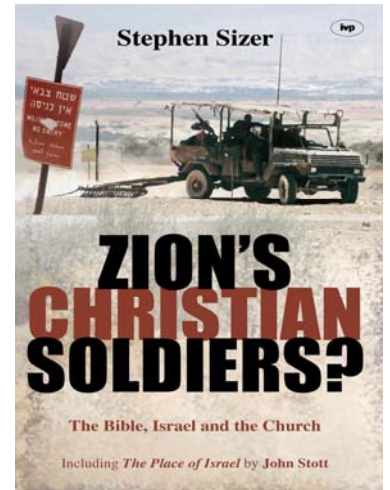


Seminar 1 - Introduction: For the Love of Zion (the Bible tells them so)

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. (Romans 10:1-2)



Unanswered Questions?

Why is there such a close relationship today between the Christian Right, the American political establishment and the State of Israel? Why after 40 years, does Israel continue to occupy territory in Lebanon (the Sheba Farms), Syria (the Golan Heights) and Palestine (the West Bank) while Syria has been pressured to withdraw from Lebanon? Why is Israel allowed to retain nuclear weapons while Iran is threatened with a pre-emptive attack for aspiring to obtain nuclear technology? And how have Britain and America become the focus of so much hate in the Arab world and the target for Islamic terrorism - despite our commitment to the rule of international law, democracy and human rights? The answers to these questions remain inexplicable unless we factor in what is now probably the most influential and controversial movement amongst Christians today – Christian Zionism.

The Significance of Christian Zionism

Let me give you a flavour of the movement and their strategy from a recent speech given by John Hagee.

Hagee is the Founder and Senior Pastor of Cornerstone Church, an 18,000 member evangelical church in San Antonio in Texas. Hagee broadcasts a national radio and television ministry to Americans on 160 T.V. stations, 50 radio stations and eight networks into an estimated 99 million homes worldwide on a weekly basis. In 2006 he founded Christians United for Israel with the support of 400 other Christian leaders.

For 25 almost 26 years now, I have been pounding the evangelical community over television. The bible is a very pro-Israel book. If a Christian admits "I

believe the Bible,” I can make him a pro-Israel supporter or they will have to denounce their faith. So I have the Christians over a barrel, you might say.¹

The assumption Hagee makes, that Bible-believing Christians will be pro-Israel, is the dominant view among evangelical Christians, especially in the USA. In March 2007, Hagee was a guest speaker at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference. He began with these words: “The sleeping giant of Christian Zionism has awakened.

There are 50 million Christians standing up and applauding the State of Israel...” As the Jerusalem Post pointed out, his speech did not lack clarity. He went on to warn:

It is 1938. Iran is Germany, and Ahmadinejad is the new Hitler. We must stop Iran’s nuclear threat and stand boldly with Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East... Think of our potential future together: 50 million evangelicals joining in common cause with 5 million Jewish people in America on behalf of Israel is a match made in heaven.²

The Pew Research Centre recently discovered that 60% of evangelicals said they supported the state of Israel,³ and 32% cited their religious beliefs as the primary reason for such support.⁴

The Unity Coalition for Israel, which brings together over 200 different autonomous organizations, is the largest pro-Israel network in the world. They claim to have 40 million active members, and lobby on behalf of Israel through 1,700 religious radio stations, 245 Christian TV stations, and 120 Christian newspapers.⁵ Besides, Christian’s United for Israel, the other three largest Christian Zionist organizations are the International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem, Christian Friends of Israel and

¹ John Hagee, The One Jerusalem Blog, 25 January 2007.

http://www.onejerusalem.org/blog/archives/2007/01/audio_exclusive_12.asp <Accessed March 2007>

² “Christians for Israel” Editorial, *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 March 2007.

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1173879085796&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull> <Accessed March 2007>

³ The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics,” August 24, 2006. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, <http://peoplepress.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=1084> <accessed March 2007>

⁴ The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Americans’ Support for Israel Unchanged by Recent Hostilities,” July 26, 2006. The Pew Research Center, <http://pewresearch.org/reports/?ReportID=37>

⁵ <http://www.israelunitycoalition.org/about/index.php> <Accessed March 2007>

Bridges for Peace. A powerful lobby movement? You bet. Christian Zionism is undoubtedly a dominant force shaping US foreign policy in the Middle East.⁶

Why else will you not find a single serving US politician openly critical of Israel?

What about your Presuppositions?

Discovering what the Bible has to say about the relationship between Israel and the Church, in history and prophecy, is not just an academic exercise. What we believe and understand affects how we behave and act. Let me illustrate. If you believe the Bible predicts an imminent war of Armageddon with Israel and the United States on one side and the Islamic and Communist world on the other, then you will not lose any sleep over the stalled peace process. And when you read about yet more bloodshed and suffering in the Middle East it will confirm what you already think is going to happen.

However, if you believe peace and reconciliation between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East is not only possible, but also God's will; that the UN Declaration of Human Rights is based on Judeo-Christian principles; and that the consistent implementation of international law should form the basis for our diplomacy in the Middle East, then you will act to achieve peace with justice. Our presuppositions not only shape our beliefs but also our actions.

Postponement or Fulfilment?

Why does this subject arouse such strong emotions among Christians, and evangelicals? Because the very gospel is at stake. The question to have at the back of your mind as you read further is this: Did the coming of Jesus, his death and resurrection and the founding of the Church, fulfil or postpone the biblical prophecies concerning Israel? Is the Church central to God's purposes on earth, or a temporary side show? In answering this question, evangelicals tend to fall into one of two

⁶ See Robert Jewett & John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003); Timothy Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2004); and John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, 'The Israeli Lobby', *The London Review of Books*, 23 March 2006, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/mear01.html> <Accessed March 2007>

camps – covenantalists and dispensationalists. Now there are variations of each, but if you haven't heard of the terms before, you are not alone. Most evangelicals don't necessarily know which they are.

Covenantalism or Dispensationalism?

Covenantalists tend to see the coming of Jesus as the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel while dispensationalists tend to see it as the postponement of those promises. Covenantalists believe the Bible teaches that God has one 'chosen people' called out from among the nations. Dispensationalists believe the Bible teaches that God has two separate and distinct peoples – the Church and Israel. They believe that the biblical promises made to the ancient Israelites apply to their Jewish descendents today. If Covenantalists emphasize the continuity within God's progressive revelation, Dispensationalists emphasize the discontinuity, distinguishing seven 'dispensations' in biblical history when God has tested mankind in a different way, and each time they have failed. They believe the present Church Age or Dispensation of Grace will fail and soon come to an end. Then during the Millennium, Jesus will reign as King of the Jews in Jerusalem and the unfulfilled promises of the Old Testament will be realised.

