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Understanding Apocalyptic Literature

7:1 to 12:13

Apocalyptic literature proclaims a theology of hope, and reminds us that ADONAI is presently on the throne and that He will ultimately triumph.



As Iain Duguid relates in his commentary on *Daniel*, the end of the world is a remarkably popular subject these days. Netflix and other streaming services, always a useful cultural barometer, are a clear witness to this fact. Over recent years we have seen the release of movies in which the future life on our planet is threatened by aliens, asteroids, floods, frost, killer viruses, lethal machines, mutant creatures, and nuclear holocaust, just to name a few. This interest may stem from the existential angst that comes from the threat of a terrorist attack, or a growing awareness of humanity's ability to make our planet uninhabitable, or from some quite different root cause. Wherever it comes from, however, it is undeniable that there is more interest in the end of the world these days than there has been for a while. This phenomenon should make this a good time to study the apocalyptic portions of the Bible, for those sections are also interested in the end of the world. If people want to know how the world will end, what better place to turn than to **the Word of the sovereign God** who controls all of history? **Dani'el Chapters 7 to 12**, which contains just such apocalyptic literature, should therefore be extremely

relevant for all of us.

Yet, for many believers the apocalyptic sections of the Bible make them nervous because they don't think they will be able to understand what they find there. It doesn't help that some preachers who do tackle these portions of Scripture explain in vivid terms the way in which the current alignment of European or Middle Eastern countries conforms to their end-times scenario. This scenario, which is made up of a cocktail of two parts **Dani'el**, three parts **Revelation**, and a dash of **Ezeki'el**, resembles one of **the composite beasts of Dani'el 7**. It's part **lion**, part **bear**, part **man**, but not exactly any of these. These complicated end-times scenarios tend to combine disparate elements of the biblical text into a single piece, ignoring the fact that the end result cannot be harmonized with the plain reading of any one of the individual parts. It leaves one wondering, "Is there another way to understand these biblical passages, a way that through sane and sensible interpretation uncovers the message of these passages for believers in all times and in all places?"¹⁸⁶

All too often teachers of the Bible have had one set of rules for the interpretation of non-prophetic passages, but have been unable, or unwilling to apply the same set of rules to apocalyptic literature. In this way, apocalyptic literature has often suffered at the hands of its enemies. But it has also suffered at the hands of its friends. Even when the same set of rules is applied to it as to other passages, there has often been an inconsistency in the application of rules, giving way to a tendency to spiritualize and/or sensationalize parts of a passage. Thus, apocalyptic literature has also suffered at the hands of its friends, which, in turn, has given it a bad name in its witness to the world.

There are four basic rules of interpretation that are keys to understanding apocalyptic literature. **The first is called The Golden Rule of Interpretation.** *When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word as its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and self-evident truths, clearly indicate otherwise.* In other words, this law states that all biblical passages are to be taken exactly as they read unless there is something in the text indicating that it should be taken some way other than literally. If the words of the Bible do not mean what they say, then no one can say what they mean. If *the Golden Rule of Interpretation* is applied consistently, much of the "newspaper prophecy" can be avoided, as well as other errors such as Amillennialism. So when the plain sense of Scripture makes sense, no other sense needs to be sought. As in any language, literal or normal interpretation does not rule out figures of speech,

but even these have a literal background. We should not approach the Bible with the idea that it is filled with symbols that are hard to understand. It is not. We should approach the Bible with the assumption that it can be understood just like any other book that is taken literally. While recognizing the existence of the symbols, there will be no resorting to guesswork. **Rather, we will study Dani'el Chapters 7 to 12 on the premise that all the symbols in it are explained elsewhere, either in a different part of Dani'el itself, or somewhere else in the Bible.** In other words, we will let Scripture interpret Scripture. Their meanings will not be determined by speculation. *The Golden Rule of Interpretation* is the first of four basic rules of interpretation and is by far the most important because it lays the foundation for the other three.¹⁸⁷

The second law is called The Law of Double Reference. This law observes the fact that often a passage of a block of Scripture is speaking of two different persons or two different events that are separated by a long period of time. In the passage itself they are blended into one picture, and the time gap between the two persons or two events is not presented by the text itself. The fact that a gap of time exists at all is known because of other Scriptures. But in that particular text itself the gap of time is not seen. A good example of this law is some of the prophecies of the TaNaKh regarding the First and Second Coming of **Messiah**. Often these two events are blended into one picture with no indication that there is a gap at all. **Zechariah 9:9-10** is a good example of The Law of Double Reference. **Verse 9** is speaking of the First Coming, but **verse 10** is speaking of the Second Coming. These two comings are blended into one picture with no indication that there is a separation of time between them. Another example is **Isaiah 11:1-5**. **Verses 1-2** speak of the First Coming, while **verses 3-5** speak of the Second Coming. Again, the two are blended into one picture with no indication of a gap of time between the two. Because many apocalyptic passages follow this principle of The Law of Double Reference, this is an important law to know.

The third law is The Law of Recurrence. This law describes the fact that in some passages of Scripture there exists the recording of an event followed by a second recording of the same event giving more details to the first. Hence, it often involves two blocks of Scripture. The first block presents a description of an event as it transpires in chronological sequence. This is followed by a second block of Scripture dealing with the same event and the same period of time, but giving further details. An example of The Law of Recurrence in a prophetic passage is **Ezeki'el 38:1 to 39:16**. **Ezeki'el 38:1-23** gives a complete account of the

invasion of **Isra'el** from the north and the subsequent destruction of the invading army. This is followed by a second block of Scripture, **Ezeki'el 39:1-16**, which repeats some of the account given in the first block and gives some added details regarding the destruction of the invading army. A similar example is found in the first two chapters of **Genesis**. From **Genesis 1:1** to **2:3**, we are given an outline of the seven days of creation. **Genesis 2:3** concludes with the seventh day. But following that in **Genesis 2:4** through the end of **Chapter 2**, we have the story of the creation of Adam and Eve. It is obvious that this second block is going back and giving us the details of exactly how Adam and Eve were created.

The fourth law is The Law of Context, which states: *A text apart from its context is a pretext.* A verse can only mean what it means in its context and must not be taken out of its context. When it is taken out of its context, it is often presented as meaning something that it cannot mean within the context. A good example of this is **Zechariah 13:6**, which states: **If someone asks him, "What are these wounds on your body?" he will answer, "The wounds I was given at the house of my friends."** This verse is often used as a prophecy of **the Messiah**. Pulled out of context, it does indeed sound like it refers to **Yeshua**. But the context of **Zechariah 13:2-6** is speaking of false prophets. This is the danger of studying a verse by itself rather than in its context. The old saying that you can prove *anything* by using the Bible is only true when you pull verses out of their context. Therefore, these are the four basic rules of interpretation, which, if followed, will help in the study of the Bible in general, and of apocalyptic prophecy in particular.¹⁸⁸