

Note by James Bruggeman: We first published this article in our magazine, *Kingdom Journal* (no longer in print) back in 1996. The article originally comes from a work from a century prior to that. I wrote in 1996:

H. Grattan Guinness, Doctor of Divinity, was an outstanding 19th-century British Bible teacher and expositor. He understood the Anglo-Saxon identity of Israel and he was especially knowledgeable in the area of prophetic interpretation. *The Approaching End of the Age: Viewed in Light of History, Prophecy, and Science* was first published in 1878 and his final, 13th edition was printed in 1897. The following excerpt is from an edition edited by E. H. Home and published in London in 1918. The excerpt is from Part II: Progressive Interpretation.

We, who live a century after Dr. Guinness and are more accustomed to sound-bites and pictures as opposed to prose, may find reading the long and complex sentences to be difficult. Nonetheless, we strongly encourage the reader to plow through it several times to obtain the rich understanding of prophecy set forth by this insightful saint. All emphasis is in the original unless otherwise noted. We have deleted the footnotes and have left unchanged the variant British spellings.

[On How To Understand Bible Prophecy](#)

The Approaching End of the Age

We have seen that God has been pleased to reveal the future to men only by degrees; that both in the number of subjects on which the light of prophecy has been permitted to fall, and in the clearness and fullness of the light granted on each, there has been constant and steady increase, from the pale and solitary ray of Eden, to the clear widespread beams of Daniel, and to the rich glow of the Apocalypse. We now proceed to show that human comprehension of Divine prophecy has also been by degrees; and that in certain cases it was evidently intended by God to be so. Light to understand the prophetic Word is as much a Divine gift as that Word itself. The sovereignty of God was exercised in the selection of the matters to be revealed by prophecy, the time of the revelation, and the individuals to whom, and through whom, it should be communicated. And it is equally exercised in the determination of the degree to which, and the time at which, the true meaning of certain prophecies shall be unveiled, as well as in the selection of the individuals to whom the interpretation shall be given. "The Lord hath not only spoken by dreams and visions of old, but He speaketh also every day, even as often as He enlighteneth the minds of His servants, that they may be

able to search out the hidden truth of His word, and bring it forth unto the world."

Prophecy, being essentially a *revelation* of the future, is of course designed to be understood; but it does not follow that it is designed to be understood immediately on its being given, nor by all who become acquainted with its announcements. The Most High has various ends to answer in predicting the future; and though we may not *always* be able to discern His reasons for making revelations before He intends them to be comprehended, yet in some cases they are sufficiently clear. In foretelling, for instance, the first Advent of His Son, God might have been pleased to predict its *results*, in as clear and unmistakable a manner as He predicted the event itself. But plainly to have foretold the rejection and crucifixion of the Lord Jesus by Israel, would have been to interfere with the free agency of man; it must either have had the effect of preventing (the crucifixion of Christ, or else have given the Jews a valid excuse for killing the Prince of Life.

Not to have foretold the actual results at all, on the other hand, would have been to deprive Christianity of one of its main pillars of evidence, the fact that the events of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth *were predicted* centuries before they took place; it would have been to give some ground for present Jewish unbelief. The alternative was to *reveal* the suffering and death of Christ, but to reveal them in *such a manner* that "both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with (he Gentiles and the people of Israel," when banded together to carry out their own wicked wills, were quite unconscious that they were therein doing what His hand and His counsel had "determined before to be done." This secured the good, and avoided the evil; the predictions were full and definite, and yet capable of being misunderstood; as a fact, they were not understood even by the disciples at first, nor are they understood to this day by the Jewish nation. They ought to have known Him, but "because they knew Him not, *nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every Sabbath day*, they fulfilled them in condemning Him. Thus it is possible to possess prophecies of certain events, to read them diligently all our lives, and yet not to understand their fulfillment, even when it takes place before our own eyes. This is sinful unbelief; but there is a temporary inability to understand Divine predictions, which is entirely free from sin, which is inevitable, and indeed ordained of God.

The Book of Daniel is one of the fullest revelations of the future contained in the Bible; it is unequalled for the variety and minuteness of its historical detail, and for its breadth of range, both chronological and geographical. It is closed by this remarkable injunction (which applies, however, *mainly to the last prophecy in the book*): "But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, *even to the time of the end*; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased...none of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand." This

passage seems to warrant three inferences of importance.

1. That though God for certain reasons saw fit to give this revelation of the future to Daniel at a certain date. *He did not intend it to be understood for centuries;* since, whatever may be the exact limits of the *'time of the end,'* it could not include *more* than the course of this dispensation, and the *commencement* of this dispensation was several centuries distant, when Daniel wrote.

2. That even when in the lapse of ages the meaning of this prophecy should become apparent to some, even when "knowledge " should "be increased " and the wise understand, it was the will of God that it should still remain a dark mystery to others, that "none of the wicked should understand."

