

2 Seven Keys to Unlock the Mysteries of Revelation

Christianity repelled him, and he did not care for the Bible, yet the British novelist and poet D.H. Lawrence wrote *Apocalypse*, an entire book about Revelation.

He confidently maintains it is "a kind of palimpsest, with 'a pagan substratum,'"¹ a statement requiring evidence. But he presents none, only speculation, as in the following passage, with its threefold use of the word *probably* plus a *surely*, an *if*, a *seem*, and a *must . . . have been*: "The oldest part, *surely*, was a pagan work, *probably* the description of the 'secret' ritual of initiation into one of the pagan Mysteries, Artemis, Cybele, even Orphic: but most *probably* belonging there to the east Mediterranean, *probably* actually to Ephesus, as would *seem* natural. *If* such a book existed, say two or perhaps three centuries before Christ . . . So that the old pagan book *must* quite early *have been* taken and written over by a Jewish apocalypticist, with a view to substituting the Jewish idea of a Messiah and a Jewish salvation (or destruction) *of the whole world*, for the purely individual experience of pagan initiation."² (Emphases added.)

Such is the mental compost he has muddled together, or he read it somewhere. But he at least had the grace to confess a few of his motivations. He said that his very instincts resented the Bible,³ and that of all its books he found Revelation "most detestable," if it is "taken superficially."⁴ But his approach to the Apocalypse is far from profound. On the contrary, it is a wonderful example of how not to go about explaining the last book of the Bible.

We, too, now need to delve more deeply into it, though unlike Lawrence and the so-called scholars that may have influenced him we shall not be trying to puzzle out its meaning with an appeal to extrinsic symbols like those of pagan mythology. Instead, we shall be adhering to seven specific principles of prophetic interpretation. (There are no doubt more, but the ones we mention are, we think, the most important ones.) They are paying heed to the Bible's own internal expositors, comparing Scripture with Scripture, consistency, prophetic augmentation, historical

correctness and honesty, avoiding the trap of the contemporary, and a respect for previous prophetic interpreters. Let us briefly consider these principles.

2.1 The Internal Expositors

An interesting feature of the Bible's predictions is that not infrequently they have a dual nature: part prophecy, part explanation. The latter often centers in a figure, either human or angelic, who acts as an internal expositor. That is, the Lord does not simply say what will happen by using symbols, but also provides inspired guides to tell the reader what they mean. Our first principle is to note and take seriously all such internal expositors. These first occur in Genesis and become very prominent in Daniel. They are also found in the New Testament, including the Apocalypse. Let us briefly note their significance with reference to the following.

Gen. 40, 41. While Joseph, the unjustly enslaved and ill-treated son of Jacob, was in prison, the Egyptian Pharaoh also thrust in two high officials who had offended him: his chief butler and his chief baker. In the same night, both had dreams, which they were unable to puzzle out, until Joseph explained that these were prophecies of their imminent future.

Afterwards Pharaoh also dreamt and could not understand the symbols of the cows and the ears of corn that he had seen. The Egyptian magicians and wise men were also stumped. At this stage, the chief butler remembered and told the king about Joseph, who was hastily prepared and summoned into Pharaoh's presence. Again the young Hebrew explained the symbols.

For the reader of the biblical text relating these experiences, Joseph is the Lord's internal expositor. It would be very incorrect and ridiculous to ignore him.

Everywhere, throughout Daniel, the prophecies are presented together with internal expositors. It is no doubt because of this that Sir Isaac Newton could state that of all the "old Prophets, *Daniel* is most distinct in order of time, and easiest to be understood: and therefore in those things which relate to the last time, he must be made the key to the rest."⁵ In the following, let us observe the abundance of internal expositors:

Dan. 2. God gives Nebuchadnezzar a dream, which the king forgets. When none of the astrologers, magicians, or other wise men in Babylon could help, another Hebrew captive, Daniel—instructed, like Joseph, by God—recounts and also explains it. In studying this chapter, it

would be wrong to ignore the internal expositor and simply come up with our own explanation, as some have done. For instance, verses 40 and 41 speak of the "fourth kingdom" and say, "the kingdom shall be divided." These divisions, represented by the feet and toes, are not—as God views history—a fifth and different kingdom. In other words, the feet and toes can only refer to states that developed out of the Roman Empire; they are not some coalition of international powers all over the planet, as some Futurists have imagined. The only fifth kingdom mentioned in Dan. 2 is the coming kingdom of God.

Dan. 4. Nebuchadnezzar has a dream of a huge, mysterious tree that is cut down and yet not destroyed. Again it is Daniel who explains it. The tree, he says, is the king himself; therefore, the "seven times" of verse 32 must be obviously literal and cannot be symbolic. To interpret them as a prophetic period extending over more than 2500 years with a terminus in 1914, as taught by some who go from door to door, is to ignore the internal expositor.

Dan. 5. At an impious feast, Belshazzar and his guests are terrified by a bloodless hand that appears and writes mysterious characters on the wall. Daniel explains them. They mean that the neo-Babylonian Empire is at an end, with Medo-Persia as its imminent successor. Again the now aged Hebrew captive is the internal expositor.

Dan. 7. Four beasts come up out of the sea. Daniel asks for an explanation from "one of them that stood by" (7:16), who now becomes the internal expositor. This celestial being also gives details about the fourth beast and its horn (vv. 19, 20).

