* to the vineyards (כְּרָמִים);

b) Let us see whether the vine has budded
c) *if* blossoms have opened,
d) *if* the pomegranates have bloomed.

e) There I will give my love to you (7:13 Eng 7:12).

By this point in the Song we might be quick to label this use of "vineyards" (כְּרָמִים) as a metaphor and hastily look for the comparison. Solomon has certainly primed us to be on the look out for metaphorical usages of the term. However, as we read the lines we are left to ponder, if this is a metaphor, we do not easily see the comparison implied or otherwise. While there certainly may be some suggestive metaphorical or euphemistic language with "vines budding," "blossoms opening" and "pomegranates blooming," "vineyards" of verse 13a are best read as literal vineyards, places where grapes are cultivated.

The adverb of location "there" (שָׁם) in line e also indicates that "vineyards" (7:13) are literal places where she wants to take her lover. The use of the verb of motion (שׁכם) also give evidence that "vineyards" are her desired destinations after their rising early (line a). This literal use of the term fits the literary context of 7:10-13 (Eng) very well. These are orchards where grapes are grown and the outdoor space where her erotic tryst will take place (line e). Lines b through d seem to be "excuses" to lure her beloved to this unique place to enjoy her lovemaking.

While one could label this "literal interpretation" (and "we" would all know what "we" mean), it does not capture our interpretative process. While we understand the term, כְּרָמִים, as a literal one, that determination came by our looking not simply at the word itself but at the context in which it is functioning. Any word by

itself could be understood as literal. However, it is not until we look at the term in its context can that its usage be determined.[31] Contextual interpretation seems to be a more accurate term for what we actually do when we interpret the biblical text.

Our last example is found in the last movement of the Song (8:5-14). These verses work to develop the obstacle theme for the last time (8:11-12).

The female lover speaks:

a) A vineyard (כֶּרֶם) belonged to Solomon at Baal-hamon;
b) He entrusted the vineyard (כֶּרֶם) to caretakers;
c) Each is to bring with its fruit a thousand *pieces* of silver (8:11)

a) My vineyard (כַּרְמִי) which is mine (שֶׁלִּי) belongs to me (לְפָנָי);
b) The thousand are for you, Solomon,
c) And two hundred are for those who take care of its fruit (8:12)

These verses are difficult to translate and interpret. However, determining the use of our term, vineyard, (כֶּרֶם) is straightforward. While it is possible that Solomon owned a single vineyard at unknown Baal-hamon, a literal reading of the term is unlikely. The key to understanding the first use of vineyard (כֶּרֶם) in 8:11a is in the place, Baal-hamon (בַּעַל הָמוֹן). This hapex geographic location is not to be taken as a literal place. Its unidentified location and its meaning, "possessor of abundance"[32] or "husband of a multitude"[33] points to a metaphorical use. Contextually, it seems the author is making a metaphorical reference to Solomon's 1000 wives and concubines (1 Kings 11:3). To state that Solomon was a "husband of an abundance" is not a literary hyperbole. Solomon's "Baal-hamon vineyard" contained a plethora of plants that represented the multitude of wives and concubines he enjoyed. This "vineyard" represented his harem that was placed in the care of others (eunchs?).

While Solomon had an abundance of women in his vineyard, the female lover boasts of only one (8:12). The three-fold repetition of the 1st person suffix in line 12a, highlights that this "vineyard" is singular and unique. Just like our first example

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[31] Take for instance the word, "love." Do I mean the emotion, or do I mean "any one of a set of transverse beams supporting the spits in a smokehouse for curing herring," (*OED*) or am I giving one side of the score of a tennis match? Only context will make my use of "love" clear. *OED, Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=Love

[32] *BDB*, 128.

[33] J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 260.

(1:6) this sole vineyard is a metaphor for the female lover's own body.   Solomon may have his 1000 women, but her "vineyard" is her own. Solomon may have purchased his wives and concubines, but the female lover's "vineyard" cannot be bought. It is clearly hers alone without price (8:7) and she offers it to her lover (8:14).

While these two verses could be speaking of two separate and unique literal vineyards, (Solomon's Baal-Hamon vineyard and the female lover's own literal vineyard), such an interpretation reads against the grain of the entire book, this last movement of the entire Song (8:5-14) and the literary context of its stanza (8:10-14). While we may quibble over the meaning of the metaphors employed by "vineyard," a contextual reading recognizes that figurative and not literal images are at play.

Conclusion

Moving forward, it seems more accurate for Dispensationalists to dispense with "literal" (and its many qualifiers) as a modifier of our method of interpretation. Embracing the term, "contextual interpretation" avoids the continued use of copious and varied qualifiers, avoids the confusion between "literal" as a noun and "literal" as a noun modifier as exhibited by Zuck and better represents the hermeneutic we practice. "Contextual" interpretation is literally the better word moving forward.