3. And thirdly, that the comprehension or ignorance of this prophecy, when the time for its being understood at all arrived, would depend rather on the *moral* than on the intellectual state of those who should study it. The *wise* alone should understand it; the *wicked* should not. The first of these inferences is confirmed by 1 Peter i. 10: "The prophets inquired and searched diligently... what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed that *not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister* the things ... the angels desire to look into." Peter here alludes evidently to this very passage of Daniel who "inquired and searched diligently" about the *time* of the events revealed to him ("O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things?"), but he lays it down as a general principle, applicable to other prophets as well, that when they "testified beforehand, of the sufferings of Christ and the glories that should follow," they ministered *not* unto themselves but unto us. That is, they revealed not a near future, interesting to themselves and their brethren of the Jewish economy especially; but a more distant future, things pertaining to another dispensation altogether, and *not designed to be understood till that dispensation dawned.*

The second of these inferences, that even when light was vouchsafed it would be partial, is confirmed by the words of our Lord, "it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given." "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes."

The third inference, as to the moral character of those who receive prophetic light, is also confirmed by His words, "if any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine." It is "scoffers walking after their own lusts" who are represented as saying "where is the promise of His Coming?" and as being "willingly ignorant" of the purpose of God, as expressed in type and in prophecy. It is evident therefore that there may be such a thing as a blameless ignorance of the meaning of prophecy, as well as a blameworthy and guilty ignorance of it. The prophets

were not to be blamed for not understanding what God did not intend them to understand. Jews and infidels now are to be blamed for a guilty unwillingness to perceive the accomplishment of Old Testament prophecies in New Testament events.

Take as an instance of blameless ignorance, that of the apostles, even after Pentecost, as to the calling of the Gentiles. This, though in one sense a hidden mystery (Eph. iii. 9), had as a matter of fact, long been a revealed purpose of God. It had been foretold in type, in prophecy, and in promise, so that in Romans xiv. the apostle makes no less than four quotations in succession, to prove that *it was written*, and in Acts xv. James admits that "to this agree the words of the prophets." It was revealed, but not designed to be understood till a certain time, and then a special vision was sent to Peter, and a special revelation on the subject granted to Paul (Eph. iii. 3), to prepare their minds for the fulfillment of these long extant predictions, and to induce them to preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ

Take as an instance of guilty ignorance, in the face of actual fulfillment, Jewish misunderstanding respecting the prophecies of the rejection and death of Messiah the Prince. These events were, as we have seen, distinctly revealed; He was to be "despised and rejected of men," "led as a lamb to the slaughter," "cut off yet not for Himself; but the revelation was understood neither by "wise" nor "wicked" for a time. When the event had fulfilled and interpreted these predictions, the risen Saviour had still to address, to the two disciples going to Emmaus, that rebuke which assumes both the fact of the revelation and of their duty to understand it "O fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken; ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into His glory?"

To this day, those who have their minds still blinded through Jewish unbelief, find "a veil untaken away in the reading of the Old Testament," and cannot perceive the accomplishment of the Messianic prophecies in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Our Lord Himself revealed much that He knew His disciples did not and could not understand at the time; though He also withheld much that they were unprepared to receive. "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." It was not till after He was risen from the dead, that they caught the deep meaning of those pregnant words. "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." "The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."

Even after the resurrection had taken place, we read, "as yet they knew not the Scriptures, that He should rise again from the dead." They were familiar with the words, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hades, neither wilt Thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption"; but, even standing beside the empty sepulchre, the true *meaning* of the words failed to penetrate the mists of

Jewish prejudice, which darkened their minds. After Pentecost, however, when Peter had not only the inspired prophecy, but the inspiring Spirit to interpret it, how lucid and authoritative his explanation of these words: "men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day.... He being a prophet, spake of the resurrection of Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, neither *His* flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses."

On the same occasion he asserts that the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit, at which his audience were ignorantly marvelling, was the fulfillment of Joel's familiar but little understood prediction: "*this is that* which was spoken by the prophet Joel." How did he know it? The "untoward generation" whom he addressed did not dream that they were witnessing the fulfillment of a Divine prophecy. Their account of the matter was very different; "these men are full of new wine." This proves that *spiritual enlightenment is required for the perception of the fulfillment of prophecy, even in startling events which may be taking place before our eyes*

It is not too much to assume that the Apocalypse of St. John was also designed to be progressively understood; that it forms no exception to the general rule, but was given *to reveal the future by degrees, and only in proportion as the understanding of it might conduce to the accomplishment of God's purposes, and the good of His people*. Analogy forbids us to suppose that such a prophecy could be clear all at once, to those to whom it was first given, and it equally forbids the supposition that it was never to be understood or interpreted at all. Can we not perceive reasons why God should in this case act as He had so often acted before, and progressively reveal its meaning? and can we not also perceive means by which such a progressive revelation of the meaning of this prophecy, might, as time rolled on, be made?