Dan. 8. Daniel has a vision of a ram and a he-goat, with first one and then four horns growing on its head—as well as a little horn that follows these. An instruction is given to a majestic angel, "Gabriel, make this man to understand the vision" (8:16). He is the internal expositor.

Dan. 9. Daniel, who has in the meantime become ill, seeks further illumination, and Gabriel returns (9:21) to explain the seventy prophetic weeks, in relation to Dan. 8. Again this mighty angel is the internal expositor. Nobody, neither Francisco Ribera, the Jesuit who went down into darkness four hundred years ago, nor one of his Protestant successors, should tamper with what he has to say.

Dan. 10. Daniel in vision sees two beings, one like the Son of Man, the other a majestic angel. The latter is Gabriel, who comes to explain further. He says, "I am come to make thee understand" (10:14). Once more he is the internal expositor.

Dan. 11. Everything in this chapter is literal explanation rather than a symbolic vision. Sir Isaac Newton convincingly links Dan. 8 with Dan. 11: "This prophecy of the Ram and He-Goat is repeated in the last Prophecy of Daniel."⁶ But we do not quite agree with Newton's word choice: the prophecy of Dan. 8 is not so much repeated by Dan. 11 as it is

explained. Gabriel, the internal expositor, does so in literal, largely non-symbolic language. He begins with the Greeks and continues through Roman as well as papal history, right to the end of time. Since some of this appears to be unfulfilled prophecy, it is still obscure, which is not surprising. What we should not do in dealing with this chapter is to deviate from the literal mode employed by the internal expositor.

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Dan. 12 directly continues from Dan. 11:1-3. Verse 4 refers to the time of the end. But in verse 9 Daniel is told to ask no more. It will all be sealed up until long beyond his life span, to the time of the end.

Internal expositors are also at work in the New Testament. The greatest of them is Christ the Lord himself. For instance, in the Olivet discourse (Matt. 24, Luke 21, Mark 13), he is not only a prophet in his own right; he is also a divinely appointed guide to help his hearers and us the readers understand, as where he says: "When ye therefore shall see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains . . ." (Matt. 24:15, 16). Paying heed to these words, his immediate disciples were able correctly to identify their applicability to the Romans, who in the first Jewish war came to crush the uprising against their domination. Fleeing across the Jordan, all the Christians were saved. We also need to benefit by the insights provided by the supreme internal expositor.

Rev. 1:1 states that Jesus used his angel in conveying his revelation to John, the beloved apostle. This celestial guide "has been identified as Gabriel."⁷ He had communicated with Daniel. He also spoke to Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1:19) and Mary, who would become the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:26, 27).

Rev. 17. This chapter is not so easy to understand; therefore, here, too, the Lord has provided an internal expositor, an angel who explains about the woman and the beast: "I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carrieth her, which hath the seven heads and ten horns" (v. 7). Apart from providing further details in other parts of the chapter, he speaks of "wisdom" (v. 9) as a prerequisite for comprehension. This can no doubt be taken to mean that clarity about these symbols is not likely to come easily, though we need not despair. It is also a challenge, like the one in Rev. 13:18 about the number of the beast.

Rev. 19:9, 10. After this vision, the angel continues as John's prophetic assistant. For instance, "he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God. And I fell at his feet to worship

him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus." (Rev. 19:9, 10)

Rev. 21:9-27; 22:6. In these passages, the angelic messenger provides both visions and explanations. It the same one that showed the woman sitting on the beast and as an internal expositor explained their meaning. This is clear from the phrase "one of the seven angels which had the seven vials," which occurs in both Rev. 17:1 and Rev. 21:9. According to Rev. 22:8, 9, John again fell down to worship him; but he once more refused to accept such adoration: "For I am thy fellowservant, of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God." He went on to state: "Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand" (Rev. 20:10).

Rev. 22:16. At the end of the Apocalypse, we read the Redeemer's reminder, "I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches."

Shea points out that there is not nearly as much internal interpretation in Revelation as in Daniel. The former is a more complex book and harder to expound. And therefore Daniel constitutes the most important single key for unlocking the meaning of the Apocalypse. "Even when in Revelation there is an angel talking, he rarely interprets a symbol, whereas in Daniel the internal expositors say explicitly: this equals this." Not to use their guidance in our study of Revelation as well is to leave us "adrift upon a sea of subjectivity"⁸ and to ignore the apostle Peter's warning "that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20). This links up with our second principle, discussed below. But more than that, the internal expositors of Daniel and other Scriptures—including the Lord Jesus—also apply to Revelation.

2.2 Comparing Scripture with Scripture

Comparing Scripture with Scripture to explain a prophecy is not to be confused with a simplistic use of "proof texts." It is, rather, compatible with methods of literary analysis in, say, an English college course. Fundamentally it recognizes that the Old and New Testament together form a single, coherent whole. Its many references, quotations, and allusions are closely—often deliberately—interrelated. This is partly so because the various authors, including highly gifted poets, were intimately acquainted with the writings of their predecessors. Bible passages and books are not discrete but reveal a large measure of intertextuality. This, however, is not confined to the Scriptures; it also characterizes other literatures created over many centuries. An example from outside the Mediterranean world is the highly allusive poetry written in Chinese, which reflects millennia of development. Also, over and above this human

factor, the Old and New Testaments are linked, and in their details closely intertwined, through the operations of the mind of God.

