

Introduction to Biblical Prophecy

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You Can Trust Prophetic Scripture

We are living in strange times. One very popular and influential author—an Emergent Christian—says we cannot be certain about anything, including such biblical doctrines as prophecy. We should therefore dismiss any concern for such things as evidence, proof, debate, and arguing for one position over another. All is ambiguous, we are told.

As I read this author's book, it struck me that one paragraph after another was brimming with self-defeating arguments. For example, he seemed completely certain that he was correct about his position that we cannot be certain about anything.

He also asserted that there are no good reasons for what we believe—and then provided what he considered to be good reasons for holding that there are no good reasons for what we believe. This kind of sloppy thinking is a reflection of our current culture.

A Certain and Trustworthy Revelation

In the Scriptures, God has provided everything He wants us to know about Him and how we can have a relationship with Him. God is the one who caused the Bible to be written. Through it He speaks to us today just as He spoke to people in ancient times when its words were first given.

We are to receive the Bible as God's words to us and revere and obey them as such. As we submit to the Bible's authority, we place ourselves under the authority of the living God.

The Bible is not merely a human product—it is God-inspired. Inspiration does not mean simply that the biblical writer felt enthusiastic, like the composer of the “Star Spangled Banner.” The biblical Greek word for inspiration literally means “God-breathed.” Because Scripture is breathed out by God—because it originates from Him—it is true.

Biblical inspiration may be defined as God's superintending of the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities and even their writing styles, they composed and recorded without error His revelation to humankind in the words of the original manuscripts. In other words, the original documents of the Bible were written by men who were permitted to exercise their own personalities and literary talents but who wrote under the control and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the result being a perfect and errorless recording of the exact message God desired to give to humankind.

Both the Old and New Testaments repeatedly claim to be of divine origin. In Zechariah 7:12, for example, the prophet refers to “the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets.” This is a claim that the writings (“words”) of Moses and the Old Testament prophets were of divine origin.

Likewise, in 2 Samuel 23:2, David wrote, “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.” Both the divine origin and the human instrument of Scripture are mentioned here. The writings came from God but were mediated through a prophet of God.

The apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 likewise affirms that Scripture comes from God: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and

profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” Several things are important in this text. First, Paul refers to “all Scripture” (the entire Old Testament), which Timothy learned from his Jewish parentage (verse 15). Second, the actual written text has divine authority—the “Scripture” (Greek: *grapha*). Third, these writings were inspired, or more literally, “God-breathed.” Finally, they have divine authority for faith and practice. Because they are the Word of God, they are authoritative for the people of God.

Second Peter 1:21 provides a key insight regarding the human-divine interchange in the process of inspiration. This verse informs us that “no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” The Greek word translated “carried along” literally means “forcefully borne along.” Even though human beings were used in the process of writing down God’s prophecies, these men were all literally borne along by the Holy Spirit. The human wills of the authors were not the originators of God’s message. God did not permit the will of sinful human beings to misdirect or erroneously record His message. Put another way, God *moved*, and the prophet *mouthed* these revealed truths. God *revealed* and man *recorded* His Word to humankind.¹

Interestingly, the Greek word translated “carried along” in 2 Peter 1:21 is also found in Acts 27:15-17. In this passage the experienced sailors could not navigate the ship because the wind was so strong. The ship was being driven, directed, and carried along by the wind. This is similar to the Spirit’s driving, directing, and carrying the human authors of the Bible as He wished. The word is a strong one, indicating the Spirit’s complete superintendence of the human authors.

Yet just as the sailors were active on the ship (though the wind, not the sailors, ultimately controlled the ship’s movement), so the human authors were active in writing as the Spirit directed. This assures us that the prophetic Scriptures truly did derive from God and not mere human beings.

Jesus Confirms the Divine Authority of Scripture

Christ Himself indicated we can fully trust the prophetic Scriptures. His view of Scripture can be stated briefly in six statements:

1. Scripture is divinely authoritative. Jesus Himself declared to Satan, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).