Let it be granted for a moment (as it shall we hope be subsequently proved) that this prophecy contains an outline of all the great events of interest to the Church of God, which were to happen prior to the second Advent of Christ, as well as of that Advent itself, and subsequent events; and that not only are the events themselves predicted, but that the actual chronology of some of them is predicted also, the duration for instance of the antichristian apostasy for a period of 1260 years. Supposing this to be the case, it is clear that God, though giving the prophecy in the apostolic age, cannot have *intended* it to be fully understood for many subsequent generations. It was the express will of Christ that the Church should be ever waiting and watching for her Lord, uncertain as to the time of His return. The Holy Spirit could therefore no more have *revealed clearly* to the early Church 1260 years of apostasy prior to the return of Christ, than He could have revealed a thousand years of Millennial blessedness; which as we have previously

shown would have been inconsistent with His purpose.

Must we therefore conclude: "*this then cannot be the character of the Apocalypse; the same argument that proves that the Millennium must succeed the Advent, proves also that no long period of apostasy can be predicted as to precede it*" ? No! but we conclude hence, that if such a period be revealed, it must be in a mysterious form, not intended or adapted for comprehension at the time. If an apostasy of such duration be predicted, it must be *so* predicted as that the true, full, meaning of the prediction should not be obvious for centuries, and yet be evident, as soon as altered circumstances should render the understanding of the prediction desirable, for the glory of God, and the good of the Church. A consideration of the problem shows, that the very same end that was to be attained by the Church's ignorance of the true nature and duration of the apostasy in early ages, will in these last days be better attained by her acquaintance with both; and will lead us to admire the wisdom and the grace of Him, who in this prophecy secured for her that ignorance while it was best, and laid up in store for her that knowledge, against the time when it should, in its turn, be most beneficial.

"Known unto God are all His works from the beginning"; the real history and length of this dispensation were of course not only foreseen, but foreordained of God. For certain reasons Christ never mentioned them to His disciples, and the Holy Ghost revealed but little about them to Peter and Paul. What were those reasons? To keep alive loving expectation of the Lord's second Coming, to encourage believers to constant watchfulness, to cheer them by a present hope, and to weaken the power of temptation to earthliness and worldliness, by stamping on all things here uncertainty and evanescence. The first generation of believers took all the promises of His speedy return literally, and lived in the hope that they might remain to the blessed moment, and not sleep but be changed. [Note by James Bruggeman: That very important fact which we underlined, and the question of the dating of the book of Revelation, are discussed at some length in our recent two-part message, *Bible Versions/Jubilee: Number of Bible Books and Their Order*. (Cassette # 278 & 279. CD \$12 ppd. Cassettes: \$10 ppd.)]

The Holy Ghost did not deceive them to any considerable extent; in one case, where the due balance of patience and hope had been in measure lost, express revelations of intervening events were given to restore that balance, but no *periods* were assigned to these events (2 Thess. ii.); the hope was left vivid as ever, if not quite so close at hand. But this *hope was born of inexperience*; blessed and beautiful as it was, it was destined to wither away and be disappointed. The cold logic of facts proved it ill-founded and mistaken, but did not render it the less sanctifying [Editor's emphasis] and cheering: blessed be God, there is another kind of hope,

born of patience and experience, and founded not on ignorance, but on knowledge. This hope dawned on the Church, as the other sank beneath the horizon, and has gradually brightened ever since; and it is a hope that shall "not make ashamed."

Now it is clear, that had God revealed the duration of the long antichristian apostasy to the early Church, they would at once have been deprived of their Advent hope. What help or consolation could the sufferers and martyrs of early days have found, in gazing forward through well-nigh two thousand years of pagan and papal persecutions, of decay and death, and spiritual corruption? The appalling prospect was in mercy hidden from their view, foreshortened almost to a point; and the Advent which was to close it all, was the grand object presented to their gaze. How could they have watched for an Advent two thousand years off? What present practical influence could it have exerted over their lives? Their ignorance was evidently best for them, and God in mercy did not remove it. They held in their hands the prophecy, big with the mournful secret; but they guessed not its burden; concluding that the "I come quickly" of their absent Lord, meant "quickly" according to human calculations. To leave them in their ignorance was the gracious purpose of God, and His motive was their comfort and sanctification.