Much of Revelation is made intelligible by tracing its symbols and statements back to other Bible books. We can and need to rely on these, together with the internal expositors, if any are present.

In doing so, we shall not be referring to the Apocrypha or the Pseudepigrapha. These are problematic books that follow Malachi and antedate Matthew. Some are accepted by Catholics, while Pro-

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testants reject them all. They admittedly do have their uses as history and for providing a limited perspective on the nature of prophecy. Certainly the fact that 1 Enoch leans heavily on Daniel shows the latter was written before the second century before Christ, a favorite date of liberal scholars. But it is anachronistic to derive from such writings the concept of "Apocalyptic" and then retrospectively apply it to the earlier book they imitate.

So we will set this word aside. It has largely been prompted by a study of such extra-Biblical writings, which "in the absence of a living prophetic voice . . . relate alleged revelations attained through dreams, visions, and heavenly journeys." The apocalyptists even pretended to be this or that Old Testament saint and uttered pseudo-predictions. That is, they lied and were false prophets. Like the real ones, they also resorted to symbolism, especially imitating Daniel, "often going to bizarre extremes in the employment of a veritable menagerie picturing Israel's history and prophesying the coming of God's kingdom."⁹

The symbolism of Revelation gives up many of its secrets if we let the Bible be its own expositor. It must be allowed to speak for itself. Too often clever people like Lawrence and others are not really explaining the prophecies; they inject extraneous matter. Pondering the symbols, they really say: "This is what I *think* they mean" or worse: "This is what I *feel* they mean." Then there are those who seek support for their purely subjective ideas by claiming that the Spirit has inspired them.

All this is too much like the inkblot game devised by Hermann Rorschach. This was, to quote Webster, "A personality and intelligence test in which a subject interprets inkblot designs in terms that reveal intellectual and emotional factors." No, we need to start within the text of Revelation, together with its internal expositor(s). Furthermore, we should compare Scripture with Scripture and link up what the last book in the Bible tells us with the rest of its witness. For instance, Rev. 13 contains a number of clues that take us all the way back to Dan. 2 and 7.

Even usually sound expositors like Uriah Smith have sometimes wandered from this path, as in his explanation of Rev. 12. According to him, the woman clothed with the sun is the true church. With this, we are in basic agreement, though there is more to the symbol than that. But he equates the sun with the gospel era and the moon with Old Testament Judaism: "The Mosaic period shone with a light borrowed from the Christian era, even as the moon shines with light borrowed from the sun."¹⁰

Though this is plausible, there is unfortunately nothing in the rest of the Bible with which to link it up. A more rigorous approach, in accordance with the principle of comparing Scripture with Scripture, necessitates the following question: "Where else in the Bible are the sun, the moon, and twelve stars used together symbolically?" The Scriptures contain a highly satisfactory answer.

Apart from Rev. 12:1, there is only one passage that explicitly deals with the sun, the moon, and twelve stars within a single metaphoric context, namely Gen. 37:9-11:

"[Joseph] dreamed another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said, 'Behold, I have dreamed another dream; and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?'"

In these verses, the sun represents Jacob, the moon his wife Leah, and the stars the sons that would father the tribes of Israel. An objection to this interpretation may be that Joseph saw not twelve but only eleven stars. That is true, but a twelfth star is implied, for all these luminaries bowed down to him—the twelfth son.

Rev. 12 is concerned with God's people from the beginning of time, though the emphasis is on the period following the Messiah's birth. The woman does represent the church, as Smith and others have maintained, but in this chapter there is also a pointed reference to Israel. It is the Jewish nation and Old Testament Judaism that gave birth to the Redeemer.

2.3 Consistency

This principle, suggested by honest common sense, requires that wherever possible, the writer or speaker on prophecy should assign the same or a similar meaning to the same symbol wherever it occurs. We must either consider Daniel and the Apocalypse a chaotic jumble not worth our attention or believe that they are a harmonious revelation from a God of order. This means that there is a consistency within particular passages, as well as of the various chapters and books among one another.

For instance, in Dan. 11:2 Gabriel embarks on a remarkable future history, first of the Persian Empire and then of the Greeks, beginning with Alexander the great, whose domains would be divided (vv. 3, 4). After this, the internal expositor focuses on two powers, the king of the South and the king of the North (vv. 5-15). These are obviously two divisions of Alexander's empire, ancient Hellenistic Egypt and Syria. Then other entities come onto the scene of history. These we believe to be the Romans and the papacy, with the assistance of another power (vv. 16-39). Near the end of the chapter, we once more read about the king of the South and the king of the North (vv. 40). What finally happens (vv. 41-45) seems yet to lie in the future. About this, we here have little to say; the point we wish to

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make is about consistency. If formerly the king of the South was Egypt and the king of the North was Syria (plus territories that used to belong to it but now lie in modern Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq), why should these entities be different in modern times? Also, since the entire first part of the chapter is about literal battles and conflicts, it must be an error to interpret its final verses symbolically.