2. Scripture is imperishable. Jesus declared, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18).

3. Scripture is infallible. Jesus clearly affirmed that “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

4. Scripture is inerrant. Jesus affirmed to the Father, “Your Word is truth” (John 17:17).

5. Scripture is historically reliable. Jesus confirmed, “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). He also said, “As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:37-39).

6. Scripture has ultimate supremacy. Jesus told some Jewish leaders, “Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?... For the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God” (Matthew 15:3,6). Such verses affirm that Scripture is supreme over human tradition.

In view of such facts, you and I can trust every single prophetic statement found in the pages of Scripture. We can be confident that God’s words about the future are reliable and true.

A Literal Approach Is Best

In the early eighties, I was one of three or four dozen Dallas Seminary

students who worked with a Christian courier company. We delivered various kinds of documents around the Dallas–Fort Worth area.

To do so, we had to learn how to use a map book. By using the index in the back of the map book, we could quickly locate the right map page—and even the right section on the map page—where the street address was located. We were told that as long as we used the map book correctly, we’d never get lost. Whenever I did get lost, it was invariably because I was reading the map book incorrectly.

By analogy, as long as we read the Bible rightly—that is, as long as we interpret it correctly—we’ll never get lost in its pages or its teachings. We will understand it the way God intended it to be understood.

I want to briefly address the right way to read the Bible. Once we do this, we’ll be better equipped to properly grasp God’s revelation about biblical prophecy—especially pertaining to prophetic chronology. We’ll also be better able to recognize the folly of such erroneous prophetic ideas as replacement theology* and preterism.†

We begin with the wisdom of taking a literal approach to interpreting Scripture. The word *literal* as used in hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) comes from the Latin *sensus literalis*, which refers to seeking a literal sense of the text as opposed to a nonliteral or allegorical sense of it. It refers to the way any person of normal intelligence would understand the text without using any special keys or codes.

Another way to describe the literal meaning of Scripture is that it embraces the normal, everyday, common understanding of the terms. Words are given the meaning that they normally have in common communication. It is the basic, normal, or plain way of interpreting a passage. But I need to mention a few qualifications.

The Literal Method Does Not Eliminate Figures of Speech

When the Bible speaks of the eye, arms, or wings of God (Psalm 34:15; Isaiah 51:9; Psalm 91:4), these should not be taken as literally

* Replacement theology basically argues that the church has replaced Israel in God’s plan and that the promises made to Israel are fulfilled in the church.

† The word *preterism* derives from the Latin *preter*, meaning past. In this view, the biblical prophecies in the book of Revelation (especially chapters 6–18) and Christ’s Olivet discourse (Matthew 24–25) have already been fulfilled.

true. God does not really have these physical features—He is pure Spirit (John 4:24). Likewise, He cannot literally be a rock (Psalm 42:9), which is material. But we would not know what is *not* literally true of God unless we first know what *is* literally true.

For example, if it were not literally true that God is pure Spirit and infinite, we would not be able to say that certain things attributed to God elsewhere in the Bible are *not* literally true—such as materiality and finitude. When Jesus said “I am the true vine” (John 15:1), the literal method of interpretation does not take this as physically true. Rather, we understand this as a figure of speech—it means that believers derive their spiritual life from Christ, our spiritual vine. It is important to understand all this, for prophetic apocalyptic literature, such as the books of Daniel and Revelation, make heavy use of figures of speech.

Determining when a passage should or should not be taken literally may sometimes be difficult. But certain guidelines are helpful. Briefly, a text should be taken figuratively...

- when it is obviously figurative, as when Jesus said He was a door (John 10:9)
- when the text itself authorizes the figurative sense, as when Paul said he was using an allegory (Galatians 4:24)
- when a literal interpretation would contradict other truths inside or outside the Bible, as when the Bible speaks of the “four corners of the earth” (Revelation 7:1)

In short, as the famous dictum puts it, “When the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense lest the result be nonsense.” I follow this dictum throughout the rest of the book.

