A Beginner’s Guide to Bible Prophecy

By Gary DeMar

What is Prophecy?

Prophecy is about the future. Bible prophecy is about what God says is going to happen in the future. There are a lot of Bible prophecies that have already been fulfilled. This shows that God’s Word is true and can be trusted.

Prophecy, when spelled with a “c,” is a noun. “Revelation is a book about prophecy.”

Prophecy, spelled with an “s,” is a verb. “A prophet is given a gift by God to prophesy about what will happen in the future.”

Many prophecies found in the Old Testament refer to the coming of a promised Savior, Jesus Christ.

- **Place of birth:** Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:5–6; Luke 2:4)
- **Time of birth:** based on the seventy weeks of years given to Daniel (Dan. 9:25; Luke 2:25–32)
- **Manner of birth:** born of a virgin (Is. 7:14; Luke 1:34)
- **Price of betrayal:** thirty pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12; Matt. 26:15; 27:9–10)
- **Manner of death:** crucifixion (Ps. 22:16, 18; Matt. 27:35; Luke 23:34; John 19:24; 20:25)
- **Condition of the body:** no broken bones (Ps. 34:20; John 19:31–33) but a pierced side (Zech. 12:10; John 19:34, 37)
- **Loyalty of his disciples:** deserted by His followers (Zech. 13:7; Matt. 26:31)
- **Burial place:** buried in a rich man’s tomb (Is. 53:9; Matt. 27:57–30)

The chance that any one person could have fulfilled all eight prophecies is 1 chance in 100,000,000,000,000,000 or 1 in 100 quadrillion. Jesus had no control over the fulfillment of these prophecies. For example, He could not choose where He was born, how He would die, or where He would be buried.

One man has calculated that there are more than 330 distinct predictions that Jesus fulfilled. The chance that any one person fulfilled just 48 prophecies is 1 in 10^{157}. This number is so large—1 followed by 157 zeros—as to be unimaginable.

Other prophecies in the Bible tell what will happen to people, cities, and nations. For example, the Bible predicts in Ezekiel 26:4–5 that the walls and towers of Tyre will be destroyed and her debris will be scraped from her so she will be a “bare rock” where fishermen will spread their nets. Many nations did come against Tyre, and in 332 B.C., Alexander the Great and his troops literally scraped the rubble from the mainland and used it to build a causeway so he could lead his forces to attack the island fortress.

The Old Testament predicts what would happen to Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and Israel in the years leading up to the entry of Jesus into the world.
Like the OT, the NT is filled with prophetic material. Some people believe that most of these prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. Others believe they have already been fulfilled. How do we know who is right?

**Scripture Interprets Scripture**

The first place to start in learning how to interpret prophecy is to learn how to interpret the Bible, because the Bible is the best interpreter of itself. This statement seems so obvious, and yet many people fail to follow it. When the subject of prophecy comes up, some eager prophecy students read the Bible as if they are seeing it through the headlines of the newspaper. When news stories report about earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars, and famines, these are immediately seen by many as “signs” that prophecy is being fulfilled right before our eyes.

There have been earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars, and famines for thousands of years. Why are they signs now, when they were thought to be signs 60 years ago, 100 years ago, and 250 years ago for people living then? In fact, for nearly 2000 years there have always been people who claimed that the end was near for them. How could they be wrong about something the Bible talks a lot about? Can the Bible be that hard to understand?

**Time Keys**

When signs are given, there are often time keys present to tell the reader when to look for the signs. For example, Jesus said that after He was killed, He would “be raised up on the third day” (Matt. 16:21). There are less specific time keys like “soon,” “near,” “shortly,” “quickly,” and “at hand.” We’ll look at these later. Sometimes there are time keys that require comparing “Scripture with Scripture.” For example, Jesus said, “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matt. 24:34). Some of “all these things” are earthquakes, wars, and famines. They are to take place before “this generation” passes away. If we can figure out what “this generation” means, then we will know something about when to look for these signs.

Jesus is the Bible’s best teacher, so let’s begin with what He has to say about this important subject. When Jesus’ disciples heard Him tell the religious leaders that the temple was going to be destroyed (Matt. 23:38), they asked Him when this would happen. While He was sitting on the Mount of Olives just outside of Jerusalem, He showed them what was going to take place in the near future (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). This step-by-step prophecy is filled with details about what was going to happen to the temple, Judea, Jerusalem, the

Matthew 24:3 is more accurately translated as “the end of the age” (a period of time) rather than “the end of the world” (planet Earth).