Covenantalists tend to regard promises relating to the Land, Jerusalem and the temple as annulled or fulfilled in the Church. Dispensationalists tend to see them as still in force and either being, or about to be, fulfilled in Israel today. Covenantalists tend to be neutral or positive about the future before the return of Jesus being either amillennial or postmillennial. Dispensationalists tend to be premillennial and pessimistic about the future.⁷

The following chart compares and contrasts a dispensational and covenantal framework. There are many variations of each, and while there may appear to be a superficial similarity between them, remember a covenantal framework emphasizes the continuity in God's sovereign purposes whereas a dispensational one

⁷ See chapter 7 and the glossary for an explanation of these terms.

emphasizes discontinuity. The example of a covenantal framework is taken from Vaughan Roberts⁸ while the dispensational ages are taken from Cyrus Scofield.⁹

Biblical Period	Covenantal Description	Dispensational Ages
Creation (Gen. 1-2)	The Pattern of the Kingdom	1. Innocency (Gen. 1:28)
Fall (Gen. 3-11)	The Perished Kingdom	2. Conscience (Gen. 3:23) 3. Human Government (Gen. 8:20)
Abraham – Moses (Gen. 12 – Deut.)	The Promised Kingdom	4. Promise (Gen. 12:1)
Israelites (Josh. – 2 Chr.)	The Partial Kingdom	5. Law (Exodus 19:8)
Remnant (Ezra-Mal.)	The Prophesied Kingdom	
Jesus (Mat.-John)	The Present Kingdom	
Church (Acts-Rev.)	The Proclaimed Kingdom	6. Grace (John 1:17)
Heaven	The Perfected Kingdom	7. Kingdom (Eph. 1:10)

I'll come clean. I hold to a covenantal position. Does that mean I am biased? Yes. Let's be honest. We are all biased. The question is whether we realise it and have good reasons for our particular bias. In this book I have tried to be fair and accurate in describing positions I disagree with. You can decide whether I have succeeded or failed. I believe the dispensational framework has been artificially imposed on the Scriptures creating divisions that are not there and ignoring those that are there. The most obvious is Mark 1:1 "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah." While this momentous event doesn't warrant a new dispensation in Scofield's scheme, it does in mine!

Why is this such a controversial subject?

I have been called a lot of things over the years. The more printable ones include a liberal, an anti-Semite, and a supercessionist (an advocate of Replacement theology). Lets begin by debunking these three red herrings.

Liberals and Evangelicals

Dispensationalists like to think they alone read the Bible literally and are more consistent than other Christians who, for example, 'spiritualise' away the promises

⁸ Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture* (Leicester, IVP, 2003), p.22.

⁹ C. I. Scofield, 'Introduction,' *The Scofield Reference Bible*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1909), p5.

made to the Israelites. That is probably why they get upset when some conservative evangelicals beg to differ. It would be more accurate to say that sometimes Dispensationalists accept a literal interpretation without acknowledging how Scripture interprets Scripture, for example, how Jesus and the Apostles use Old Testament promises and terminology in new ways. By imposing seven 'dispensations' on the Bible, some Dispensationalists seem to turn what is intended to be a unified plan of salvation for a sick world into separate isolation wards for different races.

Zionism and Anti-Semitism

It is true that at various times in the past, churches and church leaders have tolerated or incited anti-Semitism and even attacks on Jewish people. Racism is a sin and without excuse. Anti-Semitism must be repudiated unequivocally. However, we must not confuse apples and oranges. Anti-Zionism is not the same thing as anti-Semitism despite attempts to broaden the definition. Criticising a political system as racist is not necessarily racist. Judaism is a religious system. Israel is a sovereign nation. Zionism is a political system. These three are not synonymous. I respect Judaism, repudiate anti-Semitism, encourage interfaith dialogue and defend Israel's right to exist within borders recognised by the international community and agreed with her neighbours. But like many Jews, I disagree with a political system which gives preference to expatriate Jews born elsewhere in the world, while denying the same rights to the Arab Palestinians born in the country itself. Jimmy Carter is not alone in describing the Zionism practiced by the present government of Israel as a form of apartheid.¹⁰

Supercessionism or Replacement Theology

This is a favourite 'straw man' of Christian Zionists. They criticise their opponents for implying the Church has 'replaced' Israel. The implication is that the Jewish people cease to have any role within the purposes of God. This is clearly refuted in Romans 9-11.

The Scriptures are however unambiguous in distinguishing between the old and new covenants. In Hebrews, the writer says, "By calling this covenant "new," he has made

¹⁰ Jimmy Carter, *Palestine Peace not Apartheid* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2006); Uri Davis, *Apartheid Israel* (London, Zed Books, 2003); Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford, Oneworld, 2006).

the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.” (Hebrews 8:13). There is therefore, from a Christian perspective, no sense in which the old covenant can be viewed as still in force or applicable. On the night that Jesus was betrayed, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:20). When Jesus died on the cross, a new covenant was established with his precious blood that supercedes the basis of the old covenant. The writer to Hebrews continues, “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” (Hebrews 9:15).

Here then is the biblical basis for a kind of successionism. But notice the succession is first of all from one covenant to another, not from Israel to the Church. This is because both covenants were, in their first instance, made with the people of God who at that stage were predominantly Jewish. “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” (Jeremiah 31:31). This is why Jesus initially sent his Apostles only to the Jews. “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.’” (Matthew 10:5-6). But when the majority rejected his ministry, Jesus warned, “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.” (Matthew 21:43). Jesus here describes the succession that would occur within a generation. The apostle Peter, preaching after Pentecost, and citing Moses, similarly warned those who rejected Jesus, “Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.” (Acts 3:23). Covenantalists believe there has only ever been one people of God – whether under the old or new covenant - and one way to God – by grace alone and through faith alone. Both Israel and the Church have been a mixed company of believers and unbelievers, Jews and Gentiles. Only God knows who is numbered among his faithful remnant. At various times in history it has been clearer than in others – for example when all but the family of Noah perished or the entire generation who entered Sinai, perished there apart from a handful. That is why many Covenantalists are uncomfortable describing the Church as the ‘New Israel’.

The term never appears in the Bible. However, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 3, Peter uses language describing Israel and applies it to the Church.

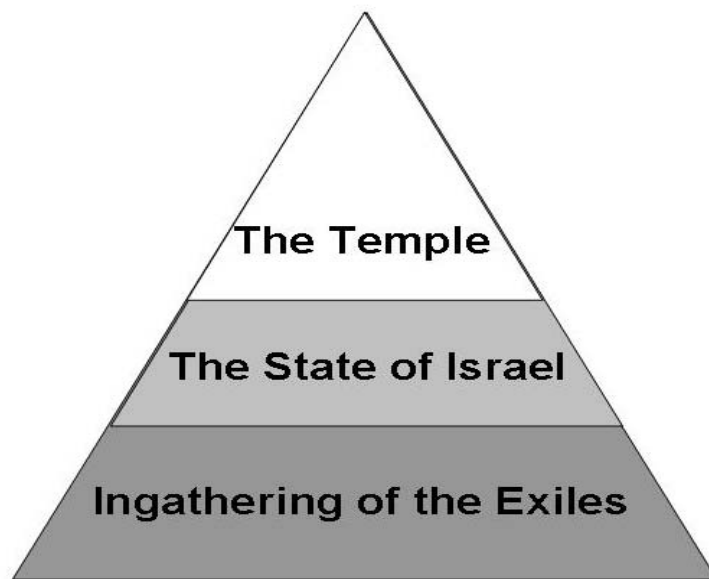
They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:8-10)

It is not that the Church has replaced Israel. Rather, in the new covenant church, God has fulfilled the promises originally made to the old covenant church. So, for example, when Jesus affirms Peter’s declaration of faith and says, “on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18), the word translated for ‘church’ in Greek is ‘ekklesia’ – the very word used in the Greek Old Testament to describe God’s people. No – Covenantalists are not liberal, anti-Semitic or into ‘replacement’ theology. That some Dispensationalists believe Israel will ‘replace’ the Church is another matter but that can wait until chapter 3.

