

© Copyright 1995, 2005, by Sam A. Smith

This document may be copied for noncommercial educational or religious use if distributed absolutely free to the end user.

This notice must be attached to all copies distributed.

All other rights reserved.

This document may not be used for any other purpose than stated above without the express written consent of the author. All commercial use of this document and/or the illustrations contained herein is strictly prohibited.

What the Bible Says About the Future: ISBN 1-59872-275-1

Published by *Biblical Reader Communications*/Sam A. Smith
www.BiblicalReader.com

Softcover edition printed in the United States of America, December, 2005

All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ©. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of International Bible Society

Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

The “NASB,” “NAS,” “New American Standard Bible,” “New American Standard,” “Amplified,” “LBLA,” and “La Biblia de las Américas” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by The Lockman Foundation. Use of these trademarks requires the permission of The Lockman Foundation. Cover photograph © Freestockphotos.com

To order print copies of this book: Visit Biblical Reader Communications on the Internet at:

<http://orders.biblicalreader.com> (ordering information), or **www.BiblicalReader.com** (general Internet site)

Quantity discounts are available.

Understanding Apocalyptic Literature

The word “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek “*apokalupsis*,” which means, “a revelation” or “disclosure” of something otherwise hidden. Because this term appears in the title of the book of Revelation, which has so much to say about the future, the word “apocalyptic” has come to be associated with prophetic literature dealing with the future, and in a broad sense it is used to encompass both biblical and non-biblical literature dealing with the future, though our interest here is confined to the Bible.

The Distinguishing Features of Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic literature in the Bible is not easily distinguished from non-apocalyptic prophecy (of which there is a great deal contained within the Bible). In fact, about the only significant feature which can be pointed to is its focus on the future, or events associated with the coming kingdom of God. If we were to suggest that biblical apocalyptic literature is characterized by visions and dreams, we can find that in non-apocalyptic prophecy; if we suggest the use of symbols or symbolic language as a distinguishing feature, we can also find abundant examples of that in non-apocalyptic prophecy; again, if we suggest a judgment theme as characteristic, we can find abundant non-apocalyptic prophecies dealing with judgment. Actually, it is very difficult to find any trait that consistently characterizes biblical apocalyptic writings — other than a focus on the culmination of the age (the future). Other characteristics generally pointed to are not consistently present and can be found elsewhere. Perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from the lack of distinguishing features of biblical apocalyptic literature is that far too much has been made over the distinction of future prophecy as a class, or literary genre. This unjustified segregation of future prophecy into a special category has been unfortunate because it is often construed as validation

for the dual hermeneutic applied by covenantal interpreters (*i.e.*, it becomes the classification structure which gives rise to the application of a special set of interpretive principles). “Future prophecy” is simply Bible prophecy concerning events that have not yet happened. All fulfilled prophecies (including those of Christ’s birth) were at one time unfulfilled, and in that sense they were “future prophecies,” but in the course of time, as they were fulfilled, they no longer pertained to the future. The distinction of “future prophecy” is not based on unique literary features or content, but on our perspective in history. Someday much of what we now consider future prophecy will have been fulfilled, and will no longer be classed as future prophecy. The point is this: There is no real difference (in a literary sense) between future prophecy and fulfilled prophecy, and there is certainly no justification for applying a special hermeneutic to prophecy simply because it has not yet been fulfilled. Having said that, there are some general principles of interpretation we need to be aware of, as well as some special considerations in the interpretation of prophecy in general.

Applying Normal (Literal) Interpretation to Prophecy

Whatever conclusion one may reach regarding the nature of apocalyptic literature as a distinct literary genre in the Bible, one thing is clear: only the literal/normal method of interpretation can ensure that the intended meaning is correctly understood – because only the literal method is truly interpretive. We will now look at some of the principles for interpreting the Bible in general and prophecy as a general class of literature within the Bible.

General interpretive principles

There are some general principles of interpretation that should be applied to any biblical text whether or not it is prophetic. Those principles are summarized below.