“**This Generation**”

- Matthew 11:16
- Matthew 12:41
- Matthew 12:42
- Matthew 23:36
- Mark 8:12
- Luke 7:31
- Luke 11:31
- Luke 11:32
- Luke 11:50
- Luke 11:51
- Luke 17:52

The key to knowing when the Olivet Discourse will be fulfilled is by knowing what Jesus meant by “this generation.” If we know the Bible interprets the Bible, then we can figure out what Jesus meant by finding other places where “this generation” is used. Jesus uses “this generation” in several places in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Each time “this generation” means the people who were still alive. Don’t take my word for it. Check out the verses for yourself. “This generation” is never used by Jesus to refer to a future generation.

If Jesus had a future generation in mind, He could have said “that generation” to make His meaning crystal clear. When “this” is used in the Bible, it refers to something that is near, while “that” most often refers to something in the future or in the distance: “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’” (Matt. 7:22).

**NOTES**

B.C. and A.D.

When you see a date that is followed by B.C., it’s telling you the event took place or the person lived that many years “Before Christ” was born. A.D. refers to events that took place or when a person lived since Jesus was born. A.D. is an abbreviation for anno domini, a Latin phrase that means “in the year of our Lord.”

Identify the Primary Audience

In addition to paying close attention to when prophetic events are said to take place, it’s important to identify the primary audience, the audience that will see the events unfold. When you read the Olivet Discourse, you should notice that Jesus uses the word “you” many times throughout the passage. “Do you not see all these things” (Matt. 24:2). Jesus is obviously addressing the disciples who pointed out the temple buildings to Him. They were the ones seeing “all these things.” “All these things” refers to the temple that was dismantled by the Roman armies “stone by stone” in A.D. 70. Jesus is not addressing a future Jewish audience.1

It’s the same audience that Jesus warns not to be misled: “See to it that no one misleads you (24:4). The audience doesn’t change when Jesus says, “you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars” (24:6). Jesus warns this same group of disciples that their enemies “will deliver you up to tribulation” (24:9). We certainly know this happened by reading the book of Acts and Paul’s letters (e.g., Acts 7:54–60; 14:19; 2 Cor. 11:22–27). Jesus tells them to “pray that your flight will not be in the winter or on a Sabbath” (24:20). Before Jesus says “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place,” He confirms everything He told them would take place with these words: “So, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door” (24:33). “You” means them, not us. Those who saw “all these things” in verse 3 are the same ones who see “all these things” in verse 33.

If Jesus had wanted to warn a future generation, He would have said “when they see” and “they will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars.” The use of “you” and not “they” throughout the chapter explains why the Olivet Discourse is not about a future generation.

There are some additional audience hints that can tell us when the events outlined by Jesus in Matthew 24 took place. The tribulation was a local event. It could be escaped by fleeing on foot “to the mountains” surrounding Jerusalem (Matt 24:16). If Jesus had been describing a global event, there would be no place to escape or hide, and foot travel would be impractical and futile. The people are living in houses that have
flat roofs (24:17), the economy is mostly agricultural (24:18), and the Sabbath is still observed (24:20). These geographical clues indicate that Jesus is describing first-century Judea.

**What does the Passage Say?**

Many people grow up thinking the Bible says one thing when it actually says something else. For example, when asked who cut off Samson’s hair, a high percentage of people will say “Delilah!” By reading Judges 16:19, we quickly learn that she “called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his hair.” If you were to ask someone who is familiar with the Bible what animal will lie down with the lamb, most likely he or she will say “the lion.” Isaiah 11:6 says that it’s the *wolf* that will dwell with the lamb (also see 65:25).

Before we can know what a passage *means*, we must first determine what it *says*. We are not permitted to add words and ideas to the Bible that aren’t there (Rev. 22:18–19). Here’s what one prophecy writer claims: “Jesus said the last generation would witness unprecedented increases in earthquakes, famines, wars and pestilences.”

First, nothing is said about a “last generation.” Second, this is what Jesus actually told His first-century audience: “Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:11). There is no mention of the *number*, *magnitude*, or *increase* of earthquakes. He only states that there will be “great earthquakes” before that first-century generation passes away. Records of earthquakes go back thousands of years (e.g., Amos 1:1; Zech. 14:5), and they were a part of Israel’s history in the first century leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Even great earthquakes!