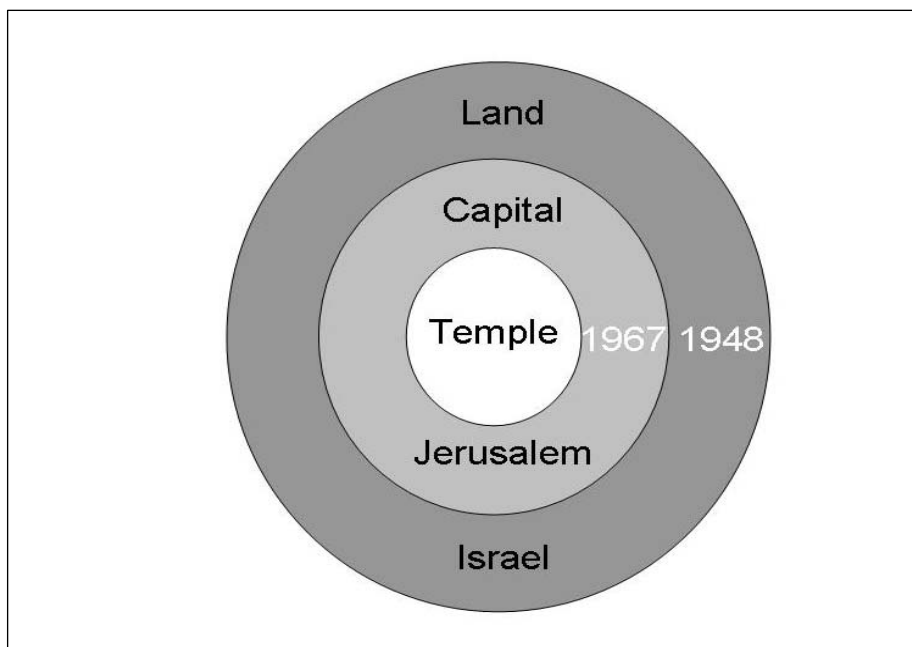
What is the relationship between Religion and Politics?

To get a handle on Christian Zionist theology, and the structure of this book, let me quote from two Jewish Rabbis. Both uses an analogy that helps illustrate the Zionist agenda. First, listen to Rabbi Shlomo Aviner: ‘We should not forget ... that the supreme purpose of the ingathering of exiles and the establishment of our State is the building of the Temple. The Temple is at the very top of the pyramid.’¹¹ This shows the relationship between religion and politics in modern Zionism. His vision is a kind of theocracy which many Christian Zionists believe will occur when Jesus returns to reign as king of Israel in Jerusalem.

¹¹ Rabbi Shlomo Chaim Hacoen Aviner, cited in Grace Halsell, *Forcing God’s Hand*, (Washington, Crossroads International, 1999), p.71.



Another Jewish rabbi, Yisrael Meida, uses a different analogy to make the same point: 'It is all a matter of sovereignty. He who controls the Temple Mount, controls Jerusalem. And he who controls Jerusalem, controls the land of Israel.'¹² Imagine these three to be like three concentric rings of a target.



¹² Yisrael Meida, cited in Halsell, *Forcing*, op.cit., p.68.

The land represents the outer ring, Jerusalem the middle ring and the Temple is the centre ring. The three rings comprise the Zionist agenda by which the Land was conquered in 1948, the Old City of Jerusalem was occupied in 1967 and the Temple site, or Haram Al Sharif, is hotly contested between Zionists and Muslims. For the religious Zionist, Jewish or Christian, sovereignty over all three - land, city and temple – is essential and inextricably linked.

Is there an Elephant in the Room?

I hope you are beginning to see why this is such an important subject. There is a giant elephant in the room and its time we started talking about it. As I intimated in the foreword, fear of being accused of anti-Semitism for challenging the Zionist agenda is enough to keep many evangelicals under their beds. In my view, and that of an increasing number of other evangelicals, it is time to speak out because Christian Zionism has become a formidable and dangerous movement. Portraying the modern state of Israel as God's chosen people on earth, the role of the Church has been reduced in the eyes of many to providing moral and biblical justification for Israel's colonization of Palestine. Those who oppose her are demonised. While not all Christian Zionists endorse the apocalyptic views of Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye, the movement as a whole is nevertheless leading the West, and the Church with it, into a confrontation with Islam. Using biblical terminology to justify a preemptive global war against 'the Axis of Evil' merely reinforces stereotypes, fuels extremism, incites fundamentalism and increases the likelihood of nuclear war. Do I think the Bible predicts all this? No I don't. In the next few chapters I will explain why.

It is not an understatement to say that what is at stake is our understanding of the gospel, the centrality of the cross, the role of the Church and the nature of our missionary mandate, not least, to the beloved Jewish people.

So let's start with the source of our authority – the Bible and how we should read it.

Chapter 2

The Bible Tells Them So – Is it possible to read the Bible too literally?

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me. (John 5:39)

How do you read the Bible? With any literature we read, we bring certain presuppositions and expectations.¹³ Presuppositions are important and we all have them. But knowing what they are is just as important because they influence how we interpret what we read. If we don't know what they are, we are not aware how they colour what we read. In this chapter we will consider three key presuppositions: It is important that we read the Bible literally, contextually and progressively. In particular, prophetic and apocalyptic scripture needs special handling and so we will examine this genre separately. We will then consider some of the pitfalls created when these biblical presuppositions are ignored and illustrate how ultra-literalism leads to some very strange, tragic and sometimes silly interpretations. In conclusion, we will see how the Bible itself answers these forms of ultra-literalism.

Three Important presuppositions when reading the Bible:

1. We must read the Bible literally

To interpret the Bible literally is to interpret it *as literature* of various kinds – that is, according to the usual rules of grammar, speech, syntax, context and genre.

One of the distinctive hallmarks of Evangelicals is the way in which we seek a literal as opposed to an allegorical interpretation of biblical passages. We believe that God has revealed his purposes fully and finally in and through the Scriptures. That is why we call it 'revelation'. According to the Book of Hebrews, 'For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart' (Hebrews 4:12).

When I read the Bible, I make certain assumptions based on what it claims, as well as on my previous experiences - that it is indeed 'living and active', the inspired Word

¹³ Two books well worth considering if you want to learn how to study the Bible are: *Dig Deeper* by Nigel Beynon & Andrew Sach (Leicester, IVP, 2005) and *Study and Meditation* by Jan Johnson (Leicester, IVP, 2003).

of God; that the writers are trustworthy and telling the truth; and that God will reveal more of his perfect will for me as I submit my life as I seek diligently to understand and apply his Word.

One important thing to remember though – we must never apply a passage before we have understood its original purpose. It may be tempting to imagine a passage was written just for me but it wasn't. The Bible was not written to me. Let me say that again – the Bible was not written to me - it was written for me. There is a big difference. When I read a passage in the Bible I must remember I am reading it, as it were, over the shoulder of the person or group of people it was originally written to. This is why, as we shall see in a moment, it is essential that we read a passage within its historical and cultural context.

