

The Book of Revelation: Four Approaches to the Prophetic Text and Interpretive Guidelines

1) The four approaches to Prophecy:¹

- a) The **Preterist** approach views the Book of Revelation as a historical record of events that took place in the first-century Roman Empire.

But this view ignores the fact that *the book itself claims to be a prophecy* (see **Revelation 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19**).

Christ did not return in the first century as predicted in **Revelation 19**.

(According to proponents of this view, Christ's Second Coming was fulfilled in the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, even though He did not actually appear at that time.)

No persecution that took place in the first century fits the description of the horrific events depicted in **Revelation 6–19**.

- b) The **Historicist** approach sees the Book of Revelation as a panoramic record of the full sweep of church history from apostolic times to the present.

The historicist must often resort to allegorizing the text to make it fit some historical event it is supposed to represent (i.e., the fall of Rome to the barbarians, the rise of the Roman Catholic Church, the advent of Islam, even the French Revolution).

¹ For further 'popular' discussions of the various views see: MacArthur, John, Jr., *Revelation 1–11: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, Publisher, 1999) & Hayford, Jack W.; and Curtis, Gary, *Until the End of Time*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998, c1994).

As a result, historicist interpreters have come up with all sorts of different interpretations of what certain texts mean, turning its interpretation into a virtual free-for-all.

In many cases, this approach (like the preterist) is guilty of ignoring the Book of Revelation's own claims to be a prophecy.

This view removes its interpretation from the realm of the literal and historical and leaves it to the chaos of allegorical and spiritualized meanings.

- c) The **Idealist** approach sees the Book of Revelation as depicting the timeless struggle between good and evil which is played out in every age.

According to this view, the Book of Revelation is neither an historical record nor a predictive prophecy.

Like the first two views, the idealist view ignores the Book's claim that it is a prophecy.

The book is thus reduced to a collection of myths designed to convey spiritual truth.

- d) The **Futurist** approach sees **Revelation 4–22** as predictions of people and events yet to come.

Only this approach allows Revelation to be interpreted following the same literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutical method by which the rest of the Bible is interpreted.

While sponsors of the other three approaches are frequently forced to allegorize or spiritualize the text to support their interpretations, the futurist does not.

The futurist alone accepts the Book of Revelation's claim to be a prophecy.

The most common criticism of the futurist approach is that it robs the book of any meaning for those to whom it was written, since most of its events are future.

To this, Dr. John Walvoord comments:

“Much of the prophecy of the Bible deals with the distant future, including the Old Testament promises of the coming Messiah, the prophecies of Daniel concerning the future world empires, the body of truth relating to the coming kingdom on earth as well as countless other prophecies. If the events of chapters 4 through 19 are future, even from our viewpoint today, they teach the blessed truth of the ultimate supremacy of God and the triumph of righteousness.”²

2) Guidelines for interpreting Prophetic Scripture:

a) Interpret the Prophetic passage literally.

This is the single most important rule in interpreting prophecy.

Don't come to a prophetic passage with a preconceived conclusion.

Dr. Paul Benware:

“We interpret literally when we approach the words of a Scripture passage in the same basic way that we would any other literature or any ordinary conversation. For example, if I told you that I just saw three brown dogs in the alley, you would interpret that statement literally. You would not seek to find hidden meaning in my comment but would assume that I saw three (not five) brown (not black) dogs (not cats) in the alley (not in the park). Not to interpret literally in everyday life would render our communication confusing and fundamentally useless. And our approach to the prophetic Word is very similar.”³

² Walvoord, John, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press) 1966, p. 22.

³ Benware, Paul N. (Charles C. Ryrie, Foreword), *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 2006), p.19.

Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost: “The literal method of interpretation is that method that gives to each word the same exact basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage.”⁴

Since God intends for biblical revelation to be understood by people, He based His revelatory communication on the normal rules of human communication.

b) Be careful not to leave the literal approach when interpreting symbols:

Symbols are valuable tools of communication. Symbols communicate truth concisely, and they communicate it graphically.

In **Revelation 11** the apostle John could have spent a great deal of time describing the spiritual and moral condition of Jerusalem. Instead he called the city “Sodom and Egypt.”

c) Interpret by comparing Prophecy with Prophecy.

Peter said that “no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation” (**2 Peter 1:20**). Peter’s point includes the idea that no prophecy found in Scripture is to be interpreted by itself but, rather, in reference to *everything else* God has said on the subject.

If all we studied on the subject of the Antichrist was **Daniel 7**, we would not get a complete picture, for the apostles Paul and John have significant points to contribute.

God is not the author of confusion and clearly will not contradict Himself as He sets forth the things to come.

d) Interpret in light of possible time intervals.

When the prophets proclaimed God’s message, they frequently were unaware that there was going to be an interval of time between prophetic fulfillments.

⁴ Pentecost, J. Dwight, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), p.9.

This is the concept of “mountain peaks of prophecy,” which has been well-illustrated and explained by Dr. Clarence Larkin:

Two-thirds of the Scriptures are Prophetic, either in type, symbol or direct statement, and more than one-half of the Old Testament prophecies, and nearly all of the New Testament point to events yet future. The Old Testament bears a “double” witness to Jesus. It points to both His “First” and “Second” Comings. This was confusing to the Bible student and religious leaders of Christ’s day. They did not know how to distinguish between the two. They did not separate the prophecies that foretold His “Sufferings” from the prophecies that foretold His “Glory.” 1 Pet. 1:10–12. They believed that all the prophecies that referred to the Messiah (Christ) were to be fulfilled at His First Coming. This accounts for why the people of Christ’s day looked for Him to set up a “Temporal Kingdom.” They did not see that this “Present Dispensation” for “Church Age,” was to intervene between the “Sufferings” (the Cross), and the “Glory” (the Crown). But we stand on this side of Calvary and can readily separate the fulfilled from the unfulfilled prophecies. This is clearly brought out on the Chart of the “Mountain Peaks of Prophecy.”