The New Testament records three earthquakes that took place in the days of the apostles, two of which are said to have been “great” (Matt. 27:54; 28:2; Acts 16:26). Tacitus, a historian who lived in the first century, mentions earthquakes that were so great that “immense mountains sank down… level places were seen to be elevated into hills, and… fires flashed forth during the catastrophe.”

In A.D. 61, just nine years before the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, an earthquake struck the city of Laodicea in Asia Minor. Here’s how Tacitus described it: “Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake … and rebuilt from its resources without any [help] from Rome.”

Like earthquakes, famines were also common in the first century (Luke 15:14; Rom. 8:35;
Knowing some Greek can Help

The New Testament is written in Greek. Since most of us don’t know how to read Greek, we are left to trust the translations we use. Some translations are better than others. Translations that work to produce the most literal translation are the best. Unfortunately, this is not always done. In Matthew 24:14, most English translations have the passage read like this: “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.”

The translation “whole world” might lead a student of the Bible to expect that the gospel must be preached to every person around the globe before the end of the age takes place. This interpretation, unfortunately, is based on a bad translation.

There are three Greek words in the New Testament that are often translated “world”: αἰών (aion), κόσμος (kosmos), and οἰκουμένη (oikoumenē). While you probably can’t read Greek, you can see that the words look very different. More importantly, they have different meanings.

The Greek word αἰών, as we have already noted, means “age,” a period of time (1 Cor. 10:11). Κόσμος is a familiar word since the English words “cosmic” (pertaining to the universe), “cosmology” (study or nature of the universe), and “cosmopolitan” (having worldwide scope) are derived from it. When the Bible tells us, “For God so loved the world” (John 3:16), the Greek word κόσμος is used and refers to Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles—the world (4:39–42). Like in English, “world” can refer to something less than the entire globe. This is also true when it’s used in the Bible.

Jesus does not use αἰών or κόσμος in Matthew 24:14. The word He chooses to make His point about how far the gospel will be preached before that first generation passes is οἰκουμένη, the “inhabited earth” or “the known world” of the day. We can get some idea of the meaning of οἰκουμένη by looking at other places where the word is used. In Luke 2:1 we read, as some translations have it, “Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.”

As in English, there are blends in Greek: αἰ = ai (rain) and οἰ = oi (oil)
Remember the famine that Luke described in Acts 11:28 as being “all over the world”? Well, the Greek word translated “world” is οικουμενη, “the inhabited earth.” This means that the famine was most likely limited to the Roman Empire.

How does this short study help in our understanding of Matthew 24:14? If the census and the famine covered an area limited to the Roman Empire, then it’s most likely that the same is true for the extent of the gospel proclamation.

Was the gospel preached throughout the “inhabited earth,” the known world of the first-century, before the Roman armies invaded and destroyed the temple in A.D. 70? What does the Bible say?

Paul writes that the faith of the Romans was “being proclaimed throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8). He tells the Colossians that the gospel had come to them and was constantly bearing fruit and increasing” in “all the world” (Col. 1:6). The gospel had advanced so far throughout the Roman Empire that Paul could say that it “was proclaimed in all creation under heaven” (1:23). This language is similar to the words we find in the book of Acts: “Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:6). Paul writes to Timothy that the gospel was “proclaimed among the nations” and “believed on in the world” (1 Tim. 3:16).

By knowing some Greek, your understanding of what the Bible says can help in interpreting what it means. In the case of Matthew 24:14, the gospel had been preached as far as Jesus said it would be preached before the temple was destroyed (24:2), before that first-century generation passed away (24:34). How do we know this? Because Jesus said it would happen that way, and the Bible confirms it.

Notes

1. Some argue that when God speaks to an immediate, physically present audience, He is actually speaking to a larger and future group of individuals. This is true. But as we see in Matthew 24:2, the use of “you” is obviously a reference to the disciples who asked the question about the temple. Jesus is answering them and includes them in the prophetic events as they transpire. Since all this takes place within the time context of “this generation,” there is need to project these events into an unspecified future.


3. Only Luke uses the word “great” in his description of the earthquakes (see Matt. 24:7 and Mark 13:8).


5. Description of earthquakes in the first century by the historian Tacitus (c. A.D. 56–117) in his historical work The Annals (2.47): www.chiefainsys.freeserve.co.uk/tacitus_annals02.htm


Οικουμενη
(oikoumenē)
“Inhabited Earth”

• Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth” (Luke 2:1).