Let us take another example. The seven heads and ten horns of Rev. 12, 13, and 17 should, according to the principle of consistency, refer to the same entities as in Dan. 7. These Apocalyptic heads have enjoyed the dubious distinction of evoking eight or more interpretations, which largely violate this principle. And what of the ten horns? They can be seen on the beasts of Rev. 12, 13, and 17, as well as their predecessor in Dan. 7. Surely they represent the same kingdoms, which must furthermore be related to the ten toes on the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan. 2). If so, they always refer to the countries of Western Europe.

If this seems too simple and restrictive to imaginative minds, we are potentially faced with the idea of twenty-eight heads and forty horns, which are surely too many.

Consistency also helps to explain the conundrum of just what is represented by the beast in Rev. 17. For this, we need to consider the total scheme of the Apocalypse. It reveals that this book is concerned with only three major opponents of the Lamb: the dragon of Rev. 12, the leopard-like beast, and the two-horned beast (also known as the false prophet), both of Rev. 13. How do we know this? They are the only ones that end up in the lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20:10). So the beast of Rev. 17 must be identical with one of these.

2.4 Prophetic Augmentation

Closely related to the principle of consistency is prophetic augmentation, which the expositor needs to understand.

Visions may basically cover the same ground, yet they are almost never repeated exactly. Instead, later representations add further details to the prophetic scenario, often with a change of focus or to zoom in on elements that require greater clarification. In the process, symbolism may be expanded, modified, or even changed, but it always remains consistent.

We call this prophetic augmentation, which is at work throughout the Bible as a whole and related to comparing Scripture with Scripture. It is particularly evident in Daniel and the Revelation. Prophetic augmentation interacts dynamically with historical events as human destiny unfolds, progressively unveiling the great controversy between Christ and Satan.

This principle is clearly exemplified by the vision of the four beasts (Dan. 7). They parallel the statue of the perplexing dream that Nebuchadnezzar had and the youthful prophet explained, yet they are not limited to what we read in Dan. 2. New elements not mentioned there are now added: especially the Little Horn and the judgment, as well as other details, such as the lion morphing into a frightened, quasi human being, to reflect Babylonian impotence in the face of the imminent Medo-Persian onslaught. The historical situation has altered drastically, and the neo-Babylonian Empire is now on its last legs.

The rest of Daniel also illustrates prophetic augmentation. Inter alia Roman as well as European power—together with the papacy—are predicted in Chapter 7. Further details emerge in Dan. 8. Here, however, the Adversary's attack on the Lord's people and the truth extends to the Messiah as well as his sanctuary. A new time prophecy, the 2300 year-days, is mentioned, though not discussed. Dan. 9 explains it in relation to the first 70 prophetic weeks or 490 literal years, which augments Chapter 8. More is also revealed about the Messiah's life and death, as well as the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Chapter 11 is a further, non-symbolic explanation of all the entities depicted in Dan. 8, expanding on their activities and final fate.

Prophetic augmentation is powerfully present throughout the Apocalypse. For instance, the seven heads and ten horns depicted in Rev. 12, 13, and 17 always—according to the principle of consistency—refer to the same empires and kingdoms. Yet the details are different, inter alia as symbolized by the crowns. In the first vision, these are on the dragon's seven heads (Rev. 12:3). The leopard beast resembles this entity, but its heads are without crowns; instead, these now sit on the horns (Rev. 13:1). But neither the seven heads nor the ten horns of the scarlet beast has crowns. There is, however, an addition. The heads are also now equated with seven mountains, and an immoral woman is sitting on them. (Rev. 17:9)

What do these changes mean? They signal a different period of time. Rev. 12 delineates the dragon, which is Satan through the ages, but it chiefly focuses on his rebellion in heaven before the world was created, his attempts to destroy the Messiah, and his persecution of the early church—though with a glance at the end time. The crowns on the heads refer to an ancient period, from Babylon to the Roman Empire. In Rev. 13, we see the Antichrist, also to the end of time; but for 1260 year-days (the greater part of his career) its destiny is intertwined with the monarchs which used to dominate Western Europe. In Rev. 17, however, the crowns are gone. Although the earlier career of Babylon is briefly described, the focus is now on the final period of this planet's history just before the Second Coming. That portion of Western Europe which used to belong to the Roman Empire no

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longer has monarchs with dictatorial power. It consists of republics. It is true, of course, that England still has a queen and Spain a king, but they are constitutional monarchs and largely figureheads. In his *Idylls of the King* (1859), Alfred Tennyson, whom Victoria had made poet laureate and would later elevate to the peerage, aptly described his country—then the planet's leading imperial power—as the "crowned republic" of Britain.¹¹

Recognizing prophetic augmentation necessitates a realization that the visions in Daniel and Revelation should be studied together. Each book presents as it were not separate, disconnected snapshots but a connected film consisting of interrelated sequences. Even more, the Apocalypse is like a continuation of Daniel, though it also refers abundantly to other books in the Bible.

Alternative schools of prophetic interpretation, like Preterism and Futurism, often fall short by overlooking prophetic augmentation.

2.5 Historical Correctness and Honesty

In the second chapter of our first volume, we dealt a little with the interrelationship of prophecy and history. To this we now need to add. The predictions of the Bible should be correctly measured against historical events. This is our fifth principle.

