

Samuel M. Powell  
John A. Knight Bible and Theology Conference  
February 15-17, 2012

## Interpreting Eschatological Texts

The history of Christian eschatology shows us that Christians have had differing opinions and have interpreted the Bible in various ways. However, the diversity of opinions does not mean that faithful, responsible interpretation is impossible; all that it really requires is a proper orientation to the Bible. Here are a few considerations that will provide such an orientation.

### Interpreting the Bible according to Its Purpose

First of all, responsible interpretation honors the Bible's purpose. This purpose is stated clearly in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." The interpreter, then, must constantly keep in view the goal, which is "training in righteousness" and equipping God's people "for every good work."

Speculative end-times theology does not honor the Bible's stated purpose. It is true that much of this literature presents itself as a ministry of warning. By trying to discern the signs of the times, this literature gives the appearance of helping Christians prepare for the end. These goals seem praiseworthy. However, there is no evidence at all that end-times speculation promotes any of these goals. Endless guessing games about the identity of the Antichrist, silly calculations of numbers in the Bible, and bizarre interpretations of biblical symbols simply do not lead to more godly living or concern for the lost. On the contrary, people devoted to end-time speculation seem to spend a great deal of energy on arguing with each other. Speculative eschatology seems more like a fight among Christians over increasingly bizarre ideas than a means of promoting godliness.

It's not that there is something intrinsically wrong with thinking about the end of history or pondering the symbolism of Revelation. But the mental gymnastics involved in today's end-times industry doesn't really serve the Bible's purpose. All it does is serve the interests of curiosity. End-times speculation is popular for the same reason that crossword puzzles, sudoku and mystery novels are popular. Humans love to figure things out. To put it differently, we like puzzles and mysteries because they create a sense of tension (what does this mean? How is this going to turn out?) that gets resolved. That's why we feel a sense of frustration when we encounter a puzzle or a mystery novel that we can't finish. End-times theology similarly presents us with a great puzzle and clues to solving the puzzle. For it, the immediate future is like a jigsaw puzzle; every day another piece or two falls into place and reveals more of the total picture. In the meantime, it encourages us to interpret current events as pieces of the puzzle. The problem is that this find-the-missing-pieces approach to eschatology has little to do with the Christian life. It doesn't require faith; non-Christians can play this game just as well as Christians can. It doesn't increase godliness; there is no evidence that end-times fanatics are better Christians than the rest of us.

All that end-times speculation really does is to scratch our itch for knowledge about the future. And it doesn't even do that very well. As is well known, Christian history is filled with attempts to predict the end-times events. Nearly every century has seen some movement convinced that it held the key to understanding the end times. There is no reason to think that today's end-times specialists have any more insight than those of previous generations. The problem that all end-times theologians have is not a lack of insight or intelligence. The problem is that they interpret the Bible according to *their* purpose (which is to satisfy their curiosity) instead of interpreting according to the Bible's purpose. When we pay attention to the Bible's purpose—training in righteousness—we find that an obsessive interest in end-times matters is at best irrelevant. At worst, it may actually stand in the way of the Bible's purpose by distracting us from our true calling as

Christian disciples.

### Honoring the Original Setting of Biblical Texts

Besides honoring the Bible's overall purpose, we should honor the particular purposes of its individual texts. This requires us to attend to the original setting of these texts.

Take the book of Revelation as an example. It is common for Christians to interpret this book (or at least chapters 4-22) as pertaining strictly to the future—*our* future. And, it is appropriate for us to interpret Revelation as speaking to us and our future. But we don't get the full impact of Revelation unless we hear its message for its first century readers and hearers. It's important to remember that Revelation is above all a letter to seven churches. These churches, at the end of the first century, had some problems and Revelation addresses those problems. The chief issue for Revelation is the churches' need to remain faithful to God and to resist compromise with the Roman empire. *Responsible interpretation has to honor Revelation's original purpose.* It's important to see that Revelation is speaking to first century Christians about first century concerns.

This means that when we read about the beast that rises from the sea (13:1) and the other beast from the land (13:11) and the great prostitute (chapter 17), we should ask, What was the message for the seven churches? It is critically important to keep in mind the following point: If Revelation was to truly be a word of warning and encouragement to the seven churches, the message of Revelation had to make sense to its first readers. It had to be addressing matters of concern to them. So how would the first century readers understand the symbols of the beast from the sea and the land beast and the great prostitute? They would understand them as symbols of the Roman empire. If Revelation was to function as a message of warning and encouragement to the seven churches, then it must have spoken of realities that were threatening them. Revelation wouldn't be a very effective warning or encouragement for its first readers if it referred to events

thousands of years in their future. The first readers of Revelation received it as a prophetic word because it spoke of matters that concerned them deeply and addressed issues that they faced every day. Revelation for them was not a book of mysteries. Even the number 666 could be understood—that is why Revelation urged its readers to use wisdom and to understand the reference (13:18). Revelation expected its readers to understand its symbols. But they could understand them only because they symbolized realities that they experienced every day. As a general point, we may state that every prophetic text was oriented to the immediate time-horizon and situation of its readers.

