

Dear all, greetings.

In anticipation of the upcoming Daniel 11 conference to be held on 19-20 Oct 2018, I am ploughing through significant numbers of papers and writings on the topic of Daniel 11 in particular and prophetic interpretation in general. One of these books is by Edwin de Kock, and it is called "The Use and Abuse of Prophecy." In this book, he outlines the history of historicism, going all the way back to the OT and the early church, and identifies how we know that history is true, and whose history we are to be studying, and what is defined as history. De Kock's knowledge is very impressive, his writing style is lucid and compelling, and his fidelity to God and His Word shines through every sentence.

One chapter in particular has caught my attention. Most of our theological debates today are not about what the text says, but how we interpret the text, i.e. a question of hermeneutics, which is often a fancy way of articulating in fancy theological language the expositor's personal presuppositions, prejudices and prognostications. However, De Kock has written about 7 principles of prophetic interpretation that are well thought through and are insightful. Here they are, in summary form:

First, the principle of listening to the internal expositors. Many prophecies come with an internal expositor within the text. This can be a human being, e.g. Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dreams or those of the butler and baker, or Daniel interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's 2 dreams or the handwriting on the wall for Belshazzar. Alternatively, this can be an angel (sometimes Gabriel himself), as in Daniel 8, 9 and 10-12. Angelic interpreters also appear in Rev. 1, 17, 19, 21 and 22. Before we impose our own expositions onto a text, look for an internal expositor.

Second, the principle of comparing scripture with scripture. Generally recognized, and often ignored! Many symbols and statements used in Revelation are drawn from elsewhere in the Scriptures, particularly the OT. We do not use the Apocrypha or the Pseudepigraphical writings for comparison. When a symbol appears in prophecy, it is wise to carefully consider if it is an echo or a direct allusion to something that has appeared elsewhere in Scripture, and then to ponder the exact nature of the linkage. Is the later prophetic use of the symbol consistent with the earlier use? Is the later use an anti-typical use of an early type, or vice versa? Is there any connection between the earlier and the later use?

Third, the principle of consistency. This means that the careful expositor assigns the same or a similar meaning to the same symbol whenever it appears, particularly in texts of a similar genre, e.g. apocalyptic prophecy. Consistency helps to interpret otherwise difficult passages. For instance, the beast of Revelation 17 upon which the whore of Babylon rides – what does the beast represent? In Rev. there are 3 major opponents of the Lamb: the dragon of Rev. 12, the leopard-like beast and the 2-horned beast of Rev. 13. These are the only beasts that end up in the lake of fire in Rev. 20, so the beast of Revelation 17 must be related to one of these 3 powers.

Fourth, the principle of prophetic augmentation. This means that visions / dreams may cover the same ground, but later visions / dreams may add extra details, change the focus, or zoom into elements that need greater clarification. In the process, symbols may be modified slightly, e.g. the beast on which the woman sits in Rev. 17 has no crowns on its heads like the beast of Revelation 12 does. Why the difference? Could it be that by the time of Revelation 17, we are looking at the nations of Europe which are predominantly republics rather than kingdoms? The symbolism of Daniel 2 is clearly augmented by Daniel 7, 8 and 9. Thus, under this principle, just because a symbol used is slightly different does not mean it cannot refer to the same entity as another, earlier and slightly different symbol.

Fifth, the principle of historical honesty. Understanding history is fraught with difficulty, and new discoveries are continually causing us to reassess our understanding of the past. In the modern era, it is popular to understand history from different perspectives, e.g. social justice history, history as experienced by trans-this, that or the other, history as experienced and understood by people who identify as peacocks, and other vitally important perspectives. Personally, I view military history as the one all should understand (together with salvation history), as military history identifies the rise and fall of civilizations, religious and political systems, and all the social architecture that went with every civilization. Military history is really world history (although some may disagree with me here). Writers throughout history have tried to write with a particular political spin. The modern-day obsession with "fake news" is nothing new. Shakespeare's plays are careful public explorations via drama of some of the profound political debates of his era. His play, Richard III, demonizes Richard III and thus establishes the legitimacy of the Tudor monarchy under which he lived. Eusebius, who wrote one of the most important histories of the early church, wrote a very biased history to emphasize certain theological trends and to downplay others. What Uriah Smith or A T Jones wrote in the 19th Century must be augmented by the historical discoveries that are coming in all the time, e.g. with new diggings, translations of the tens of thousands of untranslated cuneiform tablets in the British Museum etc.

Sixth, the principle of avoiding the trap of the contemporary. It is easy, and often methodologically lazy, to interpret prophecy through the lens of today's headlines. This has happened repeatedly throughout the past 2 millenia, by people of all backgrounds. No group is immune to this temptation. Hitler, Kissinger, Carter, Bonaparte and others have been identified as the end-time antichrists, when in reality the only 3 emperors who warranted particular and specific mention in Scripture are Cyrus, Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander. Even in Adventism, we have writers going off on wild-goose chases in their interpretations of different passages. Hal Lindsey, Samuel Toover and even Uriah Smith (arguably so) were guilty of breaking this principle and reading current news into their prophetic interpretations.

Seventh, and finally, the principle of respect for previous prophetic interpreters. Those who seek to interpret prophecy today must take the time to understand how and why and whither their own principles of interpretation have come into being. For an Adventist expositor not to know of Joachim of Flores, a Catholic abbot who rediscovered the year-day principle in the darkest days of Papal supremacy in Europe, and thereby resurrected the historicist approach from the gloom of the Dark Ages, is unthinkable. Likewise, every Adventist expositor should be familiar with the work of Manuel de Lacunza, who wrote under the name Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra and published "The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty" around the time of the fall of the Papacy in 1798. His key discovery? The 2 comings of Christ, with the 1st at the beginning of the millennium – exactly what Adventists teach today. His book spread around the world. His book was banned by the Papacy. His book inspired a revival of primitive godliness in southern Argentina, where people began keeping the Sabbath and proclaimed the imminent return of Jesus 40 years before the Millerite movement in the USA, all led by a local aristocrat called Francisco Mexia. We as Adventists today stand on the shoulders of a disparate group of people – Lutherans, Wesleyans, and yes, Augustinian and Cistercian and Jesuit monks, who over the years have identified key pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of scripture. To know where our principles of interpretation have come from allows us to understand them more fully, and to be able to apply them in a more thoughtful manner.