• “And one of [the prophets] named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine over all the inhabited earth. And this took place in the reign of Claudius” (Acts 11:28).

• “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the inhabited earth for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come” (Matt. 24:14).
What Does it Mean to Interpret the Bible Literally?

Some time ago I received the following email from a concerned Bible student:

Please read the following passage and tell me how the statement could possibly be true if the writers of the Bible knew the Earth was round: “The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the Earth” (Dan. 4:11) The Bible also clearly says the Sun rotates around the Earth: “Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to its place it rises there again” (Eccl. 1:5). If the Bible is the true Word of God, then God believes the Sun rotates around a flat Earth.

Most new Christians are told to interpret the Bible literally, but they are almost never told what “literal” actually means or how the principle can be applied consistently without damaging the integrity of the Bible. Here’s a popular definition of what constitutes a “literal interpretation of the Bible”:

The best guide to Bible study is “The Golden Rule of Biblical Interpretation.” To depart from this rule opens the student to all forms of confusion and sometimes even heresy. When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, but take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.¹

If we follow this so-called Golden Rule of interpretation, then the man with the questions about a flat and stationary earth is correct. The Bible teaches that the earth is flat, is positioned at the center of the solar system, does not move (Psalm 93:1), and rests on pillars. The Bible is not describing the shape of the earth, its physical position in the cosmos, its lack of motion, or its support mechanism.

Proper interpretation of the Bible depends on the type of literature that’s being studied and the way words and phrases are used in different contexts throughout Scripture in their literary setting. “The term literal comes from the Latin litera meaning letter. To interpret the Bible literally is to interpret it as literature.”² Consider Daniel 4:11. The context describes a dream-vision that Nebuchadnezzar had. In that dream he saw a tree “in the midst of the land, and its height was great” (4:10). Right away we should note that these images were seen in a dream as a series of visions. The fact that Daniel had to interpret the vision is an indication that the images in the dream represent other things (4:19–37). Nebuchadnezzar is

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¹ The Hebrew and Aramaic word eretz can be translated as “earth” or “land” (Exodus 10:12–15) depending on the context. The same is true for the Greek word gēs.
the subject of the dream. He was like a tree in that he had “grown strong” and his “majesty had become great and reached to the sky” (4:22).

Some of the problems associated with interpreting the Bible literally happen because of translation issues. For example, many translations of Daniel 4:11 read this way: “And it was visible to the end of the whole earth.”

Critics of the Bible would say that this would be impossible if the biblical writers knew the earth was round. The Hebrew word eretz can be translated “earth” or “land,” as in “the land of Israel” (Ezek. 12:19) and the “land of Shinar” (Dan. 1:2). The “earth of Israel” or the “earth of Shinar” would make no sense.

It would be difficult for a Golden-Rule literalist to deal with flat-earth and earth-centered language. “Common sense” observation did not lead scientists to conclude that the earth is a sphere. Even today, “common sense” observation shows the sun rises and sets around a stationary earth. The Bible is not attempting to teach a science lesson with these passages any more than newspapers are trying to be scientifically precise when they post when the sun will rise and set each day. Map makers are no less scientific when they print flat maps with four corners. What should we think of the person who made a map of London shaped like a glove? If this glove-shaped map was found buried under a mass of rubble three thousand years from now, would these future discoverers think that the person who made it believed that his world was shaped like a hand?

Let’s look at another example. Some critics of the Bible claim that it teaches that the earth rests on “pillars” (1 Sam. 2:8; Job 9:6; 26:11). In these three cases, the word is found in a poetic literary structure. It’s the characteristics of pillars that are important to the biblical writer. Biblical authors were communicating in ways that people could understand. Like us, they were using literary devices to make a point. When we say someone is a “pillar in his community,” do you suppose that people understand this to mean that he’s holding up a building somewhere? Notice this verse: “Now behold, I have made you today as a fortified city and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze against the whole land, to the kings of Judah, to its princes, to its priests and to the people of the land” (Jer. 1:18). Jeremiah has the characteristics of a fortified city, a pillar of iron, and walls of bronze.