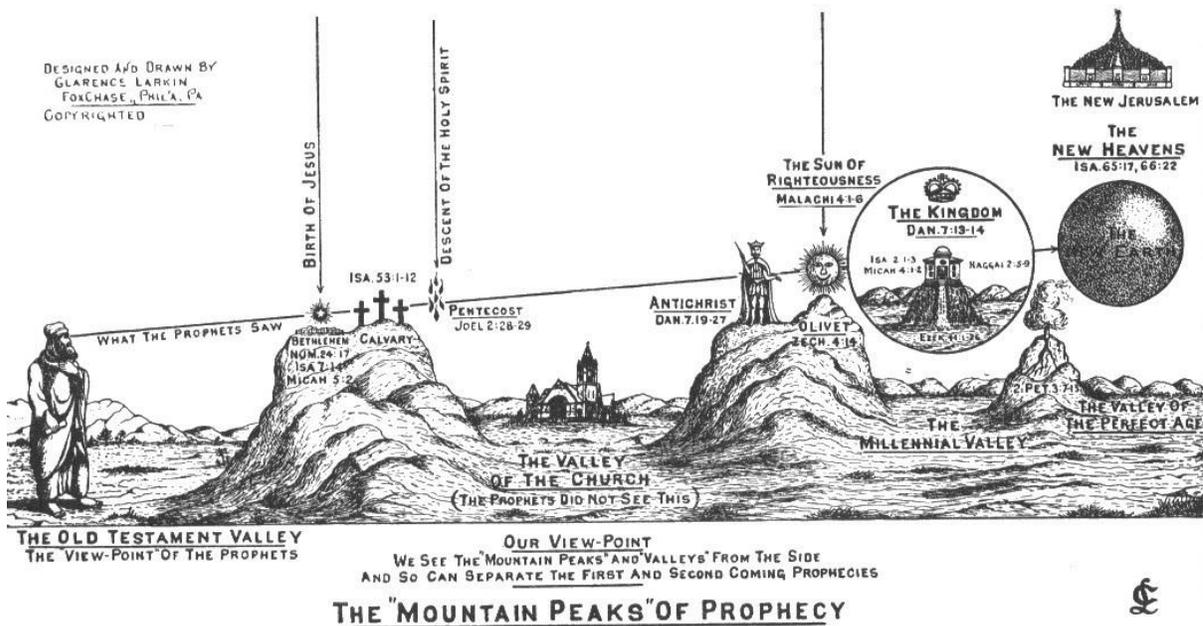
The Old Testament prophet saw the future as separate peaks of one mountain; he did not see that there was a “valley” between those peaks. The Prophet Isaiah (Isa. 61:1, 2) did not see that a “comma” in the second verse, that separated between the statements — “The acceptable year of the Lord,” and “The Day of Vengeance of our God,” was to span a period covering the whole of this “Present Dispensation” and already over 1900 years long. This is shown on the Chart, as is also the way in which Paul in his letter to Titus (Titus 2:11–13), links up the two “Comings,” with how to live between them, and also separates the “Rapture” and the “Revelation.” The Chart on the “Perspective of Prophecy” shows what each of the prophets foresaw of future events from the birth of Christ on down to the New Heavens and the New Earth. Isaiah saw more and the farthest of all the prophets.

All the Major and nine of the Minor prophets emphasize the “Kingship” of Christ, and it was this that confused the religious

leaders or Christ's day. They did not know that the "office work" of Christ was Threefold, that of Prophet, Priest and King, and that He was to hold those offices successively and not conjointly.

Nevertheless, we may classify three of the Major prophets as follows: Isaiah was the "Prophetic" prophet, Ezekiel the "Priestly" prophet, and Daniel the "Kingly" prophet. The prophets saw the "Altar" (of Burnt Offering) and the "Throne," but they did not see the "Table" (the Lord's Table) that was to come in between.

The importance of the study of Prophecy is seen in the fact that if the religious leaders of Christ's day had been students of Prophecy they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory, and if the religious leaders of our day do not study the Prophetic Scriptures, they will not be ready for Christ's Second Coming.⁵



A prophet placing several events side-by-side in his message does not require that they would be fulfilled at the same time or that one fulfillment would immediately follow the other.

⁵ Larkin, Clarence, *Dispensational Truth, or "God's Plan and Purpose in the Ages"* (Philadelphia, PA: Clarence Larkin, 1918), p.10.

e) Interpret in light of double reference.

One prophecy may have more than one fulfillment.

A prophecy may have a fulfillment both in the time of the prophet, and another in the perhaps distant future.

Charles Ryrie: “Often a prophecy may have a double fulfillment, one being in the immediate circumstances and another in the distant future.”⁶

f) Interpret figurative language scripturally.

As already mentioned, figures of speech and symbols represent something literal.

Interpret in light of the immediate context. The prophet himself interprets some symbols in the text.

Interpret in light of the larger context. Prophetic symbols involve those whose meaning is suggested by other Scriptures outside of the immediate text.

Interpret in light of the historical-cultural context. A few symbols do not find meaning in other sections of Scripture but, rather, in the days of the writer himself.

g) Be careful of newspaper eschatology! The news is exciting but may have absolutely no prophetic significance! Before you mishandle the Word of God, just



⁶ Ryrie, Charles, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc., 1953).