Using history as a key to understanding prophecy involves a number of questions. Some of these are rather theoretical, for instance just how objective and scientific historical enquiry can be. Let us admit at once that in its higher reaches it results in a reconstruction from this or that rather subjective point of view. Paul Conkin and Roland Stromberg assert that this makes "much of history a stab into partial darkness, a

matter of informed but inconclusive conjecture."¹² Reconstructing the past is, incidentally, also a form of literature, filled with imagination as well as scholarship, which needs to please and hold, not lose, its audience.¹³

So whose point of view do we reflect? As far as possible, we seek to be guided by God's perspective on history, as made plain in the Bible.

Let us note, however, that apart from the writer's overall slant on history there is such a thing as basic facts, and it is these with which we are here particularly concerned. Fortunately, nowadays, these are "rarely a point of controversy among historians; much of it they take for granted."¹⁴ That has not always been the case. For instance, as one respected Bible Commentary puts it:

"When Sir Isaac Newton wrote his *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms* (published in 1728), his source material consisted of the Bible and the works of classical Greek and Roman writers. His conclu-

sions drawn from the historical parts of the Bible have stood the test of time, and need only slight corrections even today, but his reconstruction of ancient history built on secular classical information was completely erroneous. . . .

"Bible commentators writing in the early 19th century, like Adam Clarke, were in the same predicament as Sir Isaac Newton. . . . Even today [1979], with our much greater knowledge of ancient history, we are still far removed from a correct understanding of all the interwoven happenings of the ancient nations, and are still unable to identify in all cases the figures and events described by the classical authors."¹⁵

Those words have been corroborated by the statements of professional historians. For instance, J.H. Plumb of Christ's College, Cambridge University, declared in 1965: "What the common reader rarely recognizes is the inadequacy of factual material that was at the command of an historian one hundred years ago or even fifty years ago. Scarcely any archives were open to him; most repositories of records were unsorted and uncatalogued; almost every generalization about a man or an event or an historical process was three-quarters guesswork, if not more." To this, however, he could fortunately add: "Laboriously, millions of facts have been brought to light, ordered and rendered coherent within their context."¹⁶

The twentieth century has begun to bring about what can justly be called a revolution in the field of history, and this work is still continuing. A present-day prophetic interpreter needs an awareness of such findings and insights, which were beyond the reach of former writers. Consequently, several older books, like those of A. T. Jones—though competently written—may contain some outdated historical material.

One area in which there has been a notable shift of perspective concerns the pervasive influence that Greek civilization has exerted on the Roman Empire. This can have an important bearing on a question like the

following: Why is the Antichrist beast of Rev. 13 depicted as a giant *leopard*? With this, older writers cannot help us, for history as they understood it did not yet fully portray the dominance of the towering Hellenic intellect over the derivative Roman mind, theologically and otherwise. A further volume of our *Christ and Antichrist* will contain a number of chapters about this topic, which is most relevant for interpreting, inter alia, Rev. 13 and 17.

Closely connected with using history correctly is historical honesty. A shocking fact, to be substantiated in the next chapter, is that much of church history is tainted at its source—including Eusebius' important but biased *History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, which covers the period "from the birth of Christ down to 323."¹⁷ We need to be aware that in ages past and up to the present

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religious writers have repeatedly perverted the facts, at times deliberately falsifying them. Zealous to promote the interests of their church, and no doubt for the greater glory of God, clerics have even resorted to blatant forgeries. Refraining from similar, shameful abuses needs to be one of our goals.

2.6 Avoiding the Trap of the Contemporary

Sometimes a writer, noting a superficial resemblance between prophecy and a contemporary event or circumstance, rushes into print. The book or article produced may be exciting and is almost certain to impress a certain type of reader, especially when a specific person is named. But when subsequent history turns out differently and contradicts expectations, the writer is caught in what we call the trap of the contemporary. Mockery and embarrassment follow. Avoiding this trap is another sound principle.

Some readers may recall that Adolf Hitler, Jimmy Carter, and Henry Kissinger—to mention just a few—have all been unsuccessfully named as Antichristian villains in someone's prophetic scenario. But Hitler is no longer with us. Carter and Kissinger are now in harmless and beneficent retirement. Once upon a time, Dispensationalist Hal Lindsey focused on 1948, when the Israeli state was founded, suggesting that the end would come just forty years later. His books were sold by the millions all over the world. But then 1988 came and went, and the world just kept on spinning as usual. He could not have felt good about it.

Rushing into the trap of the contemporary is an old mistake. People have been making it for centuries. The following can, we think, be instructive for people in our time.

In the first dozen years of the nineteenth century, Napoleon I, who had risen to eminence during the French Revolution, was still constructing his empire. This prompted Samuel Toovey, an Englishman, to write his *Essay on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation*, which was published under the pseudonym Philo Britannicus in 1813.¹⁸ In it, according to Froom, Toovey declares, "the two-horned second beast [of Rev. 13] 'is now personated by France.' Then he tries to find the 666 in Bonaparte's name."¹⁹

Alas, in the very next year, on 31 March 1814, the allied forces conquered Paris, and on 20 April Napoleon was sent packing into exile on Elba, a Mediterranean island near Italy. He escaped and jubilantly returned to France but was soon defeated at Waterloo in 1815.²⁰ After that, he was transported to distant St. Helena in the South Atlantic, hundreds of miles from the Southern African Coast.