But it is equally clear that for us the case is reversed. A knowledge of the limits of the great antichristian apostasy, would not now *deprive us of hope*, but the very contrary; in fact we need some such revelation to sustain our faith and hope to the end of the long delay; without the chronological data afforded us by the prophecies of Daniel and John, *we* should be in a position of fearful temptation to doubt and despair. Each century of delay would increase the heart-sickness of hope deferred. Now one generation of His saints is as dear to God as another; we may be sure He did not secure the holiness and happiness of the early Church, at the expense of ours, nor conceal what might be a blessing to us, because the knowledge might not have been a blessing to them. No! He provided some better thing for us, than that we should float uncertainly on the stream of time, not knowing whether we were any nearer to the future than to the past Advent of Christ. He *revealed*, but revealed *in a mystery*, all the main events of this dispensation, and He revealed them in just such a way as best to revive in these last times a "patient waiting for Christ."

And if it be asked *how* this could be done, since inspiration has passed away, and apostolic explanations can no longer be enjoyed, we reply, by the same means by which the interpretation of earlier prophecies was given to Peter, *by their fulfillment before our eyes*, and by the teaching of the Holy Ghost, enabling us so to discern the true nature of events, as *to recognise the correspondence between them and the long familiar predictions*. When the mind free from prejudice, a

comparison of inspired prediction and historic fulfillment is sufficient to show the relation between them. The future, which for the sake of the early Church required to be hidden under a veil of mystery, was of course only the future of this dispensation. No prolonged interval was to be interposed between the Church and her hope,— the return of her Lord; but the same concealment was not requisite as regards *subsequent* events and their duration.

If then the principle for which we contend be true, there will be found an air of mystery about the times and seasons mentioned *prior to the Advent vision*, and an absence of it subsequently. This is exactly what we do find. There are eight passages in the earlier part of the book, where periods of time are named by phrases which are obviously uncommon, *not* the ordinary or natural mode of designating the period they seem to suggest, but all having an air of mystery. In the vision which immediately follows that of the Advent, on the contrary, a period is six times over mentioned in *the simplest possible form*, "a thousand years." Why this difference? The real length of *this age* of sin and suffering was to be hidden for a time; but there was no need to hide the real length of the blessed age of purity, peace, and joy which is to succeed it.

We conclude then, that since God has constantly acted on this principle of gradually revealing the meaning of His own predictions, both in the Old and New Testaments; since we can see special reasons why He should do so, and a simple means by which, in this case. He could do so; and since the construction of the book affords internal evidence of such an intention; — that there is the strongest presumption that the *meaning* of the apocalyptic prophecies was designed to become clear to the Church *only by degrees*. We conclude, that though the Apocalypse was not, like the visions of Daniel, to be supplemented by later revelations, and understood only in the light reflected back from these, yet it was to receive explanation from other sources, so that while it was a mystery in the early ages of the Church, it should unfold its own meaning gradually, during the course of the dispensation, and become increasingly clear and consequently increasingly precious, in the last days.

We conclude also, that like Daniel's predictions and all other prophecy, it is not intended *ever* to become *self-evidently clear*, that even when understood by "the wise," its meaning will still be hidden from the world, and that consequently the true interpretation, whenever it shall arise, will have many adversaries, and be rejected with contempt by "the wicked," even while it is being fulfilled before their eyes. These legitimate conclusions will lead us to expect *the primitive interpretation of the premillennial visions of the Apocalypse to be the least correct*; though it might be, probably would be, right as to events *subsequent* to this dispensation. They prepare us to weigh with candour the interpretations of later times, and forbid us to reject, on the ground of novelty,

any view that attaches to these mysterious predictions a meaning worthy of Divine inspiration, and calculated to accomplish good in the Church, even though it may have been unknown to the Fathers, and even though it may be rejected and ridiculed by multitudes. These conclusions will lead us to expect the true interpretation to be found only after many centuries of the Church's history had rolled away, when the bright hope of early days had quite died out; and to *have the effect of* quickening the Church afresh to the patient waiting for Christ.

But we should expect also that the true clue to the mysteries of the Apocalypse, once discovered, would not be immediately applied correctly; so that it would never practically have the effect of leading the Church to think the Lord's return a very distant event, however much it might, theoretically considered, seem likely to do so. In other words, that God would not suddenly illuminate these predictions and so translate the Church at a bound from perfect ignorance to perfect knowledge of the fore-appointed length and character of this dispensation; but that He would *enlighten her darkness gradually*, by leaving a measure of obscurity till towards the close; would allow her still, as at the first, to expect the great consummation long before its predestined date, and sustain her by revealing fresh grounds of hope, based on more accurate apprehension of the truth, as each erroneous anticipation was disappointed by the event.

We shall consequently expect to find every generation of saints, after the true key to the book has once been found, *making advances on the last*, and the *discrepancies existing between their views will not stumble us, or lead us to reject them all as ungrounded*. We shall trace the vein of truth growing wider and deeper; we shall watch the ever brightening dawn of the true light; and far from deeming this gradual discovery of the meaning of the apocalyptic prophecies, with its consequent inevitable discrepancies, a proof that they have no meaning, or none worth seeking, we shall accept it as a proof of the purpose of God to act, still, as ever, on the principle of progressive revelation.