At the same time we must not forget that God wants to reveal himself to us through the Bible. God is not hiding from us or playing a game in the Bible. Evangelicals hold to the idea of scriptural perspicuity – that God's purposes are clear and unambiguous. The Bible is, as Alec Motyer says, 'like a good detective story: clues come first; solutions follow.'¹⁴ It is not, however, like a jigsaw puzzle, with some of the pieces missing. This is why we should not search for 'Bible codes' or hidden messages.

The goal of interpretation is to understand the meaning of the text that the biblical writers intended to communicate. In the divine–human concurrent activity of inspiration, God intended to communicate with his people, so biblical texts convey meaning at both the divine and human levels. An inspired and authoritative Bible has significance and relevance beyond its original circumstances, and there may be many applications. We need to work hard at interpretation. Thankfully, godly people have dedicated their lives to study God's Word carefully in the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and have written some really useful commentaries to help us.¹⁵ So we must read the Bible literally.

¹⁴ Alec Motyer, 'Bible Study and the Unity of the Bible' in *Studying God's Word*, ed. John B. Job (London, IVP, 1972), p. 14.

¹⁵ See, for example, the *New Bible Commentary: (21st Century Edition)*, ed. Donald A. Carson, R. T. France, J. Alec Motyer and Gordon J. Wenham (Leicester, IVP, 1994).

2. We must read the Bible contextually

Someone, probably famous, once said, 'A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.' Clearly, understanding the context and purpose of a passage is important in order to find its meaning. These include the historical, cultural and theological contexts. It is also important to ascertain what kind of writing it is – prose, poetry, parable or prophecy? Here are some important questions to ask of a passage:

- Who was the writer?
- To whom is it being written?
- What kind of literature is it?
- What is the cultural and historical context?
- What is the meaning of the text (our only access to the author's intention)?
- How was the text interpreted by those who first received it?
- Why was the author saying/writing it?

How we answer these questions will clearly influence both our interpretation and application. It is therefore important to try to answer these questions before seeking to make specific application to ourselves and especially events happening today.¹⁶

So is it possible to read the Bible in an ultra-literalist way? Yes, especially when people try to apply Old Testament terms like 'chosen' and 'inheritance' today without first reading them within their original context or in the light of the way the New Testament gives them new meaning. This error also occurs when its claimed contemporary events were prophesied in the Bible – like the rise of the European Community or Saddam Hussein. This kind of speculative prophetic reading of the Bible became popular in the 19th Century through the influence of John Nelson Darby, who helped found the Brethren, and among the Adventist and Millennial sects. One of Darby's followers in America, Cyrus Scofield, popularised this kind of interpretation through his Scofield Reference Bible which became the most popular study Bible in the first half of the 20th Century.

Not one instance exists of a 'spiritual' or figurative fulfilment of prophecy. Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel is always Israel, Zion is always Zion ... Prophecies may never be spiritualised, but are always literal.¹⁷

¹⁶ A good website to look at for further Bible study is www.bible.org

The problem with this kind of wooden literalism is that it leads to rather bizarre and sometimes inconsistent interpretations. For example, fans of Israel like to emphasize passages in which words like ‘eternal’, ‘everlasting’ or ‘forever’ are used in connection with the giving of the Land, Jerusalem or the Temple to the Jewish people.

Sometimes the immediate context of a passage indicates that a ‘forever’ isn’t always to be taken literally. In Isaiah 32, for example, God warns that Jerusalem ‘will become a wasteland for ever’ (32:14) but in the following verse adds, ‘till the Spirit is poured upon us...’ (32:15). Similarly, words like ‘everlasting’ are sometimes used for emphasis rather than necessarily to indicate something eternal. In Genesis 17:13, for example, circumcision is described as an ‘everlasting covenant’ while in Psalm 74:3, the destroyed Temple is described as “everlasting ruins”. In many cases, the context indicates that ‘a very long time’ is intended. Sometimes similar words are used to emphasize the seriousness of God’s judgement. Here’s one example:

But if you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses. (Jeremiah 17:27)

Sometimes, a ‘wooden’ literalism will conflict with history or contradict another passage in the Bible. Here are some examples:

Old Testament Promise	New Testament Fulfilment
I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there. (1 Kings 9:3)	I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. (Revelation 21:22)
No one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, because the LORD chose them to carry the ark of the LORD and to minister before him forever... Aaron was set apart, he and his descendants forever, to consecrate the most holy things, to offer sacrifices before the LORD, to	If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood..., why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.” (Hebrews 7:11-

¹⁷ C.I. Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course* (Chicago, Moody Bible Institute), pp. 45-46.

minister before him and to pronounce blessings in his name forever. (1 Chronicles 15:2, 23:13)	12)
Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—and I will not lie to David—that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun;. (Psalm 89:35-36)	Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.” (John 18:36)

The New Testament shows that Jesus himself was often misunderstood by those who interpreted his figurative language in a wooden literal sense. John’s gospel contains several instances. For example, after he had cleansed the Temple and was asked by the Pharisees for a sign, Jesus replied, ‘Destroy this Temple and I will raise it again in three days’ (John 2:19). They thought he meant their Temple and Jesus does not bother to correct their error. In the next few chapters: Nicodemus wonders how he can enter his mother’s womb again (John 3:4); the Samaritan woman believes Jesus is offering her free water on tap (4:15); and the religious leaders fear Jesus is advocating cannibalism by saying they must eat his body and drink his blood (6:51-52). So one of the most common mistakes made by people who heard Jesus first hand, was to take his words too literally. It is ironic that people still make the same mistake today.

3. We must read the Bible progressively

Here is another biblical presupposition we can observe in these verses from Paul’s second letter to Timothy: ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work’ (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The Bible is the very Word of God. And remember that when Paul was inspired to write that sentence, he would probably have had the Hebrew Scriptures in mind. We must therefore place a particular book or passage within the progressive revelation of God’s will. Being rooted in history, God’s revelation is progressive in the sense that he reveals more of his purposes as time goes on. And remember the Bible as history is a ‘one way street’. We therefore usually interpret earlier passages in the light of later ones. So for example, the writer to Hebrews says ‘The law is only as shadow of

the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves.’ (Hebrews 10:1). Paul amplifies this in Galatians.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. (Galatians 3:23-25)

