Bite Size Bible Study

Prophecy Part 4 #263 By Lee Logue

Apocalyptic Prophecy

Apocalyptic prophecy can have literal, symbolic or cultural meanings. These prophecies may refer to real (past, current or futuristic) events, powers, or hopes.

Apocalyptic literature refers broadly to a group of books written between ~200 B.C. and ~100 A.D. Beginning with the persecution of the Jews by the Greco-Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes (167 B.C.E.) and ending with the destruction of the Jewish nation by the Roman emperor Hadrian (135 A.D.).

This form communicates primarily through symbolic language. Prophets receive visions of truths via surreal imagery, delivered by heavenly messengers. These messages are imaged by things like monsters, numbers, cosmic signs and/or heavenly scenes. These images often represent real-world empires, spiritual forces, and historical eras. All this is to contrast between a corrupt, present evil age and the coming, kingdom of God.

These were written to assure suffering people that God remains sovereign and evil will ultimately be defeated. A major role of the Apocalyptic writers was to explain why the righteous suffered and why the Kingdom of God was yet in future, when He would intervene and judge the world to establish righteousness.

Apocalyptic writers did not generally speculate about the end-time as coming in some far-off time, because that would have held little meaning for the people to whom the prophecy was written. These writings were produced to encourage Jewish resistance to the encroachments of paganism, and the then corrupt governments.

The difficulty of our understanding of Apocalyptic literature is its symbolistic language. To the early readers this language, thoughts and symbolism would have been familiar. Our problem is that we know very little of the culture of that time and we live and operate in a widely different culture. The images that they would have recognized, would differ radically from our view of the same image, due mainly to cultural and educational differences.

Terrifying beasts, heads, horns and dragons fill the books of Daniel and Revelation, making them some of the most controversial and least understood books in the Bible. Unfortunately, many students and even scholars of the Bible read their own ideas into these symbols and images. Considering this confusion, it is vital for us to understand the genre, and/or literary style, of these portions of Scripture.

When reading this kind of prophecy, we need to stop before we ask, “What event does this represent in our modern times?” Our first questions would better be “How does this symbol function in the passage?” And “How did the original people understand this symbol?” And, as always, by reading the passage in context with what is mentioned before and after.

After these tests are made on the scripture, we need to determine what are the symbolic meanings, first in the culture that it was given. What is happening in the history of that time and how that culture would have understood this prophecy. Look for clues as to whether it is only for that time or a warning for future times – or both.

In Daniel 7 we read of his dream of four beasts. Carefully read this passage and try NOT to use your interpretation of it. After you have considered it carefully as to what it says and what it does NOT say, I invite you to read Daniel’s interpretation of the dream.

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying in bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream.

*Daniel said: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. **3** Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.*

“The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it.

“And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, ‘Get up and eat your fill of flesh!’

“After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule.

“After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns.

“While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a human being and a mouth that spoke boastfully.

“As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as

snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.

"Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. ***12*** *(The other beasts had been stripped of their authority but were allowed to live for a period of time.)*

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. Daniel 7:1-14 NIV

What stands out to you? What feelings do the images inspire? What preconceptions do you have about their meaning?

Now read the rest of the chapter in your Bible for Daniel's understanding of the dream. Daniel 7:15-28.

Daniel's visions here are instructive because he interprets them himself, even though the interpretation leaves a lot of mystery. We know, for instance, that these are not literally four giant beasts emerging from the ocean's depths: they are four human kings. But who are they? When are they coming? And what does "a time, times, and half a time" mean?

This is where we must resist the temptation to guess. It is important to realize that the symbolism in these visions is not simply a form of 'code' that we can crack. The symbols used have deep cultural roots so that, to those who are aware of them, they have a significance and 'a feel' that goes beyond the intellectual level. The cultural significance of the symbols gives the visions additional meanings that are lost on those who are unaware of them and who therefore concentrate simply on the surface meaning of the symbols.

That leaves us with an invitation to deepen our study of God's Word, and engage in some study of the Hebrew culture.

Daniel in his book and John's message in Revelation were to reinforce the belief in the Messiah and to God's continued activity in the workings of history. They tell us that we don't need to depend on some saving event in the future, because God has already acted decisively in history.

Prophecy is to stir hearers to repentance, while the principal aim of apocalyptic literature is to encourage believers. Prophecy and apocalyptic literature share a common goal – to point people to God and encourage them in their faithfulness.

The most important message of Apocalyptic Prophecy is not precise symbolic meaning and definitions of monsters, numbers, signs, and heavenly scenes. The urgent message is that Jesus has not forgotten His people and continues to work with them through the Holy Spirit. When the time is right, He will set up His kingdom to transform this world back into the Eden that He originally created it to be.

Reflection and Application

- Which symbols are interpreted within the passage itself?
- Which remain uncertain?
- What emotions does the vision create?
  - for you
  - for Daniel
- What does the passage suggest about human power, in contrast to God's kingdom?
- Were your preconceptions changed by Daniel's report?
- What part of Daniel's interpretation changes your interpretation of the dream?
- How do you plan to avoid turning biblical symbols into speculation?

Symbolic does not mean fake,
and literal does not always mean obvious.

Apocalyptic prophecy communicates truth through images that require careful consideration.