

Interpreting the Bible 10 – Interpreting Prophecy & Apocalyptic Writings

Interpreting Prophecy

1. **Investigate the book's background, date, and author.** To whom is the prophetic oracle addressed? Is there a unifying theme to the book? When were the prophecies proclaimed or written? Who is the author, and what do we know about him? How would the original hearers have understood the prophecies? To help answer these questions, consult a good study Bible.
2. **Expect figurative language.** Prophecy is the language of judgment, anguish, longing, and celebration. As an emotive genre, it is filled with poetic pictures and exaggerated expressions.
3. **Distinguish conditional and unconditional prophecy.** Prophecies can be given as unalterable purposes of God (Gen. 12:1–3, Gal. 3:15–18), or they can be given as conditional promises or warnings (Jonah 3:4). Only additional statements in the context clarify whether the prophecy is unconditional or conditional.
4. **Seek to understand what the inspired author is trying to convey to his original audience before seeking to determine the implications for us today.** One must be careful to distinguish prophecy of specific, unrepeatably events from the underlying patterns of God's dealings with humankind. God is not capricious, so the characteristics displayed by God in prophetic texts can be linked to similar situations today (for example, the ultimate accountability of wayward nations, the preservation of a faithful remnant, the apparent delay in God's judgment of the wicked, etc.). One specific example is the repeated prophetic declaration of God's faithfulness to Israel, even though they constantly abandon him. What analogous situation do we see today? The visible church fails to demonstrate consistently the truth of the gospel, but we know that Jesus has promised that he will build his church and that nothing can stop its ultimate advance and the coming consummation of his kingdom (Matt. 16:18).
5. **Determine whether the prophetic predictions are fulfilled or unfulfilled.** If there is an eschatological referent in the text, it may be difficult in some cases to determine the state of fulfillment. When possible, allow the New Testament to be your guide on the fulfillment of messianic and eschatological Old Testament prophecies.
6. **Note the apologetic value of prophecy.** The proven fulfillment of prophecies in Scripture is evidence for the truthfulness of Scripture.¹

¹ Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010), 199–201.

Interpreting Apocalyptic Writings

The English word *apocalyptic* comes from the Greek word *apokaluptō*, meaning “to reveal” or “to unveil.” Apocalyptic literature is a genre of Jewish literature characterized by its use of symbolic imagery to reveal God’s mysterious, providential workings behind the scenes and his coming plans for the future.²

Apocalyptic Writings In Scripture

- * Isaiah 24-27; Ezekiel 38-39; Zechariah 1-6; Mark 13; etc.
- * The only books that are classified as apocalyptic are Daniel and Revelation (even though both contain non-apocalyptic material (Daniel 1-3 and Revelation 1-3))

Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

1. The expectation of the inbreaking of God into the present age to usher in a qualitatively different existence in the age to come.
2. The use of an angelic mediator or mediators to communicate God’s message to a chosen recipient/spokesman.
3. The journey of the chosen human recipient into the heavenly realms, with ongoing interaction and communication with the angelic mediator(s).
4. Highly symbolic visions or dreams that describe both current hidden spiritual realities and future divine interventions.
5. Visions of final, divine judgment.
6. Warnings of coming distresses and trials to be faced by the faithful.
7. Encouragements to the faithful to persevere in light of the true spiritual realities and coming divine interventions.³

² Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010), 213.

³ *Ibid.*, 213-214.