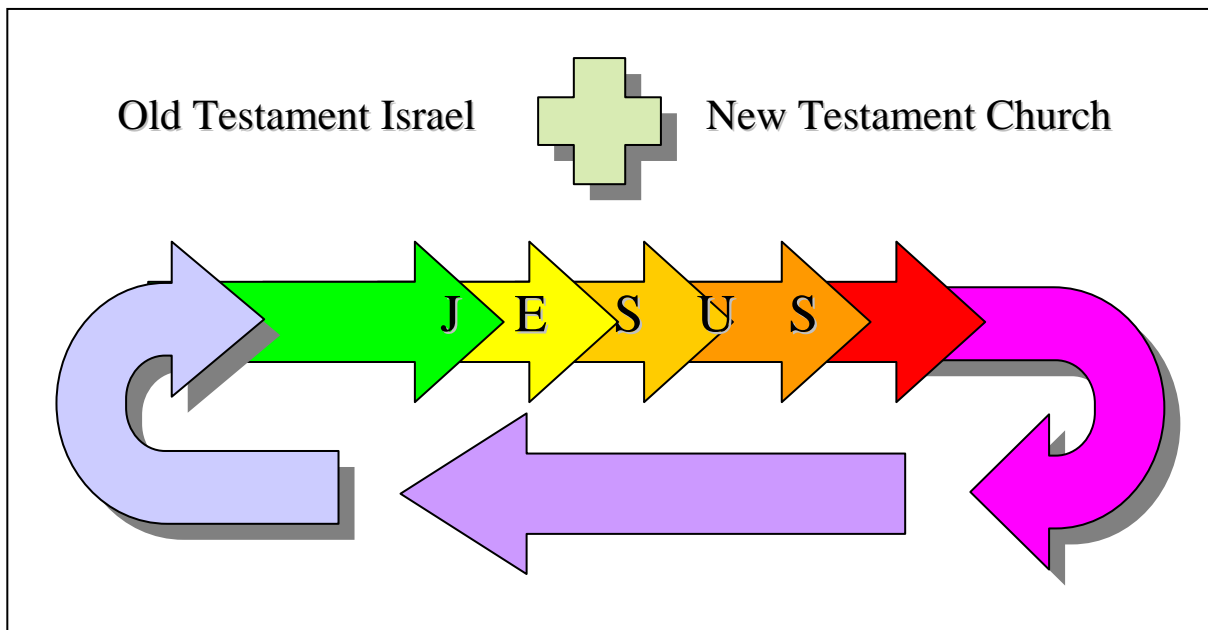
The word used for ‘put in charge’ was used by the Greeks to describe the role of a household slave or servant who was in some way responsible for a child’s care and upbringing (see also 1 Corinthians 4:15).

So, if in the words of Paul, ‘the law’ does not ‘lead us to Christ’, as intended, then our interpretation of it is likely to be defective. What is the relationship between the Old and New Testament? Alec Motyer helpfully summarises five aspects of the relationship – confirmation, finalization, dependence, reaffirmation and completion:

The five are as follows: *confirmation*, i.e. the unfolding of truth in the Bible, and especially in the narrative words and deeds of Jesus, confirm earlier lines of revelation; *finalization*, i.e. where the earlier revelation has embedded the truth in provisional forms, guarded it with temporary safeguards, or couched it in contemporary but ultimately inadequate thought-forms, it is then stated in its final form; *dependence*, i.e. the final statement of a truth assumes all that has gone before and cannot be understood without reference to the earlier words or events; *reaffirmation*, i.e. some items in the Old Testament seem at first sight to be out of step with the character of Jesus and the revelation vouchsafed in him, yet the New Testament does not reject but affirms them; *completion*, i.e. the Bible expresses a progressive revelation, an accumulating body of truth in which the New Testament rounds out the Old.¹⁸

Since God is the author and inspiration of all the Scriptures, what he says in one passage will not contradict what he says in another. We must be careful therefore to not create tension that does not exist, especially between the Old and New Testaments, but instead look for the flow of revelation, just as Jesus instructed the Pharisees. ‘You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me’ (John 5:39). If we have come to know Jesus as our personal Lord and Saviour, we will read the Hebrew Scriptures with Christian eyes – the way Jesus and his Apostles did.

¹⁸ Motyer, *Studying God’s Word*, p. 15.



Even the Apostles didn't always do this straight away. They brought their Jewish presuppositions with them which sometimes coloured their hopes and expectations. For example, after his resurrection and just before his ascension to heaven, the Apostles were still confused about whether Jesus was going to restore the kingdom to the Jewish people and defeat the Romans (See Acts 1:6-7). On a previous occasion, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus had gently rebuked some of them. 'How foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken... and beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (Luke 24:27).

After Pentecost, the Holy Spirit helped the Apostles see that Jesus was the Saviour of all nations and not just King of the Jews, and that his kingly rule extended over the whole world and was not just limited to Israel. The Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles show how they came to recognise how Jesus was the fulfilment of the hope and expectation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

We too need the same illuminating work of the Holy Spirit as we read the Bible, to see the harmony and progression in God's purposes. D.L. Moody often used to say 'The Bible without the Holy Spirit is a sundial by moonlight.' It is certainly dull and you are bound to get a wrong reading. We must take care to read the Bible literally, contextually and progressively.

Interpreting prophetic and apocalyptic scriptures

As the new Millennium approached, there was a marked rise in the number of books published on Bible prophecy. One commentator called it PMT – Pre-Millennial Tension! One notorious example, perhaps not surprisingly now out of print, but easily found in second hand bookstores, is Edgar C. Whisenant's, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture will be in 1988*.¹⁹ On 1 January 1989, he published a vain second attempt entitled, *The final shout: Rapture report 1989*²⁰. I suspect he had been writing it toward the end of 1988 as an insurance policy. Edgar, bless him, is sadly not alone. If you want to read about other failed prophets, check out *Doomsday Delusions* by Marvin Pate and Calvin Haines.²¹

There are some ways in which prophecy differs from other apocalyptic literature.²² Prophecy is associated with forth-telling and foretelling God's word. Invariably the prophets had a message for their contemporaries (forth-telling) and a message concerning the distant future (foretelling). Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish the one from the other as in Isaiah 7:1-17. Apocalyptic literature, which means 'revelation' or 'unveiling', tends to focus only on the events leading to the end of time.

Prophecy	Apocalyptic
Initially spoken then later written	Initially written
Separate brief message	Longer and more repetitive
Plain language	Symbolic language, (e.g. animals)
	Dualism is common (Jesus and angels vs. Satan and the Anti-Christ)
Castigates nominal believers	Confirms and encourages remnant
Focus on repentance and faith	Pessimistic about human ability to change events

Both prophecy and apocalyptic literature share much in common. They both emphasize God's sovereignty in human affairs as well as his future intervention at the end of time to deal with sin and bring justice and peace. Both promise that the faithful who stand firm will be redeemed. The writings of the prophets are clearly identified in the Bible and include the writings of 16 prophets from Isaiah to Malachi,

¹⁹ Edgar C. Whisenant, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture will be in 1988* (Nashville, World Bible Society, 1988)

²⁰ Edgar C. Whisenant, *The final shout: Rapture report 1989* (Nashville, World Bible Society, 1989)

²¹ C. Marvin Pate & Calvin B. Haines Jr. *Doomsday Delusions* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1995)

²² Adapted from J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1980), pp. 86-87.

together with others like Samuel, Elijah, Elisha and even Saul (1 Samuel 10:5-11). The biblical passages associated with the apocalyptic include Ezekiel 38-39; Daniel 7-12; Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21; 2 Thessalonians 2; and Revelation 6-19.

Sometimes Biblical books contain both the prophetic and the apocalyptic. The Book of Revelation is one example.

Prophetic	Apocalyptic
Revelation 1-3. A series of exhortations to the churches of the 1 st Century.	Revelation 4-22 A series of heavenly visions about the future.