This time, the Royal Navy ensured that there would be no escape. After a few years, he died. And then it was not France but the British Empire that became the global superpower for the rest of the nineteenth century.

Toovey had been just a little too enthusiastic. He may have finalized his spectacular prophetic exposition late in 1812 after 14 September, when Napoleon took Moscow, even though the retreating Russians had set it on fire. But before the year was out, the terrible winter drove the conqueror back to where he had come from, decimating his splendid Grande Armée. This should have warned the author of the *Essay*, but he did not tell his publisher to hold it back. Perhaps he thought the Russian debacle was just a temporary setback, yet it proved—for Napoleon—to be the beginning of the end. When Toovey's work appeared, it was already out of date. Today it is just a curiosity, known to only a few.

As a rule, individual people fail to have a sufficient impact on history for them to feature in prophecy. Occasional exceptions do occur. Of these, the most prominent is obviously Jesus Christ, who is more than human. Three emperors have also loomed large enough for explicit, individual prophetic attention: Cyrus (Isa. 45), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2:38), and Alexander the Great (Dan. 8:21). The reason for singling them out is that they were virtually synonymous with their empires, which they founded.

But surely contemporary affairs can sometimes herald a real fulfillment of prophecy. Yes, they can; after all, another name for the historical approach to its interpretation is the *continuistic* school. Contemporary affairs can be very relevant, yet we need to be cautious in how we interpret and evaluate them, realizing *inter alia* that only time can really tell. An example of healthy caution is that of Adam Clarke (1762-

1832), the famous Irish Wesleyan preacher and Bible commentator, in his reaction to the pope's contemporary capture and exile:

"If we knew precisely when the papal power began to exert itself in the *antichristian* way, then we could at once fix the time of its destruction. The *end* is probably not very distant; it has already been grievously shaken by the French. In 1798 the French republican army under General *Berthier* took possession of the city of Rome, and entirely superseded the whole papal power. This was a deadly wound, though at present it appears to be healed; but it is but *skinned over*, and a deadly cicatrice remains."²¹

Subsequent expositors have affirmed the importance of 1798, with 538 as the beginning date for the 1260 year-days. They have also noted that the apparent healing of the papal wound to which Clarke referred was temporary, a skinning over, as he put it. In 1801,²² Napoleon concluded a Concordat with the Vatican, but nothing came of it. Through the ups and downs of the nineteenth century, the pon-

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tifical beast just kept on bleeding from that deadly wound. In 1870, from a Protestant perspective, it seemed to be on the point of expiry; for in that year the Papal State was finally annexed to a united Italian kingdom.²³ By then, Adam Clarke had been dead for almost forty years, so in this world he could never know how correct he had been.

Nor was it possible for him, as for us, to see how—in fulfillment of Rev. 13:3—papal power was to recover since 1929, after its Concordat with Mussolini. This created an independent Vatican State, endowing it with a religious monopoly and huge financial advantages throughout Italy, including tax exemption. Il Duce also gave the pontiff some \$90 million dollars as a cash payment and \$150 million in government bonds. That was to compensate him for the loss of the Papal State in 1870.²⁴ Coming a few months before the Great Depression, this made possible brilliant investments, which turned the Vatican into a financial superpower, with a stupendous growth of Catholic influence all over the planet during the last part of the twentieth century and beyond.

Expositors that belong to the Historical School do not always avoid the trap of the contemporary. Like everybody else, they hurry through space-time with their fleeting lives, and sometimes stray from a more dependable path—perhaps because they are eager to see their Lord return while they are still alive. In his enlightening *Adventists and Armageddon: Have We Misinterpreted Prophecy?* Donald E. Mansell in an excellent survey shows over many pages how Uriah Smith, the grandmaster of historicist prophetic interpretation, on one subject committed this error, sending his church's exegetes and evangelists off on a wild goose chase that lasted for several generations.

James Springer White (1821–81), who with his wife Ellen and Joseph Bates had largely founded the Seventh-day Adventist Church, earlier maintained that the entity depicted in the last part of Dan. 11 as well as in the preceding verses 20-39, was the Roman power, both pagan and papal. This view observed the principle of consistency already dealt with and linked the whole chapter to Dan. 8, as Sir Isaac Newton had also done.

Originally Smith had accepted White's conclusion, but from 1871 veered away from it. Conclusive for him was the outcome of the Franco-Prussian war in which the formerly puissant French were defeated. "When Smith learned the humiliating terms of the treaty [signed on 10 May of that year], he evidently concluded that since the papacy's chief defender could no longer help the pontiff, the papacy had no future in the fulfillment of the last verses of Daniel 11." And after all, Garibaldi had already captured Rome during September 1870, taking away from the pope the last vestige of temporal power in Italy, where he had reigned as *il papa re* for a thousand years.²⁵

Smith became fixated on the Eastern Question, which concerned the Ottoman Empire centered in Istanbul (Constantinople), the Turk often being referred to as the "sick man" of the Middle East. James White protested against this deviation. Unfortunately he died on 6 August 1881²⁶ and therefore could have no further voice in the debate.