Now on reviewing the history of apocalyptic interpretation we find that the early Christians were right in their interpretation of the visions which follow the second Advent; they understood correctly, that which it was not the purpose of God to *conceal* from them. *All the primitive expositors and teachers were premillennialists*. With the exception of Origen, who spiritualized everything, and of a few who denied the inspiration and apostolicity of the book, all the early Fathers up to the time of Constantine, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Victorinus, Methodius, Lactantius, held that the first resurrection of Revelation xx. was a literal resurrection, prior to a personal reign of Christ on earth. The expectation of a spiritual millennium, to precede the Coming of the Lord, grew up only in the more corrupt ages of the Church, after her union with the world in the days of Constantine.

As to the previous visions of the book, — the commentaries which have appeared may be arranged in three distinct classes, as Preterist, Futurist, or Presentist. [Today, more common terms for "Presentist" are "Historicist" or "Progressive Historical." -Editor] The first or Preterist scheme considers these prophecies to have been fulfilled in the downfall of the Jewish nation and the old Roman empire, limiting their range thus to the first six centuries of the Christian era, and making Nero Antichrist. This scheme originated with the Jesuit Alcazar towards the end of the sixteenth century; it has been held and taught under various modifications by Grotius, Hammond, Bousset, Eichhom, and other German commentators, Moses Stuart, and Dr. Davidson. Moses Stuart bases it on the denial of the very principle for which we are contending; he takes it for granted that the writer had an "*immediate* object in view when he wrote the book," and that the *original readers of the Apocalypse understood it*; and argues that it must therefore treat of such matters as they could understand.

But his only *reason* for this assertion is that *he cannot conceive* how "a sensible man" could write a book "which would be unintelligible to those to whom it was addressed"; and he proceeds to admit that there is no *evidence* extant to show that the early Christians understood it. Further on he says that "very soon after this age, it was *so* interpreted that grave obstacles were raised to the reception of the book as canonical." And looking back from the end of the eighth century, after reviewing all the previous expositors of Revelation, he says, "we find that no real and solid advances were yet made" towards a satisfactory explanation of the book. Thus he *assumes* that its first readers were intended to understand it, and assumes that they did do so, while admitting that there is not the slightest proof to support either assumption, and that the light if ever possessed was very quickly lost. His work evinces much learning but little spirituality, and treats the Apocalypse too much as a merely human production.

The second or Presentist [Historicist - Editor] interpretation is that historic Protestant view of these prophecies, which considers them to predict the great events to happen in the world and in the Church, from St. John's time to the Coming of the Lord; which sees in the Church of Rome, and in the Papacy, the fulfillment of the prophecies of Babylon and of the Beast, and which interprets the times of the Apocalypse on the year-day system. This view originated about the eleventh century, with those who even then began to protest against the growing corruptions of the Church of Rome. It grew among the Waldenses, Wickliffites, and Hussites, into a consistent scheme of interpretation, and was embraced with enthusiasm, and held, with intense conviction of its truth, by the Reformers of the sixteenth century. In their hands it became a powerful and formidable weapon, to attack and expose the mighty apostasy, with which they were called to do battle. From this time it spread with a

rapidity that was astonishing, so that ere long it was received as a self-evident and fundamental truth among Protestant Churches everywhere.

It nerved the Reformers of England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, and Sweden, and the martyrs of Italy and Spain; it decided the conscientious and timid adherents of the Papacy to cross the Rubicon, and separate from the so-called Catholic Church; and it has kept all the Reformed Churches since from attempting reunion with Rome. [Unfortunately, now in the late 20th century, with the prominence of the Futurist view, we are witnessing renewed attempts by many in so-called "Protestantism" to reunite with the Great Whore of Rome. Modern, corrupted Bible versions are helping this trend mightily. - Editor]

It [Presentism - Progressive Historicism] was held and taught by Joachim Abbas, Walter Brute, Luther, Zwingli, Melancthon, Calvin, and all the rest of the Reformers; by Bullinger [This is Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75), not the Bullinger of *The Companion Bible* — Editor], Bale, and Foxe; by Brightman and Mede, Sir Isaac and Bishop Newton, Vtringa, Daubuz, and Whiston, as well as by Faber, Cunningham, Frerc, Birks, and Elliott [Dr. E. B. Elliott See note at end of this article. —Editor]; no two of these may agree on all questions of minor detail, but they agree on the grand outline, and each one has added more or less to the strength and solidity of the system, by his researches. It met, of course, with intense and bitter opposition from the [Roman Catholic] Church it branded as Babylon, and the power it denounced as Antichrist, and to this day it is rejected by all who in any way maintain or defend them.