It is important when reading apocalyptic literature to know a little bit more about their common characteristics before attempting to interpret and apply them. Marvin Pate and Calvin Haines, very helpfully list the typical characteristics of apocalyptic material. These include:

- The writer often goes on a journey with a celestial guide who shows him interesting sites and comments on them.
- The Information is usually communicated through visions.
- Visions often contain strange or even enigmatic symbolism including depictions of animals and other living beings.
- Visions are usually pessimistic about people being able to change the outcome.
- Visions usually end with God destroying evil through his personal and cataclysmic intervention.
- The vision is intended to comfort and sustain the righteous remnant who will be rewarded when God establishes his kingdom.²³

Historically, biblical apocalyptic literature arose between the time of the Babylonian captivity (Ezekiel and Daniel) through the return of the exiles (Zechariah) to the Greek and then Roman occupation of Palestine (Revelation). The time therefore between around 586 BC and 100 AD was one of great ferment and anxiety for the Jewish people. The apocalyptic writings describe the rise and fall of empires as well as rulers who at various times tolerated or persecuted God's people. Sometimes the

²³ Adapted from C. Marvin Pate & Calvin B. Haines Jr. *Doomsday Delusions*, p. 24. See also Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Leicester, IVP, 1972), pp. 34-61.

text itself helps us to understand that what is described, while using human imagery, is intended to be interpreted figuratively or symbolically. So, for example, in Zechariah's vision of the future, we meet Joshua the High Priest "standing before the angel of the Lord and Satan" (Zechariah 3:1). Just when you want to know more about this enigmatic person – remember Joshua is Hebrew for Jesus – Zechariah drops a hint: "Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, you who are symbolic of things to come. I am going to bring my servant, the Branch." (Zechariah 3:8). So Joshua and his friends, whether a literal person or not, signify or symbolize future events, just as the term 'Branch' is understood as a messianic title for Jesus (see Isaiah 4:2; Jeremiah 23:5)

This is a good illustration of how, at the same time, apocalyptic literature portrays 'history' between the now and the not yet – between the present and God's future intervention to rescue and vindicate his people. This is the period known as the 'End-Times' or 'Last Days'. We must recognise however that these terms have been used for rather a long while, and don't just refer to events since 1948 or 1967. Quoting Isaiah 44:3, for example, Peter describes the events of the Day of Pentecost as the fulfilment of these 'Last Days' (Acts 2:16-17. See also Hebrews 1:2). We must not therefore be naïve in thinking we alone are living in the End Times. Let me quote once more from Pate and Haines,

Put another way, end-time prophecy, because it more often than not emerged from a persecuted minority, is a coded language in need of deciphering. The reason for the use of coded language is obvious – it protected both author and recipients from the dominant, oppressing regimes of the day. Hence, for example, the prevalence of heavenly visions, enigmatic symbolism (for example, beasts representing political empires), gematria (figurative meaning attached to numbers such as 666), dualism (the clash of people groups described in terms of a struggle between supernatural powers). As such, eschatological prophecy's primary focus concerned the particular life setting of the biblical author and recipients, though its parameters also include the distant future.²⁴

While apocalyptic literature is like an animated picture book, full of detail, movement and action, it is not a puzzle book intended to confuse. That is why it is important to

²⁴ C. Marvin Pate & Calvin B. Haines Jr. *Doomsday Delusions*, p. 28.

focus on the broad themes and not get hung up on the detail. Michael Wilcock makes this very helpful assessment:

The conviction that the Revelation really is meant to reveal truth, and not to obscure it, and that its treasures really do lie on the surface if one looks for them in the right light, is by no means the same as a belief that its meaning will be spelt out for us verbally, with logic and precision... It is no use reading Revelation as though it were a Paul-type theological treatise in a slightly different idiom, or a Luke-style history projected into the future.²⁵

This is why apocalyptic literature like Revelation should be interpreted in harmony with the teachings of the entire Bible. There are, for example, over 400 references or allusions to the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation. William Hendriksen reminds us that 'In emphasizing this basis of the Apocalyptic visions in the subsoil of the sacred Scriptures we must always bear in mind that it is wise to proceed from the clearer to the more obscure and never vice versa.'²⁶

To sum up, there are two basic errors ultra-literalists make regarding the prophetic and apocalyptic literature: First, they ignore the historical setting of the passages and the way in which they have already been fulfilled. Second, they read back into the passages contemporary events and develop novel ways to interpret them as if they were speaking of present day readers. This heresy is not new. It's good to remember the words of Martin Luther who said of the Book of Revelation, 'everyone thinks of the book what ever his spirit imparts.'²⁷ Let's look at some examples to illustrate this:

Five common mistakes made by ultra-literalists

Here are some more common mistakes made by ultra-literalists when biblical presuppositions are ignored:

1. Transient Literalism

When Christian writers interpret contemporary events in the light of prophecy, they run into difficulties. For example, Hal Lindsey insisted that Russia's place in history was predicted in the Bible.

²⁵ Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation* (Leicester, IVP, 1975), p. 24.

²⁶ William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, (London, IVP, 1940), p. 49.

²⁷ Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation*, p. 23.

1980's Countdown to Armageddon	Planet Earth 2000 AD
Today, the Soviets are without question the strongest power on the face of the earth. Let's look at recent history to see how the Russians rose to the might predicted for them thousands of years ago. ²⁸	We see Russia as no longer a world threat, but a regional power with a world-class military - exactly what Ezekiel 38 and 39 predicted it would be. ²⁹

As Russia declined, Lindsey switched his emphasis to Islamic Fundamentalism. While *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) suggested that we were threatened by 'The Russian force'³⁰, in the *Oracle Commentaries* (2006) that had morphed into a 'Russian-Syrian-Iranian Axis.'³¹

Another favourite theme of prophecy pundits is 'Babylon the Great' (Revelation 14:8 and 17:5), variously interpreted as the Roman Empire, the Vatican, and the European Community. - If we take the Bible literally, surely 'Babylon' is Babylon?

Charles Dyer's *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times*³² indeed suggested that Babylon would be rebuilt before the final battle of Armageddon and then showed how Saddam Hussein was apparently rebuilding it. The cover shows Saddam in uniform, in front of a statue of Nebuchadnezzar. - With his untimely demise, events in Iraq do not appear to be heading in the predicted direction. In 2004 Dye's sequel³³ presents a toppled Saddam alongside an image of the new enemy - Osama Bin Laden. The actors may change, but the same confident assurance of 'bible prophecy coming true' remains.

2. Speculative Literalism

Hal Lindsey adopts a similar approach to apocalyptic descriptions. Since someone in the 1st Century could not understand scientific developments in the 20th, the Apostle John was forced to 'illustrate them with phenomena of the first century; for instance,

²⁸ Hal Lindsey, *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (New York, Bantam, 1981), p. 68.

²⁹ Hal Lindsey, *Planet Earth 2000 AD* (Palos Verdes, CA, Western Front, 1994), p. 216

³⁰ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (London, Lakeland, 1970), p. 160.

³¹ Hal Lindsey, 'Uncovered: Russian-Syrian-Iranian Axis' *Oracle Commentaries* (22 July 2006) <http://www.hallindseyoracle.com/articles.asp?ArticleID=13165> [Accessed August 2006]

³² Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times* (Wheaton, Tyndale, 1991)

³³ Charles H. Dyer, *What's Next? God, Israel and the Bible* (Chicago, Moody, 2004)

a thermonuclear war looked to him like a giant volcanic eruption spewing fire and brimstone.’ The symbolism in Revelation, is the result of ‘a first-Century man being catapulted in God’s time machine up to the end of the twentieth century’³⁴, and returning to describe what he saw.

Capitalising on the *Bible Code* craze, Lindsey’s *Apocalypse Code* takes John’s ‘locusts’ for helicopters; ‘horses prepared for battle’ as heavily armed attack helicopters; ‘crowns of gold’ for helmets and so on.³⁵ The superficial appeal of this kind of interpretation is short-lived as the wreckage of previous false claims testifies.

