

Ten Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting the Apocalyptic Prophecies of Daniel and Revelation

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Like all Scripture, the apocalyptic prophecies and narratives in the books of Daniel and Revelation require interpretation because (1) finite human minds are unable to comprehend the infinity of the divine mind (Deut 29:29; Job 11:7–9; Isa 55:8, 9; Eccl 3:11; Rom 11:33, 34) and (2) sin has darkened and blinded the human mind so that, unaided, it cannot understand it correctly (Rom 1:21; Eph 4:18; John 9:39–41). Many of the patriarchs, prophets, and leaders of Israel in the Old Testament understood this need and “gave the sense” of the word of God “so that the people understood the reading” (Neh 8:8 ESV). In the New Testament, Jesus “interpreted [from διαρμηνεύω (*diermēneúō*)] to” his disciples “in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27 ESV). His scriptural interpretation was “handed down” to us by the apostles in their inspired canonical writings (1 Cor 11:2; Gal 1:11, 12; 2 Thess 2:15; 2 Tim 1:13, 14; 3:14–17; 2 Pet 1:19–21; 3:1, 2, 15, 16). Moreover, the differences between the present era and those of the past in language; social customs; geography; civil, military, and political institutions; economic and technological conditions; patterns of thought and writing; and philosophical worldview mandate the hermeneutical process. Yet, with the subsequent rise of modernism and postmodernism, a wide variety of hermeneutical approaches now exist. Nevertheless, these interpretive principles and their corollaries, derived from Scripture itself, are needed for soundly interpreting Scripture on its own terms, according to its plain meaning (i.e., *sensus literalis*).

General Hermeneutics

- **Principle 1:** Like all other genres of the Bible, the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation should be studied prayerfully under the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit (i.e., *spiritalia spiritualiter examiner* [2 Cor 2:10–14]).
- **Principle 2:** The symbols of apocalyptic prophecy should be interpreted intertextually within the sixty-six-book canon of Scripture, utilizing the standard macro-hermeneutical principles of (1) *sola* (i.e., only), (2) *prima* (i.e., first), and (3) *tota* (i.e., all) *Scriptura*; (4) *analogia* (i.e., analogy of) *Scripturae*; (5) the Christological principle, and (6) the canonical-theological principle. Accordingly, all of Scripture is its own sole interpreter (i.e., *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* [Isa 28:9–10])—comparing one text/passage with others throughout the Bible.
 - For example, a beast or a horn in apocalyptic prophecy represents a king and his corresponding kingdom (Dan 7:17, 23, 24). Therefore, the male goat of Dan 8:5 symbolized the Macedonian kingdom of Greece (Dan 8:21) and “the great horn between his eyes” signified its “first king,” Alexander (III) the Great (Dan 8:21 ESV). Also, the water upon which the great prostitute sat in Rev 17:1 represents the multitudinous, diverse people who form her support system (Rev 17:15).