The third or Futurist view is that which teaches that the prophetic visions of Revelation, from chapters iv. to xix., prefigure *events still wholly future*, and not to take place till just at the close of this dispensation. It supposes an instant plunge of this apocalyptic prophecy into the distant future of the consummation. This view gives the literal Israel a large place in the Apocalypse, and expects a personal infidel Antichrist, who shall bitterly oppress the saints for three years and a half, near the date of the second Advent, thus interpreting *time* as well as much else in the Apocalypse, *literally*. This view is, in a *certain sense*, the most ancient of the three: for the primitive Fathers agree in several of these latter points. In its present form, however, it may be said to have originated, at the end of the sixteenth century, with the Jesuit Ribera, who, moved like Alcazar, to relieve the Papacy from the terrible stigma cast upon it by the Protestant interpretation, tried to do so, by referring these prophecies to the *distant future*, instead of like Alcazar to the distant past.

For a considerable period this view was confined to Romanists, and was refuted by several masterly Protestant works. But of late years it has sprung up afresh, and sprung up (strange to say) among Protestants. It was revived by such writers as the two

Maitlands, Burgh, Tyso, Dr. Todd, the leaders of the "Brethren" generally, and by some Tractarian expositors also. It is held thus by *extreme* parties; by those who, though Protestants, are ashamed of the Reformation, speak of it as an unwarrantable schism, and verge as closely on Rome as is possible; *and* by those who, though Protestants, deem the glorious Reformation to have stopped grievously short of the mark, and see so much of Babylon still, in the Reformed Churches, that they refuse to regard them as having come out of Babylon, or as victors over Antichrist. It is held under a greater variety of modifications than the other two, no two writers agreeing as to what the symbols *do* prefigure, but all agreeing that they do *not* prefigure anything that has ever yet taken place.

Those who hold this view support it, among other arguments, by the authority of the primitive Church. They say: "the Fathers had apostolic tradition; they had no controversial bias; their opinion ought to have great weight; the historical interpretation was unknown in the Church for one thousand years or more; our view is the original view of the early Christians. *They* expected that Antichrist would be an individual man; *so do we*. *They* expected him to be an infidel atheistic blasphemer, not a Christian bishop; *so do we*. *They* believed his tyranny would last three years and a half immediately prior to the Coming of Christ; *so do we*. *They* took the days, weeks, and months of the Apocalypse literally; *so do we*." Now we readily admit this agreement (though indeed it is by no means so perfect as is implied), and reply that herein lies a *very strong presumption against the Futurist scheme*. *It is a return to that early interpretation of the prophecies, which was necessarily defective and erroneous, seeing it was not the purpose of God, to permit a premature comprehension of the nature and length of this dispensation*.

It is a view which rejects the light, as to the *purposes* of God, which experience of the *providence* of God has afforded. It exalts the impressions of ignorance, above the ripe results of mature knowledge, and claims prestige for primitive views, on points where later views are necessarily preferable. It recommends those who are of full age to return to the opinions of childhood, forgetting that errors excusable in children are inexcusable in men. The early Christians knew nothing of the marvellous ecclesiastical phenomena with which we are acquainted; their ignorance of the true scope of the prophecy was unavoidable; we have seen the awful apostasy that has lorded it for more than twelve hundred years in the Church of God; similar ignorance in us is without excuse, for experience ought to teach. The *Futurist view denies progressive revelation*, and asserts that the early Church understood the Apocalypse better than the Church of after-times; which is contrary to the analogy of Scripture, and to the evident purpose of God.

Two main systems of interpretation of this final revelation of Scripture are then before us: which is likely

to be the true? The one characterized the infancy of the Church, the other was the offspring of mature experience: the one sprang up amid utter ignorance of the actual purpose of God; the other in view of His accomplished providence: the one can never be brought to any *test*; the other at every point exposes itself to critical examination: the one was and is held by the apostate and persecuting Church of Rome; the other by multitudes of confessors and a glorious army of martyrs: the one leaves us to form our own opinion of the greatest fact in the history of the Church, the Papal system of ecclesiastical corruption and tyranny; the other gives us God's infallible and awful judgment about it: the one was never more than a barren speculation; the other has been, and is, a *mighty power for good*: the one leaves us in dismal doubt as to our place in the prophetic calendar; the other makes us lift up our heads, to catch the glow of the coming sunrise.

The presumption is surely *against* the modern revival of the primitive view. A return to primitive *doctrine* is good; no progressive revelation of the dogma of justification by faith, for instance, was to be expected; innovation in questions of faith is condemned; we are "earnestly to contend for the faith *once delivered to the saints*." But prophecy is not doctrine, and its very nature implies that it must be capable of receiving elucidation from the course of providence. *The Protestant historical system of apocalyptic interpretation is based on this fact, and has consequently a strong presumption in its favour.* But presumption is not proof; and the question is of such importance that a fuller examination must now be attempted.

Three main points require to be settled before we can hope to arrive at the meaning of the prophecies of the Revelation.