3. Contradictory Literalism

While ultra-literalists claim to provide ‘consistent interpretation’, they nonetheless reach very different conclusions. See for instance how M.R. DeHann and Hal Lindsey contradict one another:

M.R. DeHann (1946)	Hal Lindsey (1973)
In Revelation 9:13-21 we have a description of an army of two hundred million horsemen ... seems to be a supernatural army of horrible beings, probably demons, who are permitted to plague the unrepentant sinners on the earth. ³⁶	The four angels of Revelation 9:14-15 will mobilize an army of 200 million soldiers from east of the Euphrates ... I believe these 200 million troops are Red Chinese soldiers accompanied by other Eastern allies. ³⁷

While for DeHann the 200 million are ‘demonic horsemen’³⁸, for Lindsey they are ‘Chinese soldiers’³⁹ and indeed their horses may be mobilized ballistic missile launchers!⁴⁰ These writers cannot all be right - unless we are talking about 200 million demonically possessed Chinese soldiers on horseback.

In his 1939 commentary, regularly reprinted since then, William Hendriksen raised several important questions about this kind of interpretation:

³⁴ Hal Lindsey, *Israel and the Last Days*, (Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House, 1983), pp. 32-33

³⁵ Lindsey, *The Apocalypse Code*, pp. 42, 47.

³⁶ M.R. DeHann, *Revelation: 35 Simple Studies in the Major Themes of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1946), p. 148.

³⁷ Hal Lindsey, *There’s a New World Coming, A Prophetic Odyssey* (Santa Ana, California, Vision House, 1973); pp. 142-143.

³⁸ Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Are we Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, Tyndale House, 1999), pp. 190-192.

³⁹ Schuyler English (ed.), *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 143.

⁴⁰ Lindsey, *There’s a New World Coming*, p. 143.

Do these symbols refer to specific events, single happenings, dates or persons in history? For if they do, then we may well admit that we cannot interpret them. Because among the thousands of dates and events and persons in history that show certain traits of resemblance to the symbol in question, who is able to select the one and only date, event or person that was forecast by this particular symbol?'.⁴¹

How can we tell which interpretation is correct if we don't first allow scripture to interpret scripture within its historical context?

4. Enhanced Literalism

For ultra-literalists, sometimes the biblical text seems to need a little 'enhancing' to make their interpretation more obvious.

When Hal Lindsey interprets a Biblical text, he often adds words [in brackets] to purportedly guide us. Here are just a couple of examples. 'Therefore when you see the Abomination which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place [of the rebuilt Temple] (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.'⁴² Here the prophecy is assumed to refer to a supposedly rebuilt Temple, rather than to the desecration of Herod's Temple by the Romans and Zealots. His interpretation of Daniel 11:40-45 is similarly imaginative.

At the time of the end the King of the South [the Muslim Confederacy] will engage him [the False Prophet of Israel] in battle, and the King of the North [Russia] will storm out against him with chariots and cavalry and a great fleet of ships. He [the Russian Commander] will invade many countries and sweep through them like a flood. He will also invade the Beautiful Land [Israel]. Many countries will fall, but Edom, Moab and the leaders of Ammon [Jordan] will be delivered from his hand.⁴³

The perception of Russia as the 'End Times' enemy of Israel, is largely the product of Scofield's imaginative speculations. The passage which sparks most controversy is Ezekiel 38:15-16, in which Scofield takes 'Gog' and 'Magog' to refer to Russia. Notice also how Scofield enhances the text:

⁴¹ William Hendrikson, *More than Conquerors. An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (London, IVP, 1973), pp. 40-41.

⁴² Lindsey, *The Apocalypse Code*, p. 78.

⁴³ Lindsey, *Planet Earth 2000 AD*, pp. 182-183.

That the primary reference is to the northern (European) powers, headed up by Russia, all agree ... “Gog” is the prince, “Magog” his land. The reference to Meshech and Tubal (Moscow and Tobolsk) is a clear mark of identification.⁴⁴

Ultra-literalists have perpetuated the principle of ‘enhancing’ the text to reinforce their own interpretations. The myth that ‘Gog’ and ‘Magog’ refer to Russia, is repeated ad nauseam.⁴⁵ Tim LaHaye insists, ‘Etymologically, the Gog and Magog of Ezekiel 38 and 39 can only mean modern-day Russia.’⁴⁶ The theory has nevertheless been discredited by biblical scholars and etymologists alike.⁴⁷ John B. Taylor offers this critical assessment. ‘Interpretation needs to correspond to the contexts, and attempts to read too much into the incidentals of the prophecy betray the ingenuity of the speculator rather than the sobriety of the exegete.’⁴⁸

5. Arbitrary Literalism

Sooner or later, someone was bound to suggest that the United States of America appears in the Bible. Several authors have tried.⁴⁹ Lindsey appears to be one of the first. His reading of Revelation 12:14-17, ‘*The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert*’ takes the passage to refer to ‘some massive airlift’ transporting escaping Jews from the holocaust. ‘Since the eagle is the national symbol of the United States, it’s possible that the airlift will be made available by aircraft from the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.’⁵⁰ Lindsey does not explain why ‘the eagle’ should mean the United States, rather than Germany or the Czech Republic for instance. Nor does he explain why in Revelation it refers to modern aircraft, while in Exodus 19:4, Deuteronomy 32:11-12 and Isaiah 40:31 it does not. This is hardly evidence for a consistent ‘literal interpretation’.

⁴⁴ Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 883.

⁴⁵ Grant Jeffrey, *Messiah: War in the Middle East & the Road to Armageddon* (Toronto, Frontier Research Publications, 1991), pp. 98ff.

⁴⁶ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are we Living in the End Times?*, p. 86.

⁴⁷ Edwin Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier*, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1982), pp19-27; Ralph H. Alexander, *Ezekiel, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1986), p. 930.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243. ⁴⁸ John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (Leicester, IVP, 1969), pp.243-246

⁴⁹ Noah Hutchings, *U.S. in Prophecy*, (Oklahoma City, Hearthstone Publishing, 2000); Mark Hitchcock, *Is America in Prophecy?* (Portland, Oregon, Multnomah, 2002); Hal Lindsey, *Where is America in Prophecy?* video (Murrieta, California, Hal Lindsey Ministries, 2001).

⁵⁰ Hal Lindsey, *There’s a New World Coming* (New York, Vision, 1973), p. 185.

Mike Evans has caused an even bigger splash with his latest offering, *The American Prophecies*:

Is America in prophecy? Yes, it is. As a Middle East analyst and minister who has worked closely with leaders in that region for decades, I tended to be sceptical of attempts to come up with schemes to plug America into prophetic interpretations. I have often referred to such teachers as "Pop Prophecy Peddlers." But, after thousands of hours of research, I am totally convinced that America is found in prophecy, and I believe you will, too, after reading [my] book.⁵¹

Even the reviewer for Amazon observes that actual quotes from Scripture are rather sparse.⁵²

Controversially, Evans goes on to claim

September 11 would never have happened if America had fought the same bigotry in the 1990's rather than trying to appease it. Millions of Jews would be living today if anti-Semitism had not been ignored in the 1920s and 1930s. The Great Depression, as well as other American tragedies, happened because of America's pride and challenge to God Almighty's plan.⁵³

The danger with this kind of prophetic speculation is that it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is how D.S. Russell summarises the dilemma:

One rather frightening by-product of this process of interpretation is that it is easy to create the very situation which is being described so that the interpretation given brings about its own fulfilment. Russia, for example, is to be destroyed by nuclear attack – and scripture must be fulfilled! It needs little imagination to understand the consequences of such a belief, especially if held with deep conviction by politicians and the military who have the power to press the button and to execute the judgment thus prophesied and foreordained.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Mike D. Evans, *The American Prophecies: Ancient Scriptures reveal our nation's future* (New York, Warner, 2004), pp. 5-7.