With Smith's ideas ascendant, a century of Adventist writers and evangelists—explaining both Armageddon and Dan. 11:40-45 in almost the same breath—watched the ups and downs of the Ottoman Empire with eagle eyes. Militarily it appeared to be ever more impotent. Then, in World War I, it made the mistake of joining the Central Powers: Germany and Austria. Like others in the Christian world, these expositors enthralled their audiences by pointing out how the British under General Edmund H.H. Allenby (1861-1936), closed in on and on 9 December 1917 captured Jerusalem.²⁷ Finally, by war's end, the Ottoman Empire disintegrated. The British victor was "later nick-named 'Allenby of Armageddon'"²⁸ He actually called himself Viscount Allenby of Megiddo and Felixtowe. He had changed his title to incorporate a commemorative reference to his victory in the valley of Megiddo, although at the end on the tel it was only "a group of about 100 Turkish fighters who were defending the last vestiges of the Ottoman Empire."²⁹ The Second Coming seemed so near!

But then, to the world's amazement, the Turkish people rallied under a new and resolute leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938). They defeated the Greeks, who between 1919 and 1922 had invaded the western territories of the dying Ottoman Empire. Turkey swiftly became a revitalized and rather formidable republic, which still survives today. Increasingly it became evident that the Turk was not going to abandon

Constantinople and somehow "plant the tabernacles of his palace in the glorious holy mountain" (Dan. 11:45) of Jerusalem. Though a few diehard writers and preachers persisted with this view, originated by Uriah Smith, until after the Second World War, events had obviously rendered it obsolete and shown it to be wrong. As Harold E. Snide, a Bible Teacher at Union Springs Academy, ruefully remarked as early as 1927, "from being the 'sick man of the East,' Turkey . . . has truly become the 'sick man of prophecy.'"³⁰

Nowadays, Adventists have basically reverted to the interpretation that the power depicted in much of Dan. 11 is the papacy, originally enunciated by James White. But, as Mansell puts it, present-day interpretations of the "last power" in verses 40-45 are in "disarray."³¹ Concerning this prophecy, he also quotes three similarly worded paragraphs by Ellen G. White, inter alia: "The judgments of

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God are in the land. *The wars and rumors of wars*, the destruction by fire and flood, say clearly that the time of trouble, which is to increase until the end, is near at hand. We have no time to lose. *The world is stirred with the spirit of war*. The prophecies of the eleventh [chapter] of Daniel have almost reached their final fulfillment" (emphasis added).³²

Despite this language, which could hardly be clearer and more self-evident in its meaning, Mansell thinks that "the 'war' Ellen White speaks of is not necessarily armed conflict between nations. As shown above, it is far more likely she is speaking of the persecution of God's people by the nations and, as previously pointed out, she is simply using military terminology."³³ One reason for believing that Dan. 11:40-45 requires a symbolic interpretation is a traditional view that these verses must necessarily be linked with the imagery of Rev. 16:12-16. But the two passages may just be somewhat different end-time prophecies.

For the reasons stated in a previous section, we think the final events of Dan. 11 will have to be literal in their fulfillment. We suggest the following possibility: To solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the great powers internationalize Jerusalem, with the pope as presiding authority and ombudsman. Islamic Jihadists find this unacceptable and stir up first Egypt and then an alliance led by Syria to sweep into the Holy Land, with the purpose of eliminating this arrangement as well as the Jewish state. First one and then the other invade it. Especially successful are the Syrians, helped by Muslims from Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. Subsequently they turn on Egypt, which they invade successfully. They enjoy tremendous support in the Middle East, but are distressed by ominous news about developments in the East (possibly Iran with its Shiites) and

the North (European forces, perhaps under American leadership, or Russia). At first, however, the Syrian-led coalition enjoys tremendous success, exterminating an immense number of Jews, for they "shall go with great fury to destroy, and utterly to make away many" (Dan. 11:44). They establish an Islamic state with Jerusalem as its capital. Nevertheless, the king of the North—Syria together with its allies—"shall come to his end, and none shall help him" (vs. 45). They may be annihilated by Western or other forces, unless they perish in some other, unspecified way.

This, however, is a very tentative idea and may be wide of the mark. Only time will tell.

Other prophetic interpreters who risk being caught in the trap of the contemporary identify fundamentalist Islam with the two-horned beast of Rev. 13, which is wrong for reasons we need not enter into here. It is, moreover, risky to name specific persons like Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden as figures in Bible prophecy. We believe that these men, like so many before them, will soon disappear into the mists of history and generally fade from people's minds.

Writers on prophecy could avoid the trap of the contemporary, together with the consequent embarrassment, by pondering the shipwreck suffered by those ill-fated views propounded at various times by Samuel Toovey, Hal Lindsey, and even Uriah Smith.

2.7 A Respect for Previous Prophetic Interpreters

Another principle is a respect for, though not a slavish adherence to, the conclusions of previous writers in this field. For those who like us belong to the Historical School of prophetic interpretation this is more than important; it is indispensable.

Those who wish to add to human knowledge, scientists and other scholars as well as college students, take it for granted that they must, through research, first find out what predecessors in their field have already discovered. The writings of such people are evaluated. Their errors are discarded, but what is valid in their contribution becomes the starting point for further adventures of the human mind and spirit.