1. Is the Apocalypse to be understood literally? and if not, on what principle is it to be interpreted?

2. Is it a fulfilled or partially fulfilled prophecy? or does it refer to events still future?

3. Is it a Christian or a Jewish prophecy? That is, does it bear to the Church, and to her fortunes in the world, the same relation that earlier prophecy bore to Israel, and to their fortunes in the world? These questions will be considered, in the chapters which follow.

It is obvious to the most superficial reader, that in its actual texture and construction, the Apocalypse is a *record of visions that are past*. All allow that it is, nevertheless, as to its meaning, a *prophecy of events that are future* or *were future* at the time that the visions were granted to St. John. The angel calls the book a prophecy, "seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand." Of its *prophetic* character there can therefore be no more question, than that *its form* is a record of past visions. In the strictest sense then, no one understands the book *literally*; for the

statement, "I saw a beast rise up out of the sea," taken literally, is in no sense whatever a prophecy; it is a narrative of a past event, not a prediction of a future one. Such literalism as this is divinely excluded. John beheld things which were to take place "hereafter," but the future was signified to the apostle in a series of visions. The book is "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to Him, to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass; and He sent and signified it by His angel, unto His servant John."

To signify is to *show by signs*, to intimate your meaning, not in plain words, but by signs and symbols. Now it were clearly folly to confound the sign with the thing signified. The first verse of the book clearly indicates that its true meaning is veiled under significant figures and that a process of translation must take place before that meaning can be reached. Each symbol used must be separately studied, and its force gathered, from its context, from comparison with other Scriptures, from its own nature, and from such explanations as are given in the prophecy itself, before we can expect to discover the mind of the Spirit of God in this book. If on opening a letter from a friend, the first sentence that met the eye was, "I write in Latin in order that my letter may not be understood by all," we should at once be prepared to translate as we read; we should not pore over a certain combination of letters and syllables, trying in vain to make some intelligible English word out of them; we should say the *word* is so and so, but the *meaning* is so and so.

In reading the symbolic portion of the Apocalypse, we are bound to do the same; on no other principle can anything like consistent interpretation be attained. The nature of the case forbids it. And yet an opposite maxim of interpretation is often laid down; — take everything literally, unless you are forced by impossibility in the nature of things to give a symbolic signification. This is like saying, if you can find any combination of letters or syllables in this Latin letter, that will form any English word, take it as English, but where you cannot possibly make any thing out of them as English, they no doubt they are Latin. What a singularly lucid communication would be the result of such a system of interpretation! And yet it is in connection with the Apocalypse too common, among some, whose spirituality and intelligence ought to be fruitful of more wisdom. Such interpreters argue in defence of the monstrosities evoked by their system, some what in this way: "The Nile was once literally turned to blood, we doubt not therefore that this prediction. Revelation viii. 8, 'the third part of the sea became blood, means just what it says; God, who wrought the one miracle, can accomplish the other.'" Undoubtedly: the question is not what God can do, but what He here says He *will* do. Now Exodus is *i* literal history; when it says the river became blood *it means it* Revelation is a symbolic prophecy, when therefore it says "the third part of the sea became blood," *it does not*

mean it, but *i* means something entirely different; and it is needful not only to substitute a future for a past time, but to translate these symbols; into plain language, in order to ascertain what the meaning really is. It would be ludicrous, were it not painful, to contemplate the absurdities and inconsistencies, which have arisen from a neglect of this simple and almost self-evident maxim of interpretation, demanded by the opening verse of the book, as well as by its whole construction. To overlook it is to turn the most majestic and comprehensive prophecy in the Bible into a chaos of vague monstrosities, unworthy of being attributed to inspiration; it is "to degrade the highest and latest of God's holy revelations, into a grotesque patchwork of unmeaning prodigies."

Prophecy, like science, has its own peculiar language; for understanding the prophecies, therefore, as Sir Isaac Newton justly observes, we are in the first place to acquaint ourselves with the figurative language of the prophets. When God deigns to converse with man. He must use the language of man. The Scriptures were designed for the whole world; hence it was meet that their predictions should be couched in what may be termed a universal language. But the only universal language in existence is the language of hieroglyphics. *The key to the scriptural hieroglyphics is furnished by Scripture itself*, and when the import of each hieroglyphic is thus ascertained, there is little difficulty in translating, as it were, a hieroglyphical prophecy into the phraseology of modern language. It is hardly needful to add that there are exceptions in the Apocalypse. Plain predictive sentences and literal explanatory clauses are interspersed here and there, amid the symbols of the book. They stand out from the general text, as distinctly as a few words of English introduced in a page of a Greek book would do; it needs no signpost to say "adopt a literal interpretation here." They speak for themselves; common sense dispenses with critical canons, and recognizes them unaided.