In Psalm 144:12, the prayer is that the daughters of Israel will be “like corner pillars of a palace.” In the same verse, the prayer is that Israel’s sons will be “as grown-up plants.” Once again, it’s the attributes of pillars and plants that the author uses to make his points. The same is true when we read that Wisdom has built “her house . . . hewn out of seven pillars” (Prov. 9:1). Wisdom, because it’s an abstract concept, needs concrete characteristics to make its principles concrete.

What’s interesting is that the New Testament always uses “pillar” in a symbolic way. James, Peter, and John are “reputed to be pillars” in the church (Gal. 2:9). “The household of God, which is the church of the living God,” is “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). We also read, “He who overcomes, Jesus “will make him a pillar in the temple” of God (Rev. 3:12).

This final example will help with our understanding of how all of these examples relate to Bible prophecy:

I saw another strong angel coming down out of heaven, clothed with a cloud; and the rainbow was upon his head, and his face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire (Rev. 10:1).
In addition to the figurative use of “pillars,” notice how heaven, a cloud, a rainbow, and the sun are being used in a symbolic way. Often times the use of stars, sun, moon, and clouds are used in prophetic sections of Scripture in a similar way. For example, in the Olivet Discourse we read, “But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matt. 24:29). Is Jesus describing what will happen to the actual sun, moon, and stars, or is He borrowing the characteristics of these heavenly bodies from the way they are often used in the Old Testament? Sometimes the Bible uses “sun,” “moon,” and “stars” to describe nations, in particular the nation of Israel. Consider

“It's obvious that the sun, moon, and stars represent Jacob, Rachel, and Joseph's eleven brothers—the nation of Israel. In Revelation 12:1, we read about a “great sign” that “appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” Most commentators agree that this image represents Israel. “In ancient cultures these astronomical symbols represented rulers. The dream, then symbolically anticipated the elevation of Joseph over the whole house of Jacob (Joseph's father, the sun; his mother, the moon; his 11 brothers, the stars, v. 10).” — Tim LaHaye writes that the “woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet,” and having “on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Rev. 12:1)
is a reference to the nation of Israel." He concludes that “they are symbolic of Israel…”

Jesus borrows the sun, moon, and stars language from Isaiah 13:10 and 24:23 and Ezekiel 32:7 and Zephaniah 1:15 and applies them to the nation of Israel in His day. He knows that this type of language has been used throughout the Old Testament to describe the judgment of nations. Consider this prophecy about the fall of Egypt by Old Testament Babylon: “When I extinguish you [Egypt], I will cover the heavens, and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you and will set darkness on your land;’ declares the LORD” (Ezek. 32:7–8). John A. Martin’s comments on Isaiah 13:10 are a helpful summary of how this language should be understood:

The statements in 13:10 about the heavenly bodies (stars … sun … moon) no longer functioning may figuratively describe the total turnaround of the political structure of the Near East. The same would be true of the heavens trembling and the earth shaking (v. 13), figures of speech suggesting all-encompassing destruction.

Jesus’ disciples understood that Israel would come under a judgment similar to the judgment Babylon experienced. The language is identical. The interpretation should be equally identical. Jerusalem would be treated like the pagan nation of Babylon. The events of history have proved Jesus’ words to be true. The Roman armies besieged Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and destroyed the temple so that not one stone was left upon another (Matt. 24:2).

Notes

1. Tim LaHaye, Nu Fear of the Storm: Why Christians Will Escape All the Tribulation (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1992), 240.
3. Jayne Clark, “Map exhibits help navigate history and ‘who we are,’” USA Today (November 2, 2007), 6D. It can be viewed online at www.usatoday.com/travel/destinations/2007-11-01-map-exhibits_N.htm
A Beginner’s Guide to Bible Prophecy

PART 4

Making Sense of the Book of Revelation

Know the Old Testament

Revelation is a difficult book to understand. There’s a dragon, a giant woman, scrolls, land and sea beasts, mysterious numbers, frightening marks, blasting trumpets, a thousand years, 200 million horse soldiers, stars falling from heaven that hit the earth, and so much more. What do they all mean?

Then there are all the things that are not in Revelation that we have been told can be found in Revelation. You won’t find the words “antichrist,” “rapture,” or “millennium,” any mention of a rebuilt temple, Jesus reigning on the earth for 1000 years, a seven-year period of anything, or a treaty made with and then broken by “the antichrist.” Nothing is said about animals being sacrificed again or circumcision being reinstituted. The number of the beast is not 6–6–6 but 666 (600+60+6).