This is also how modern technology proceeds. For instance, on 16 December 2003, John Glenn, the first American that went into orbit around the earth, together with Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, the first men to walk on the moon, were at Kitty Hawk. Commemorating a hundred years of flight in aircraft heavier than air, they had come to honor the Wright brothers, who on that day in 1903 began to equip the human race with wings. Senator Glenn said, "Whatever we were able to do we were able to do because we stood on the shoulders of others."³⁴

Even business people recognize this principle. In April 1959, Joseph R. Wilson, Honorary Chairman of the Board, Xerox Corporation,

said to the Philadelphia Securities Association, "We build on the treasures of others' minds, present and past. Intellects of other centuries and from other lands contribute to our progress now because we can make use of their ideas."³⁵

A great fault of enthusiasts who hurry into print to acquaint the world with their views about this or that prophecy is often to overlook or even willfully shove aside what others have done in this field. Since we belong to the Historical School of interpretation, we consider it both more profitable and safer first to ponder the findings embodied in a classic like Uriah Smith's *Daniel and the Revelation*, written well over a hundred years ago. Much of what he has to say did not originate with him, for it embodies centuries of research and hard-won insights obtained throughout the Christian era. Despite a few blemishes, most of his book is still valid. An outstanding merit is

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that for his time Smith had an exemplary grasp of history as well as contemporary affairs.

Another such work, though of a somewhat different character, is *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (1946-54) in four volumes by Le Roy Edwin Froom. As a compendious survey and far-ranging history of the field it has no equal. Denton E. Rebock, referring to it, asserts that it proves "conclusively that Seventh-day Adventists have made but few contributions to this field."³⁵ We think this overstates the case, but he is basically right: Adventists have largely not originated but rather perpetuated, and still maintain, a very ancient tradition. It is sad to record that present-day writers pay insufficient attention to Froom's monumental research.

Like scientists, moon explorers, and even business tycoons, we need to stand on the shoulders of others who came before us.

Where we occasionally modify the positions adopted by intellectual giants like Martin Luther, Charles Wesley, Sir Isaac Newton, Uriah Smith, Le Roy Edwin Froom, and other expositors, we are led to do so by no frivolous motives or desire to reinvent the prophetic wheel. More often than not, our guide is a more accurate knowledge of history, made possible by subsequent scholarship, or the fact that events occurring after their time have brought greater clarity.

A good example is provided by the seven heads of Rev. 17. In Smith's time and country, nineteenth-century America, both historical theory and the educational system placed an excessive emphasis on ancient Rome. This helped to produce the idea that those heads refer to seven stages of Roman government. Today we no longer need to take this interpretation seriously. Instead, we know that intellectually—and in their

culture as a whole—the Romans were heavily, even slavishly, indebted to the Greeks. This enables us to view the role of the latter in a different light. It illuminates a number of prophecies, including Rev. 13 and 17.

Another reason for being acquainted with what previous writers have discovered or propounded is that God has had something to say to all his children throughout the ages, not only to our own or some future time. To think that Daniel and Revelation are mostly about us is being shortsighted and not a little egocentric. (Through the centuries there have been many people, long vanished, who imagined such a thing about their own time.)

In all this, moreover, we need to be aware of the rivalry between the Historical School of prophetic interpretation and Futurism, which looms so large in Dispensationalist thinking. This is rooted in the traditional Catholic approach to the subject, which has evolved from the third and fourth centuries onward and was modified by a Jesuit intellectual, Francisco Ribera, during the Counter Reformation toward the end of the sixteenth century.

Futurism seeks to focus all the readers' attention on the last few years of human history, brushing aside the views that predominated in Protestant countries between the Reformation and the early nineteenth century. It seeks to divert attention from the career of the real Antichrist, which right now is quietly but powerfully proceeding apace.

Furthermore, we maintain as did Froom that the Lord has not only foretold the future through the Scriptures but also from time to time provided "prophetic witnesses," people who could read what Jesus called the signs of the times. Though not directly inspired like Daniel or John, these have usually also been guided by the Holy Spirit—over and above their ability and despite the imperfections of some things they have written. Through the ages, they have augmented the work of the internal expositors to whom we have already referred. It is therefore not inappropriate to call them external expositors.

The apostle Peter points out "that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private *interpretation*" (emphasis added.) That is, the Holy Spirit who inspires the prophets also enables us to understand what they have written. (2 Pet. 1:20, 21) Our Heavenly Father is anxious for us to grasp what the Bible has to say about the future. He has not left us with a heap of unintelligible symbols, yet only those who have a disposition to serve him will understand.

The Bible says so, especially in relation to time prophecies: "The wicked shall act wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand" (Dan. 12:10, 11). This is very forceful in the Septuagint, the Old Testament Greek translation used by the apostles and the early Christians: "ἀνομήσωσιν ἄνομοι καὶ οὐ συνήσουσιν πάντες ἄνομοι" (anómōsōsin ánomoi, kai ou

sun□s□si pántes ánomoi, "the lawless ones will act lawlessly, and none of the lawless will understand")—only those who are wise unto salvation. That word *ánomoi* ("lawless ones") is most significant. In the singular, it is Paul's name for the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:8). Those who follow or consort with the Beast, featured in Rev. 13, adopting its Futurist explanations, cannot expect the Lord to illuminate their minds as they try to puzzle out what the Scriptures predict.

For interpreting prophecy, especially Revelation, we need a sound methodology. We ourselves apply and highly recommend the seven principles explained above. They are, we think, indispensable. And so is a teachable spirit, on the part of those that love and obey the Lord, who will guide them into all truth.