In its original setting, Revelation spoke a word of warning and encouragement in the context of the Roman empire: encouragement from the anticipated destruction of the empire, warning about the threat of cultural assimilation. Revelation's driving concern is that the churches were getting too comfortable with life in the empire—hence chapter two's warnings about fornication and eating food sacrificed to idols, which are probably directed to Christians participating in the imperial cult or other pagan festivities. Hence also the warning against Laodicea for thinking itself rich, a warning that expresses alarm about Christians being too intimately integrated into the economic structure of the empire (chapter 3) in contrast to those who would not be able to buy and sell for fear of receiving the mark of the beast (chapter 13)—probably a reference to Christians being unwilling to handle imperial coins, with their pagan symbols.

Responsible interpretation of Revelation today should begin with the way in which it functioned in the first century. Revelation was concerned to warn its readers to avoid every trace of cultural assimilation to the empire. Interpretation today should begin with that fact and then find ways to allow Revelation to perform the same function in our contexts. This hermeneutical strategy involves understanding how Revelation functioned in the first century and then asking how it can perform the same function in our cultures today. Since the purpose of Revelation was to warn

against cultural assimilation and to encourage resistance to a demonic political structure, we should use Revelation to help us locate points of destructive assimilation and to discern demonic political powers in our situation today. It should lead us to ask, In what ways have we compromised the worship of God alone? In what ways have we cooperated with demonic political systems in our day? These sorts of questions will allow us to honor Revelation's original purpose and also allow it to fulfill that purpose for us.

---

### Rethinking the Nature of History

Another thing that can help us better understand eschatological texts is a view of history that makes sense of prophetic texts.

People often assume that books like Revelation describes a future that is fixed. It's as though history were a film whose script was written in advance and then filmed exactly according to the script. Many people think of history as though, like a script, it specifies, far in advance, exactly what will happen and when it will happen. History in this view is simply a matter of performing the script. Revelation and other prophetic books are, so to speak, a portion of the script that we've been allowed to read. Reading these books is like reading a film's script before the actors perform it. Once we read the script, we know just what the actors will do as they go through the script.

To change the metaphor, many people think of history as a huge calendar. On this calendar God long ago filled in events on every date. For example, in the beginning God decreed that, on my birth date in 1956 God filled in an event on the big cosmic calendar: I would be born. For the year A.D. 70 God decreed the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans and placed those events on the calendar. In the same way, God has decreed all the events of the future, including end-times events. Each event will happen when its day on the calendar comes around. Revelation describes those future events and provides some details about the calendar. Those who study carefully can, it is

thought, figure out parts of the calendar and thus know when the end-times events will happen.

There is one big problem with viewing history as a script and a calendar—these metaphors make it impossible to make sense of eschatological texts. Take, for example, the book of Jonah. God commissions Jonah to declare that “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4). However, the Ninevites unexpectedly repented. Did God go forward with the destruction of Nineveh? Was this destruction already part of an unchangeable script? Was it already entered onto the cosmic calendar? Was God bound to destroy Nineveh in spite of their repentance? No. On the contrary, the course of Nineveh’s history changed because of their actions. This tells us that history is not locked into place. It is not a preordained script or calendar. Instead, history is shaped and changed according to what human beings do.

In the book of Jeremiah, this belief is stated clearly. Using the example of a potter who reworks a lump of clay into a new vessel, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah:

I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation . . . turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it (Jer. 18:7-8).

This passage directly states that the future, including Israel’s future, is not scripted in advance.

Whatever God’s plans are, they can be changed according to humankind’s response to God’s word.

Accordingly, there is no reason to assume that Revelation describes events that are already scripted. They are not already entered onto God’s calendar, each with an assigned and unchangeable date. Instead, we should think of Revelation as describing a recurrent pattern in history. In this pattern, God’s people find themselves threatened by a hostile cultural and political system. This system demands everyone’s allegiance and make itself an object of worship. In this situation, God’s people are faced with an either-or choice. They must choose to worship God alone or to compromise with the political system. The book of Revelation speaks powerfully to Christians of every century because it describes a pattern that happens repeatedly in human history. Since we

can be sure that this pattern will repeat itself in the future, we know that Revelation does describe the future. But it doesn't describe only the future and certainly not a future whose details and dates are fixed. Instead it describes every situation in history when God's people are threatened by a demonic political system.

### Conclusion

In the Bible's eschatological texts the church possesses a resource of incalculable value. These texts mediate the word of God to us in powerful and compelling ways; however, we can blunt the force of the prophetic witness if we approach these texts with a wrong orientation. The task of theological hermeneutics is in part to clear away wrong orientations so that these texts can speak to us with power. To this end, it is vital that we 1) read these texts according to the Bible's overall purposes, 2) honor their original setting and function, 3) discern how they can perform that same function in our situation, and 4) approach the Bible with an appropriate view of history.