

The Authority of Scripture

The central issue on how to interpret Revelation is one of evidence. We cannot rely on *external* evidence, such as world events. Academic pedigrees and instinct are notoriously unreliable, due to human prejudice. The book can be understood primarily through *internal* evidence, namely, the Word of God. A judicious use of historical evidence will flesh out the context in many cases, but we ultimately must “let the bible interpret the bible.” Anyone can prove anything by comparing scriptures to history or an imagined future. Using the Bible as its own authority, however, is the only legitimate way to understanding Revelation. Relying on the Word will bring us to the Truth; anything else may lead to error.

Something I say often is this: The Ottoman Empire may be one of the Four Horseman. But how do you prove it?

Rules of Interpretation

Three important rules need to be established at the outset of our study, which may cause some to question this author’s arbitrary fixing of rules of interpretation. Jesus said, “Now I have told you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe.” (John 14:29) Our Lord was referring to His impending death and resurrection. That said, all biblical prophecy is designed to *reveal* Jesus Christ. While Revelation carries the theme of Good winning out over Evil via the Church, its central Character is Jesus Christ. Anyone attempting to focus on world events is leading people astray.

I. Revelation is a *prophetic* work, written in *symbolic* language. Ancient Jewish scholars used several interpretive “rules” to understand prophecy. One of those rules, simply stated, was, *you can’t arbitrarily interpret prophecy to be both figurative and literal*. This important principle is thrown out the window in Christian society today. Compare what was written during World War I or II to something written today. Our parents and grandparents were told the mark of the beast was a real tattoo of ‘666’ on their heads and hands. Some thought it was when the Social Security numbering system was developed. We look back and smile at their naiveté. Today, writers have speculated that the mark refers to sub-dermal computer chip implants, which sounds impressive and more accurate. Anyone living in the last century are looked at as woefully ignorant in their understanding of Revelation. We, however, see ourselves as more enlightened. Besides the obvious prejudice associated with this type of thinking, there are major problems with it:

- (1) It denies the book’s meaning to everyone *before* the current generation. In other words, only those living in the so-called Last Days will finally understand the

symbols. Since the book was written to comfort 1st Century Christians, what good would Revelation have done them?

(2) How do you prove it? Futurists confidently assert that certain events are prophecies being fulfilled now. As events shift and fade, they shrug their shoulders and wait for the next event to move onto the world's stage. A perfect example of this concerns Russia and many proposed "antichrists." Russia has essentially passed away, so futurists have now focused on Iraq, Iran, China, etc. Those who were thought to be the Antichrist have gone to their graves. So the premillennialists scrutinize whoever they currently deem to be the potential Antichrist.

The great thing about being a premillennialist is that you don't have to prove anything. Just point to a current event and claim it's a fulfillment of Revelation. When it doesn't come to pass, merely wait for the next event. People forget, new books are written, and Time marches on.

Bernard Shaw wrote, "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history." When World War I began, preachers cried out it was the fulfillment of Revelation. "Get ready for the Second Coming!" they cried out from pulpits all over the country. The War To End All Wars ended, and preachers slunk quietly back to their offices. One would think they would've learned their lesson when World War II broke out. They did not. Twice as many books were written, declaring the end was upon us. We have yet to learn even today. Christian bookstores are full of End Times prophecy books.

Ninety-five percent of the symbols used in Revelation can be found in the Old Testament. Indeed, to study the book is to study the Old Testament. Those symbols whose meanings have been lost in time need to be identified, and our speculation used economically when determining their purpose in the book.

II. A second important rule is that of culture. As previously mentioned, Jesus and the apostles spoke and wrote from a Middle-Eastern perspective. Concepts such as marriage do not have the same import when gauged from a Western viewpoint. For example, in trying to rightfully understand the marriage of the church to Christ in chapter 21, we need to adopt the Jewish perspective, not modern-day Western worldviews.

III. The third rule deals with hermeneutics—the *science* of interpretation. The practical application of this science is what we call *exegesis* (getting the meaning *out of* scripture). Interpretation deals with understanding the thoughts of another person, in this case, those of Jesus Christ. The views expressed by Him may not necessarily be our thoughts, which makes understanding the Word necessary to understanding Him. Hence, if Revelation is seen as too mysterious, it's a safe bet that a well-rounded understanding of scripture is lacking. Hermeneutics deals primarily with the old *who, what, when,*

where, and *why*. Revelation was written to the 1st Century church (who). It deals with the revealing of Jesus Christ (what), of things shortly coming to pass (when). It encompasses earth, heaven, the church, and Satan's empire (where). It is a panorama of the triumph of Good over Evil, written to provide comfort to persecuted Christians living 2,000 years ago (why). Since it was written to the saints living at that time, we must assume that they understood the book. It would have done 1st Century Christians precious little good to write something they would not have understood.