The Literal Method Does Not Eliminate the Use of Symbols

The Bible is filled with symbols. But each symbol is emblematic of something literal.

For example, the book of Revelation contains many symbols that represent literal things. Jesus explained that the seven stars in His right

hand were “the seven angels [messengers] to the seven churches” (Revelation 1:20) and that the seven lampstands were the seven churches (1:20). Bowls of incense represent the prayers of the saints (5:8), and “many waters” symbolize “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages” (17:15). Clearly, then, each symbol represents something literal. Textual clues often point us to the literal truth found in a symbol—either in the immediate context or in the broader context of the whole of Scripture.

The Literal Method Does Not Eliminate the Use of Parables

Jesus often used parables that are not to be taken literally. Yet each parable conveys a literal point.

Jesus wanted His parables to be clear to those who were receptive. In fact, He carefully interpreted two of them for the disciples—the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-9) and the parable of the weeds (13:24-30). He did this not only so there would be no uncertainty as to their correct meaning but also to show believers how to interpret the other parables. The fact that Christ did not interpret His subsequent parables indicates that He fully expected believers to be able to follow His methodology and understand the literal truths they pointed to.

Six Reasons for a Literal Approach

There are at least six good reasons for adopting a literal interpretation of Scripture (including prophecy).

1. It is the normal way to understand all languages.
2. The greater part of the Bible makes sense when taken literally.
3. This approach will allow for a secondary (allegorical) meaning when demanded by the context.
4. All secondary (or allegorical) meanings actually depend on the literal meaning. We would not know what is not literally true of God unless we first know what is literally true.

5. It is the only sane and safe check on our subjective imaginations.
6. It is the only approach in line with the nature of inspiration (the idea that the words of Scripture are “God-breathed”).

Biblical Confirmation of a Literal Interpretation

The biblical text itself provides numerous confirmations of the literal method of interpretation. For example, later biblical texts take earlier ones as literal, as when the creation events in Genesis 1–2 are taken literally by later books (see Exodus 20:10-11). This is likewise the case regarding the creation of Adam and Eve (Matthew 19:6; 1 Timothy 2:13), the fall of Adam and his resulting death (Romans 5:12,14), Noah’s flood (Matthew 24:38), and the accounts of Jonah (Matthew 12:40-42), Moses (1 Corinthians 10:2-4,11), and numerous other historical figures.

Further, at Jesus’s first coming, He literally fulfilled more than a hundred predictions, including that He would be...

from the seed of a woman (Genesis 3:15)
 from the line of Seth (Genesis 4:25)
 a descendent of Shem (Genesis 9:26)
 the offspring of Abraham (Genesis 12:3)
 from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10)
 the son of David (Jeremiah 23:5-6)
 conceived of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14)
 born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)
 heralded as the Messiah (Isaiah 40:3)
 the coming King (Zechariah 9:9)
 the sacrificial offering for our sins (Isaiah 53)
 pierced in His side at the cross (Zechariah 12:10)

“cut off” (or killed) about AD 33 (Daniel 9:24-26)
 resurrected from the dead (Psalm 2; 16)

Note also that by interpreting prophecy literally, Jesus Himself indicated His acceptance of the literal interpretation of the Old Testament (Luke 4:16-21).

Still further, by specifically indicating the presence of parables (Matthew 13:3) or an allegory (Galatians 4:24), the Bible demonstrates that the ordinary meaning is a literal one. And by providing the interpretation of a parable, Jesus revealed that parables have a literal meaning behind them (Matthew 13:18-23).

By rebuking those who did not interpret the resurrection literally, Jesus indicated the literal interpretation of the Old Testament was the correct one (Matthew 22:29-32). Jesus’s use of Scripture constitutes one of the most convincing evidences that Scripture ought to be interpreted literally.

The relevance of all this for this book is obvious. A prophet chronology that has any hope of being accurate must follow a literal method of interpreting individual Bible prophecies. The wisdom of this approach will become increasingly evident throughout our study.