Determine what the text says

It should go without saying that before one can determine what a text means, one must first determine what it says (literally). This means that the interpreter must determine the proper reading of the

text in the original language and resolve as many difficulties in the wording of the text as possible prior to attempting an interpretation. Additionally, the interpreter should be thoroughly familiar with the lexicography (word meanings), accidence (inflectional forms of words), syntax (the use and significance of inflectional forms of words), and grammar (relationships among words and sentence parts) of the passage. Of course, this is an idealization; some of these elements may not come into sharp focus until a trial interpretation is postulated. Nevertheless, insofar as it is possible to acquire this information prior to venturing an interpretation, it should be done.

Determine the historical context

Every communication is context sensitive, that is, to some degree or another the meaning and significance hinges on the context in which, and concerning which, the communication is made. Therefore, the determination of historical context is essential for understanding any passage of Scripture. Lack of historical context can actually be as much of an impediment to interpretation as uncertainty over the meaning of a word or phrase.

Determine the theological and dispensational context

The Bible is a progressive revelation from God. To take a clip out of its biblical context is to remove it from the only setting in which it can be properly understood. Every statement must be understood in the light of what God has revealed up to that point in history. The interpreter must be aware of the predisposing (antecedent) theology of the passage he is attempting to interpret. In other words, he must know the theological context in which the passage sits. Not only that, but the interpreter must also be aware of the dispensational features of the passage. He must ask himself, "What are the operative principles of the era in which this passage was written? Did the events or statements occur before the fall of man, under the law, after the cross, or are they spoken prophetically in reference to some future age?" With all of the foregoing information in hand, the interpreter is usually ready to put forward an interpretation. However, there are some special considerations when dealing with prophetic passages.

Special considerations in the interpretation of prophecy

While the same principles given above apply to both prophetic and non-prophetic passages, there are some features of prophecy which complicate the application of these principles, such as the presence of figurative language, symbols, time compression, foreshortening, even parables. It is important to realize that these special features do not mitigate against the application of the normal/literal method of interpretation, they simply make it more challenging.

Observing time relationships

Sometimes prophecies seem to compress or expand time by devoting more space to a shorter event than to an event that is longer (e.g., Revelation 4:1-20:10, in which sixteen chapters are devoted to the seven years of the tribulation and only seven verses are devoted to the thousand years of the millennium). In other cases prophecies may contain large gaps in a timeline (e.g., Isaiah 61:1-3, where the first and second advents of Christ are pictured as one event; or Daniel 9:24-27, where the church age is entirely omitted), or they may contain no timeline at all and events may not be in chronological order (e.g., Isaiah 65:17-25, where eternity is described before the millennium). In some cases, prophecies can supply time relationships for other prophecies. However, the interpreter must be very careful in comparing the information and arriving at conclusions. Also, the supplied time relationship, while helping to understand the overall truth of the subject or event, should not be read back into the more obscure prophecy as if the author were aware of that information – which may not have been the case. This is particularly true when a later prophecy clarifies an earlier one. (Remember, revelation of truth was progressive, with one concept being built upon another.)

Interpreting symbols

At times Bible prophecy makes use of symbols, including symbolic objects, actions, symbolic representations of people, and symbolic use of names and numbers. The challenge for the interpreter is to determine (literally) what the symbol represents. One pitfall that the student of Bible prophecy must avoid is identifying as symbolic things that were not intended as symbols. The fact that a prophecy

contains symbols does not mean that everything in the prophecy is symbolic. Generally, one should only identify something as symbolic when any other interpretation is nonsensical or conflicts with clearly established biblical facts. If the interpretation of something non-symbolically makes good sense, then one should not seek to interpret it as a symbol.

In seeking to interpret symbols, one should check the immediate context carefully; the meaning of the symbol may be identified in the passage. If the immediate context does not supply the meaning of the symbol, the larger context of Scripture should be checked. It is possible that the symbol is used elsewhere, and its meaning may be more apparent from another passage. Always look for the first occurrence of a symbol; often the key to interpreting a symbol will be found where it is first used. In seeking to interpret symbols, remember that symbols, by their nature, bear some affinity to the thing symbolized. Paying careful attention to the properties of the symbol may provide a clue as to what it means.