In order to help in our understanding of Revelation, we need to have a good understanding of the rest of the Bible, especially the Old Testament.¹ We also need to recognize the language of Revelation. While it was originally written in Greek and then translated into many other languages, its true language is in “symbols” or “signs.” How do we know this? Revelation tells us. The word translated “communicated” in Revelation 1:1 is a Greek word best translated as “given for a sign.” In order to understand this “sign language,” we have to know how these symbols are used in other places in the Bible. The mind of the author of Revelation “was stored to a marvelous degree with the ideas, the language, and the imagery found in the Old Testament.”²

Without going into detail, consider how it would be easy to miss John’s meaning if we did not realize that Balaam (2:14), Jezebel (2:20), a measuring rod (11:1), Egypt and Sodom (11:8), two witnesses, (11:3), Babylon (14:8; 16:19; 17:15; 18:2, 10), and Gog and Magog (20:8) have an Old Testament background filled with meaning. There is no way to understand how John is using these symbols until we know how they were used in their original Old Testament context.

Revelation or Revelations?

It’s the book of Revelation, not the plural Revelations: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Rev. 1:1–3).
It Matters when Revelation was Written

Knowing when Revelation was written can help those who read the prophecy to determine for what period of time it was meant to be applied. We know that John tells us the things that were revealed to him were to take place “soon” or “shortly” (1:1). In the final chapter of Revelation, John is instructed not to “seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near” (22:10; cf. 1:3). When words like “near,” “soon,” and “shortly” are used in the Bible, they always refer to events that are about to take place. They never refer to distant events. The events in Revelation, therefore, describe prophetic events that were to take place near to the time John received the prophecy.

You might say, “But the language is so end of the worldish.” This is not the case when Revelation is read against the backdrop of the Old Testament and the way it describes local judgments using what sounds like end-of-the-world language. Consider the prophet Micah’s opening chapter:

For behold, the Lord is coming forth from His place. He will come down and tread on the high places of the earth. The mountains will melt under Him and the valleys will be split, like wax before the fire, like water poured down a steep place (Micah 1:3–4).

This judgment was because of “the rebellion of Jacob” and “for the sins of the house of Israel” (1:5) in Micah’s day. Even the use of “earth” does not make this a global judgment since the better translation is “land,” that is, “the land of Israel.” Revelation is about God’s righteous judgment against Israel that centered on the destruction of the temple that was still standing when John wrote down the revelation given to him.

In Revelation 11:1, we learn that John was told, “Rise and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and those who worship in it.” In the gospels, Jesus prophesied that the temple would be destroyed within a generation (Matt. 24:34) so that “not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be thrown down” (24:2). History records that Jesus’ prophecy came to pass within a generation just as He stated. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman armies led by Titus in the year A.D. 70. If Revelation had been written after A.D. 70, there wouldn’t have been a temple to measure. Since the New Testament doesn’t say one thing about the temple being rebuilt, the temple John was told to measure must have been the one that was destroyed by the Romans. This makes perfect sense since John was told that the events in Revelation would happen “soon… for the time is near.”

Not everyone agrees with this argument. Some commentators argue for a date of composition near the end of the first century. But this makes little sense since this would contradict what Revelation says about events taking place “soon” because “the time is near.” Then there is the problem of how John could measure a temple that did not exist. There is no indication that it’s a visionary temple since there are people still worshipping in it (11:1). It can’t be a heavenly temple since “it has been given to the nations; and they will tread under foot the holy city for forty-two months” (11:2). Those who argue for a late date for Revelation’s composition use questionable sources outside the Bible to make their case.

The Whole World or John’s World?

How do we explain Revelation 3:10 which reads, “Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth”? Read this way, the verse seems to be describing a worldwide event. Notice, however, that John says that the “hour of testing… is about to come.” He is describing something that was on the horizon for him and his first readers. You will find similar language in 1 John 2:18: “Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour.” John was describing events that were taking place in his day. How can these near events be reconciled with “the whole world” and “those who dwell on the earth”? Here’s where Greek comes in again.
You will remember from Part 3 that the Greek word often translated “world” is not always 
kosmos (κόσμος), the word you would expect. Sometimes its 
oikoumenā (οἰκουμένα) which means “inhabited earth,” which is interpreted to mean the political 
boundaries of the known world. Then there is John’s statement about testing “those who dwell 
upon the earth.” Once again, Greek comes in handy. The Greek word for “earth” is best 
translated as “land.” John seems to be describing prophetic events that were “about to happen” to 
those living in an area where these churches were located. Those who read Revelation 
were witnesses of events that would affect the nation of Israel just prior to the destruction of 
Jerusalem. They would see these things from the vantage point of heaven (4:1–4).