You Can Understand Prophetic Scripture

Just as we should use a literal approach in interpreting biblical prophecy, we should use sound interpretive principles for “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). This verse has a depth and richness in the original Greek that does not come across in English translations, as Bible expositor Thomas Constable explains.

“Handling accurately” (literally, *cutting straight*) is a figure that paints a picture of a workman who is careful and accurate in his work. The Greek word (*orthotomounta*) elsewhere describes a tentmaker who makes straight rather than wavy cuts in his material. It pictures a builder who lays bricks in straight rows and a farmer who plows a straight furrow.²

This imagery indicates that just as a craftsman is precise and careful in his work, so must you and I must be when interpreting Scripture. That is why interpretive principles can be so beneficial. Here are six that have guided me through the years.

The Plain Sense

1. When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense lest you end up with nonsense.

I noted this dictum earlier, but it is worth repeating. Bible expositor David Cooper suggests that in view of this dictum, we ought to “take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”³ Likewise, prophecy scholar Arnold Fruchtenbaum suggests that “unless the text indicates clearly that it should be taken symbolically, the passage should be understood literally.”⁴

A plain reading of Genesis indicates that when God created Adam in His own rational image, He gave Adam the gift of intelligible speech so he could communicate objectively with the Creator and with other human beings (Genesis 1:26; 11:1,7). Scripture shows that God sovereignly chose to use human language as a medium of communicating revealed truths, often through pronouncements of the prophets. Many times, these men began their messages with “Thus says the LORD” (for example, see Isaiah 7:7; 10:24; 22:15; 28:16; 30:15; 49:22; 51:22; 52:3-4).

If God created language primarily so He could communicate with human beings and so human beings could communicate with each other, He would naturally use language and expect man to use it in its normal and plain sense. This view of language is a prerequisite to understanding not only God’s spoken word but also His written Word (Scripture).

Consider the specific promises God has made to Israel, including the land promises in the Abrahamic covenant.⁵ The plain meaning of these promises makes perfect sense. There is no good reason to say that such verses will not be fulfilled with Israel but are rather spiritually fulfilled in the modern church—a position held by proponents of replacement theology.

Assumptions

2. Submit all doctrinal assumptions to Scripture.

Our doctrinal opinions should not govern our interpretation of Scripture. Of course, all interpreters are influenced to some degree by personal, theological, denominational, and political prejudices. None of us approaches Scripture with a blank slate. For this reason, our doctrinal opinions must be in harmony with Scripture and subject to correction by it. Only the positions that are compatible with Scripture are legitimate. We must allow the biblical text itself to modify or even completely reshape our presuppositions and beliefs.

For example, many people believe that when the antichrist emerges on the scene, he will be a Muslim. Some of these people seem to have a theological bias in favor of this position because of the recent proliferation of Islamic terrorism.

Testing this position against Scripture, however, reveals significant problems. For one thing, Daniel 9:26 predicts the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 but also mentions the antichrist: “The people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.” “Prince” refers to the antichrist. The people who destroyed Jerusalem and its temple were the Romans. Since the antichrist is of this people, we can conclude that the antichrist will be a Roman Gentile and not a Muslim. The point is that we must always be willing to test our beliefs against Scripture.

The Biblical Context

3. Pay close attention to the biblical context.

Every word in the Bible is part of a sentence, every sentence is part of a paragraph, every paragraph is part of a book, and every book is part of the whole of Scripture. The interpretation of a specific passage must not contradict the total teaching of Scripture on a point. Individual verses do not exist as isolated fragments, but as parts of a whole. To interpret them properly, we must understand their relationship to the whole and to each other. Scripture interprets Scripture.