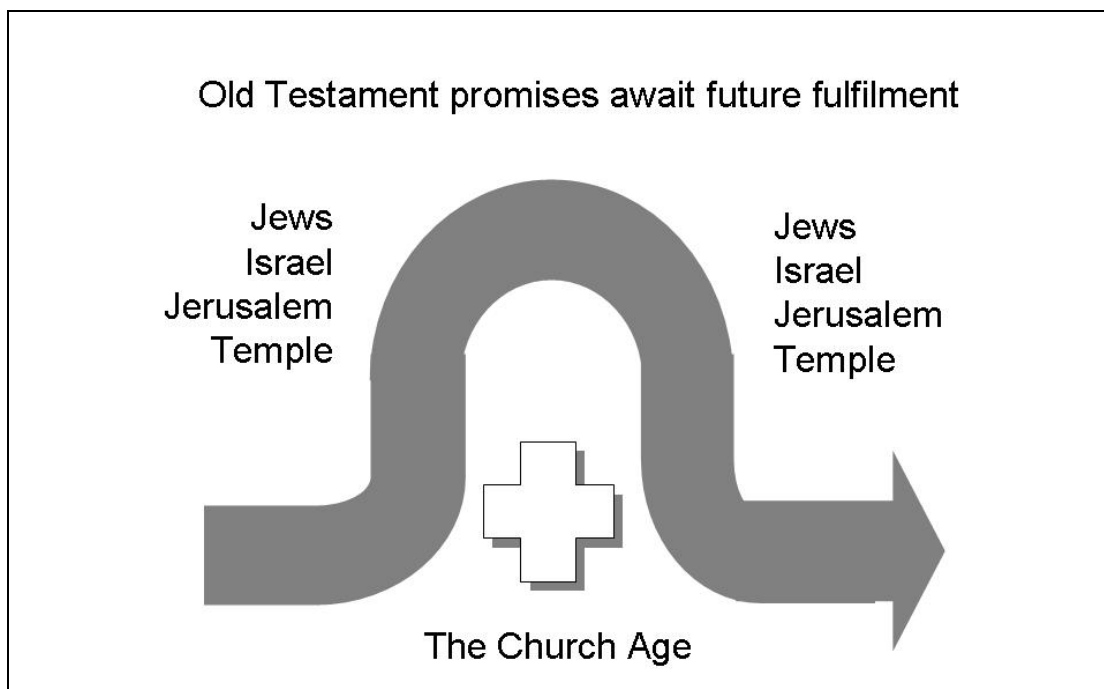
⁵² Gail Hudson, Editorial Review, Amazon, <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/044652252X/103-5325893-4368626?v=glance&n=283155> [Accessed August 2006]

⁵³ Evans, *The American Prophecies*, p. 26.

⁵⁴ D.S. Russell, *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 64. See also by the same author, *Prophecy and the Ancient Dream* (Peabody, Hendrickson, 1994).

Answering the Ultra-Literalists

The fundamental error these ultra-literalists make is they fail to recognise how Jesus and the Apostles reinterpreted the Old Testament. Instead texts are made to speak about present and future events almost as if the New Testament were never written. The implicit assumption is that somehow Old and New Testament run at times parallel into the future, the former speaking of Israel and the latter of the Church, almost independent of one another.



The problem with this kind of reasoning is that it actually contradicts the Bible. Jesus and the apostles tell us quite plainly that some parts of the Hebrew Scriptures have been fulfilled, annulled or superseded. In Mark 7, for example, the Pharisees challenged Jesus because his disciples didn't ceremonially wash their hands before eating. Jesus replied: 'nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body. In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean' (Mark 7:18-19).

In one sentence, Jesus annulled the restrictive Levitical laws that determined what food could and could not be eaten. Bacon was now kosher. God has to give the Apostle Peter a vision of unclean food and command him to eat it before he realises that in Christ there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile (Acts 10:11-15). When

Peter encounters Cornelius, a Gentile who has come to believe in Jesus he finally gets it. 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right' (Acts 10:34-35).

Until then, Peter had thought that the Jewish people enjoyed an exclusive and special relationship with God denied to Gentiles. As we shall see in the next chapter, through the death of Jesus, 'the people of God' now embraces all peoples. The Book of Hebrews explains the reasons for this:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Hebrews 1:1-2)

The writer goes on to explain that the Old Covenant with Israel is now obsolete because it has been superseded. 'By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear' (Hebrews 8:13). A little later the writer explains that Jesus came to do God's will. In so doing "He sets aside the first to establish the second." (Hebrews 10:9). His perfect atonement, made once for all, superseded and 'set aside' the need for any further animal sacrifices. This is because in the death of Jesus God has 'cancelled the code' (Colossians 2:14), 'destroyed the barrier' and 'abolished in his flesh the law' (Ephesians 2:14-15). This is why it is fundamental that we read the Bible with Christian eyes, and that we interpret the Old Covenant in the light of the New Covenant, not the other way round. The writer of Hebrews explains why the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World, made such a difference:

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. (Hebrews 10:1)

Paul draws out the implications of this for Christ followers, both Jewish and Gentile. 'Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival... or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.' (Colossians. 2:16-17)

The question is therefore not whether the promises of the Old Testament should be understood literally or allegorically. It is instead a question of whether they should be understood in terms of Old Covenant 'shadow' or in terms of New Covenant 'reality'. This is the basic error some Christians make when they apply Old Testament passages to the Jewish people and Israel today without interpreting them in the light of what the New Testament has to say.

If the Hebrew scriptures, just as much as the Christian scriptures, are indeed primarily concerned with telling the story of God's rescue mission - in sending his incarnate Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to be the Saviour of the world (Luke 24:27 & John 5:39), then the primary question we need to ask of any passage is surely this – how does it relate to God's purposes fully and finally revealed in Jesus?

The next session will explore the biblical concept of 'chosenness' and ask the question, who exactly are God's 'chosen people'?

Chapter Summary Points

1. We must interpret the Bible literally, contextually and progressively.
2. We must see how the New Testament helps to interpret the Old Testament.
3. We must take special care when interpreting prophecy and the apocalyptic scriptures.
4. We must avoid the temptation to allow contemporary events to determine our interpretation.
5. The ultimate question of any passage is this – how does it relate to God's purposes fully and finally revealed in Jesus?

Passages to Review

John 5:24-40; Colossians 2:8-19; 2 Timothy 3:10-4:5; Hebrews 1:1-14; Hebrews 4:1-13; Hebrews 10:1-25

Questions for Further Study

1. What are my presuppositions as I read the Bible?
2. Which books or writers have influenced or shaped them?
3. How was the coming of Jesus the fulfilment or postponement of the promises made to Israel?
4. How is Jesus central to the Bible message?
5. In what ways is the Old Testament a 'shadow' of the New Testament?
6. Which aspects of the Old Covenant are now 'obsolete' for Christians?