The student of prophecy should be especially careful about interpreting numbers as symbolic. Of the great many occasions in which numbers occur in Bible prophecy, they are seldom used symbolically. Biblical numerology can become another form of “spiritualization.” Even in the case in which a number may have some special significance elsewhere, the use of the number in prophecy does not necessarily mean that it should be interpreted as a symbol. The rule to follow is this: “If the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense.”

Interpreting Prophetic Parables

A parable is an extended simile; it conveys a truth through the medium of an analogy. Several things should be kept in mind when seeking to interpret parables, be they prophetic or not. 1) Don't try to find some special significance for every detail of the parable. Some details are only given to complete, or “round out,” the similitude. Even when Christ interpreted His own parables, He didn't assign significance to every detail in the story, but only those elements that were central to the truth being conveyed. 2) As an extended figure of speech, and like all figures of speech, parables are only used to

teach a single, central truth. 3) Many parables are interpreted within the context of the passage; one should look for the interpretation to see if it is supplied. 4) Even if the interpretation is not given, the context may contain clues as to why the parable was spoken and what it means.

Observing the larger context of prophecy

A great many prophetic events are dealt with in more than one place. Therefore, interpretation should take into account details revealed elsewhere. This does not mean that those details should be imported into the passage under consideration, only that the final interpretation should be in harmony with other Scripture. For example, there are over a dozen passages of Scripture that describe the second coming in detail. All these passages do not include precisely the same details, but they are all accurate, if not complete, descriptions of the event. The complete description of the event (so far as we have it) is the sum of all that information. Therefore, the interpreter should seek to interpret each of these passages in the light of the biblical prophetic context.

The single sense of Scripture

Students of the Bible have debated the question of whether there is a “fuller” meaning to some passages than what the human authors may have been aware. After all, if the principal author of Scripture is God, why could He not have infused within it a deeper meaning than even the human authors were capable of understanding? The answer is that He could; however, we would have the same difficulty deciphering the message as the original authors. We also have to be careful not to confuse “significance” with “interpretation.” While the significance of a prophecy may seem to change with increased revelation, its interpretation does not.

There can only be one correct interpretation of any passage. If there could be more than one correct interpretation, how would we know, and by what process would we discover them? Whether there is in some prophecies a meaning beyond the obvious normal/literal meaning only God knows, and if there is, it does not appear that He has let us in on how to accurately detect and decipher them. Until

He does, we must be content with the only method we know that leads to objective meaning, and that method is grammatical-historical-dispensational interpretation. Of course, this rules out any “double sense” of Scripture unless God Himself interprets it for us elsewhere in Scripture, and there are only a few instances of this (mostly in the Gospel of Matthew).

The question of near versus distant fulfillment

In some cases prophecies seem to have both a near and a more distant fulfillment. This does not argue for a double meaning. It may be simply a general prophecy. In other words, the prophecy may not be linked to a specific event so much as a specific “kind” of event or events. Or, it may be that the nearer event is merely a foreshadowing of the ultimate prophesied event to come. Another possibility is that a prophecy may be partially fulfilled at one point with the completed fulfillment occurring later; such would still constitute only one fulfillment. However, as indicated previously, a passage can have only one correct interpretation, and consistent with that, prophecy has only one fulfillment, in other words the interpreter cannot justify an interpretation requiring multiple meanings.

Summary

Biblical apocalyptic literature should not be regarded as a separate literary genre from fulfilled prophecy, though prophecy (in general) is a genre separate from other forms of biblical literature, like historical narrative or didactic literature. (This does not prevent us from viewing “future prophecy” as a subset of prophecy in general, as long as we understand this classification is due to *our* position in history, not something peculiar about the literature itself.) As with all Scripture, prophecy must be interpreted normally/literally, giving due consideration to figures and symbols. Only the normal/literal method anchors interpretation in objectivity. “Spiritualization” (allegorization) is an inherently subjective process, since it breaks with the normal use of language and thus observes no set rules of communication – only the whim of the interpreter.