As an example of the importance of context, consider Matthew 24:34: “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until

all these things take place.” Did Jesus mean that *all* end-time prophecies must be fulfilled during the first century, as modern-day preterists hold? I don’t think so. Consulting the context indicates that Christ was saying that those people who witness the signs stated *just earlier* in Matthew 24—the abomination of desolation (verse 15), the great tribulation such as has never been seen before (verse 21), the sign of the Son of Man in heaven (verse 30), and the like—will still be alive when the remaining end-time prophecies find fulfillment. The future tribulation period will last seven years (Daniel 9:27; Revelation 11:2), so Jesus is saying the generation alive at the beginning of the tribulation will still be alive at the end of it. Context clears everything up.

Genre

4. Make a correct genre judgment.

The Bible contains a variety of literary genres, each of which has certain peculiar characteristics that we must recognize in order to interpret the text properly. Biblical genres include history (Acts), the dramatic epic (Job), poetry (Psalms), wise sayings (Proverbs), and apocalyptic writings (Daniel and Revelation). Incorrect genre judgments will lead us astray when interpreting Scripture.

A parable should not be treated as history, nor should poetry (which contains many symbols) be treated as a straightforward narrative. For example, the Psalms refer to God as a Rock (Psalm 18:2; 19:14). This should be not be understood literally but seen as a symbol of God’s sturdiness—God is our rock-solid foundation. The Psalms often use such metaphors.

The wise interpreter allows his knowledge of genres to control how he approaches each biblical passage. In this way, he can accurately determine what the biblical author was intending to communicate to the reader.

Even though the Bible contains a variety of literary genres and many figures of speech, the biblical authors most often employed literal statements to convey their ideas. Where they use a literal means to express their ideas, the Bible student must employ a corresponding literal approach to explain these ideas. A literal method of interpreting

Scripture gives to each word in the text the same basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary writing, speaking, or thinking. Without such a method, communication between God and man would be impossible.

To illustrate the importance of genre, we have every indication that the prophetic promise in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 should be taken literally.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

In other words, there will be a literal rapture. First Thessalonians is an epistle (letter) written by the apostle Paul, and it contains straightforward statements of fact.

On the other hand, in the book of Revelation—an apocalyptic text that includes many symbols—we find that the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Revelation 1:20), the bowls full of incense denote the prayers of the saints (5:8), and the many waters describe “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages” (17:15). Genre distinctions are critical.

The Historical and Cultural Contexts

5. Consult history and culture.

The interpreter of Scripture must step out of his contemporary Western mind-set and into an ancient Jewish mind-set, paying special attention to such things as Jewish marriage rites, burial rites, family practices, farm practices, business practices, the monetary system, methods of warfare, slavery, treatment of captives, use of covenants, and religious practices. Armed with such detailed historical information, interpreting the Bible correctly becomes a much easier task because we better understand the world of the biblical writers.

A thorough historical understanding of Jewish history helps us

understand why the antichrist is called the “little horn” (Daniel 8:9). The ancient Jews recognized that animals used their horns as weapons, so the horn eventually came to be seen as a symbol of power and might. As an extension of this symbol, horns in biblical times were sometimes used as emblems of dominion, representing kingdoms and kings, as in the books of Daniel and Revelation (see Daniel 7–8; Revelation 13:1,11; 17:3-16). So the antichrist—as a “little horn”—apparently starts out in a relatively minor way with a localized dominion but eventually attains global dominion (Revelation 13).

Multiple Applications

6. Remember that one passage may apply to more than one event.

Prophetic Scriptures may refer to two events that are separated by a significant time period. These events are nevertheless found in a single passage of Scripture, seemingly blended into one picture, masking the intervening time period. The time gap is not recognized within that particular text, but it becomes evident in consultation with other verses.

This is what we find in certain Old Testament passages about the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. For example, in Zechariah 9:9-10, we read, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey...He shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea.” This passage speaks both of the first coming (Christ the king mounted on a donkey) and the second coming, which will issue in His universal millennial reign. (See Isaiah 11:1-5 for another example.)

These six interpretive principles will make our efforts to establish a biblical prophetic chronology much easier. Now let’s examine specific prophecies in the Scriptures.