Any system of interpretation that violates the fundamental law of the book is thereby stamped as erroneous. The system that says: "Babylon means Babylon; and the literal ancient Babylon will, we are bound to believe, be revived," must be false. In the Apocalypse, Babylon does *not* mean Babylon, nor Jerusalem Jerusalem, nor the temple the temple; the system therefore that says "all this Jewish imagery proves that the book has reference to the future of the Jewish nation, and not to the future of the Church," must be false. All this Jewish imagery is *symbolic*; these things are used as *signs*. Everything connected with Israel was typical of things connected with the Church. The *things signified* must therefore be *Christian*, otherwise the sign and the thing signified, would be one and the same. The system that says the New Jerusalem is a literal city, 1500 miles square and 1500 high(!), made of gems and gold, *must be false*; the New Jerusalem is a sign; the thing signified, is the glorified Church of Christ, as comparison with other

Scripture proves.

The Divine explanations attached to some of the earliest symbols employed in the book, furnish the key by which much of its sign-language is to be interpreted. They are to the symbology of the Apocalypse, what the Rosetta stone was to the hieroglyphics of Egypt. "The seven stars are the angels of the seven Churches, and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven Churches." The seven-branched candlestick was one of the most important emblematic vessels in the tabernacle "which was a figure for the time then present" of spiritual realities. John saw seven separate candle sticks, and saw Christ the great High Priest, walking in their midst, like Aaron, trimming his lamps. He tells John what the emblem represents; the seven candlesticks symbolized the seven Churches of Asia. This explanation authorizes us whenever we meet the same symbol of a candlestick, to attach to it the same signification; and it does more.

The candlestick was *one* feature of the tabernacle and temple economy, in which *every* feature was typical of heavenly things; many other symbols borrowed from the same system, appear in the Apocalypse: *this one key unlocks them all*. We have no right to say that the ark of the covenant, the altar, the sea of glass, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony, the court, the holy city, the New Jerusalem, the priests and their garments, or the worshippers, are to be taken literally. We are bound on the contrary to interpret them *all* on one harmonious principle. The seven candlesticks means seven Christian Churches, that is, they are a perfect representation of the Christian Church. *A Christian and not a Jewish sense, then, must attach to all the rest.*

The seven stars are not a part of the tabernacle system, but they are equally symbols, standing for a reality of an entirely different nature. Whatever the angels of the Churches were, they were not stars; and whenever we meet with this symbol in the book, we may be sure from the Lord's translation of it here, that it will not mean literal stars, but rulers, governors, chief men, messengers, or something analogous. "The seven stars are the angels of the seven Churches." What sort of consistency would there be in the book, if a star in one place meant a ruler, and in the next a literal star? Language used in so indeterminate and inexplicable a way, would cease to answer the purpose of language; no definite meaning could attach to it. The study of the Apocalypse might well be abandoned, as more hopeless than that of the hieroglyphics, or the arrow-headed inscriptions of remotest antiquity; for these we possess keys, for the Apocalypse none, *if our Lord's own explanations are rejected as such.*

There is another indication of the same kind in the twice repeated expression, "which say they are Jews and are not, but do lie." The parties alluded to were literal Jews, but being unbelievers, our Lord here denies to them the name, thereby taking from "Jew" thenceforth its old literal meaning, and confining it to a higher sense.

"He is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart." These explanations and indications at the commencement of this prophecy, are like a Divine warning against the error of taking these Jewish emblems literally; in the Apocalypse they must uniformly be interpreted as *signs of other things*.

Finally, the principle of progressive revelation demands that these visions should be taken as literal predictions of a coming crisis at the end of the age. Other prophecies had already brought down the chain of events to the destruction and fall of Jerusalem, and our Lord Himself, in treating of it, passed on to the final crisis, of which it was a precursor. The one and only period unilluminated by prophetic light was *the Church's history on earth*. Our Lord had revealed little, save its general character as a time of tribulation; the other apostles had foretold certain events which were to characterize its course; it remained for the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to Him, and which He now sends, as His last gift to the Churches, to map it out in detail, and present in a mystic form all its leading outlines. If the Apocalypse merely went over again the events of the final crisis, it would not be an advance on all previous revelation, as its place in the canon of Scripture warrants our concluding that it is. To be this, it must be a symbolical history of the Christian dispensation.

[End of article.]

Note by Editor James Bruggeman: The Preterist view of the book of Revelation depends heavily, if not entirely, upon its date of composition being sometime before 70 A.D. The arguments used by leading Preterist expositors like David Chilton were all answered 100 years before Chilton in a massive, four-volume set called *Horae Apocalypticae (The Times of the Apocalypse*, London, 1862) by Rev. E. B. Elliot. We have the set and if and when time permits, we will scan and post the entire work here. Click on "Horae" under Bible Study Articles to see the title page of Volume 1.