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**Stars or Meteorites?**

Let’s apply the principles we’ve learned so far by looking at three examples from Revelation. We read in Revelation 8:10 that “a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers.” If one 
star hits the earth, the earth will be vaporized in an instant. In fact, if a star gets even close to 
the earth, the earth is going to burn up before it hits. Notice Revelation 8:12: “Then the fourth 
glory sounded, and a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were smitten, 
so that a third of them might be darkened and the day might not shine for a third of it, and the 
night in the same way.” How can a “third of the sun” be smitten without catastrophic results on 
the whole earth and not just a third of it? All of this language is drawn from the OT and only 
has meaning as it is interpreted in light of its Old Testament context—the judgment and 
destruction of nations (Isa. 14:12; Jer. 9:12–16; Ezek. 5:2, 12), in 
particular, the nation of Israel in 
the first century (Matt. 24:1–34). 

Some claim that the “stars” 
are actually meteorites rather 
than symbols of a nation under 
judgment. If this is the case, 
then there is a problem with 
Revelation 12:4 where a “great 
red dragon” uses his “tail” to 
sweep a “third of the stars of 
heaven” to throw “them to the 
earth.” Such a barrage would destroy the earth, making it
uninhabitable for man and beast for millennia. And yet, we are to believe that the armies of the entire world are going to pick a fight with Israel (Rev. 16:13–16) after a third of the earth’s population has been wiped out.

It’s in Revelation 9:15 that the four angels “kill a third of mankind.” If this judgment takes place in the land of Israel, then the use of “mankind” (lit., men) is a reference to those living in Israel during the time of the siege. Josephus records that more than a million Jews were killed during the war. This number is probably more than a third of the population, but we know that there were judgments to come (Rev. 16) before the final Roman onslaught against the temple. Eventually the total number killed will come to two-thirds of the population (Zech. 13:8), the million mentioned by Josephus.

**Armageddon: Past or Future?**

Notice something important about the so-called “Battle of Armageddon” (16:16). John writes that the “kings of the whole world” will gather “together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty” (16:14). Many see this as a world-wide conflagration because of the use of “whole world,” but it’s not. The Greek word for “world” is oikoumenē (not kosmos), the same word used in Matthew 24:14, Luke 2:1, and Revelation 3:10 that is a reference to the then-known world. The battle is waged by the world empire of the day—Rome—made up of many nations. The phrase is used in a similar way in the Old Testament.

**Chinese Soldiers or a Demonic Army?**

What of the 200 million troops on horseback (Rev. 9:16)? There aren’t 200 million horses in the entire world today. At most there are 65 million, and this includes all types of equine. Even many who interpret Revelation as applying to a yet future time see this imagery as symbolic. Why would these nations mount such a vast army after a third of the earth’s population has just been wiped out by plagues and falling stars? It doesn’t make any sense. The world would be in such chaos that the last thing on anyone’s mind would be to round up 200 million horses, soldiers, weapons, saddles, and enough food and water so they could make a nearly impossible trek from China (16:12) to Israel. Do we not remember how the world went on hold after 9–11? It seems obvious from Revelation 9:17 that this is a symbolic army, a demon-inspired army bent on destruction (9:1–11). The comments by Ralph E. Bass, Jr., are helpful:

[This] is a number designed to terrorize. And indeed, that is its achieved result. As Carrington says, “. . . it is the empire of hell.” There never has been such an army and apparently never will be one…. But the number appears to have another meaning than the number of Roman soldiers from that area; it appears to suggest the number of demons that were released on Israel and Jerusalem. Remember the story of the demon possessed man from Garasenes (Luke 8:30)? He was possessed by a legion of demons. A legion was from 5,000 to 6,000 men, and all this in but one man! At 6,000 demons per person, it would only require a little over 33,000 inhabitants of Judah to justify these numbers.

**Summary**

Being able to interpret the Bible requires knowledge of the Bible. This is especially true with the subject of prophecy. The Bible is the best interpreter of itself.

**Notes**