Genre-specific Hermeneutics

- **Principle 3:** It is crucial to remember the unique characteristics of the genre of apocalyptic prophecy, especially when compared to the other type of prophetic genre in the Bible, classical prophecy.
 - Apocalyptic prophecy is **primarily found in the books of Daniel and Revelation**, with additional examples also found in Ezekiel, Joel, Zechariah, Matt 24–25 (cf. Mark 13; Luke 21), 1 Thess 4–5, 2 Thess 2, and 1 Cor 15. Classical prophecy is the predominant type of prophecy in Scripture, primarily found in the books of the major and minor prophets.
 - Apocalyptic prophecy is more cryptic in nature, employing **symbolic imagery and language** to reveal events predominantly pertaining to or successively leading up to the end. Classical prophecy employs limited symbols and imagery that are more true to life and grounded in reality.
 - Apocalyptic prophecy features **stark and striking contrasts** (i.e., temporal, spatial, or ethical dualisms) to convey its messages, whereas classical prophecy makes more limited use of such contrasts.
 - Apocalyptic prophecy is primarily revealed through **prophetic visions and dreams** accompanied by an angelic interpreter. In contrast, the basis of classical prophecy is a direct word or message from God (“thus saith the LORD” KJV).
 - Classical prophecy can be conditional in nature (e.g., Jonah’s prophecy concerning Nineveh [Jonah 3:4–10]), while apocalyptic prophecy is always **deterministic**. The eschatological fulfillment of what is prophesied is sure and certain, and no one or nothing can stay its realization in history (Dan 2:21; 4:35).
 - The focus of apocalyptic prophecy is **the universal sweep of history with an emphasis on the time of the end**. Thus, its accent is upon the eschatology (i.e., the end-time events) of the entire κόσμος (*kósmos*) or “world.” Classical prophecy focuses more upon the local setting and the contemporary time in which the prophecy is given.
 - Apocalyptic prophecy offers **a comprehensive view of history, spanning from the time of the prophet to the time of the end, with no temporal gap** between the local setting and the eschaton. Classical prophecy can jump from the local setting to the eschatological “Day of the Lord,” without reference to the history in between them.
 - Apocalyptic prophecy has **one, and only one, historical fulfillment** that sweeps across history from the time of the prophet to the time of the end. In contrast, the covenant-centered kingdom promises and prophecies of classical prophecy can have a tri-faceted fulfillment that extends beyond its local (i.e., national, geopolitical, ethnic, etc.) significance to include (1) a messianic fulfillment (i.e., inaugurated eschatology), (2) an ecclesial fulfillment (i.e., appropriated eschatology), and (3) a universal/eschatological fulfillment (i.e., consummated eschatology).

- **Principle 4:** The symbols of apocalyptic prophecy should be interpreted as having **only one meaning and a single historical fulfillment** (contrary to Desmond Ford’s apotelesmatic principle and other approaches, which allow for multiple meanings and fulfillments) unless the text explicitly states otherwise (e.g., Rev 17:9, 10).
 - For example, the head of gold of the image in the divine dream given to Nebuchadnezzar II in Dan 2 exclusively symbolizes Neo-Babylonia and its first and preeminent king from 605 to 539 BC (Dan 2:36–38), and the symbol of the fiery red dragon in Revelation only points to Satan (Rev 12:9) and his evil operations in history through the western Roman Republic and Empire (168 BC–AD 476).

- **Principle 5:** Apocalyptic prophecy should be interpreted in accordance with **the historicist approach** derived from Scripture itself, as seen in the apocalyptic prophecy in Dan 2.¹ This approach espouses an ancient interpretive method for apocalyptic prophecy in the Bible that was upheld throughout the history of the Christian church by many early church fathers and especially the Protestant masterial reformers, such as Martin Luther (1483–1546), Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), and John Calvin (1509–1564). Historicists view the fulfillment of biblical apocalyptic prophecy as unfolding across the vast span of human *history sequentially*, from past to present to future, without significant gaps in time. Thus, historicism can be seen as a “middle-of-the-road” approach that bridges together the positive biblical elements of preterism (i.e., past, forthtelling prophecy), futurism (i.e., future, foretelling prophecy), idealism, and eclecticism—temporally locating them on the chronological, consecutive continuum of history—while avoiding their unbiblical excesses and exegetical oversights, including their sometimes corresponding supersessionism² and accompanying anti-Semitism.



- For example, in Dan 2, the head of gold symbolized Neo-Babylonia (605–539 BC), the chest and arms of silver Medo-Persia (539–331 BC), the belly and thighs of bronze Macedonia/Greece (331–168 BC), the legs of iron pagan Rome in its republican and imperial phases (168 BC–AD 476), the

¹ The first and foundational apocalyptic dream of the multi-material image in Dan 2 provides a patterned schema at the outset for all subsequent apocalyptic visions and dreams, especially those given in Dan 7, 8, and 11:1–12:4. Symbolically, the dream predictively points to a historical succession of empires (without gaps) until the return of Christ with each successive material—gold for Neo-Babylonia (605–539 BC), silver for Medo-Persia (539–331 BC), bronze for Greece/Macedonia (331–168 BC), iron for Rome (168 BC–AD 476), iron and clay for divided Europe (AD 467–second advent of Christ), and a rock for the eternal kingdom of God. All of the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation expound this same historical progression of events from past to present to future, as prophesied in Dan 2, repeating and enlarging upon its content in varied ways (i.e., recapitulation). Therefore, Dan 2 sets forth a historicist methodology for the interpretation of its own prophecy, as well as all those that follow.

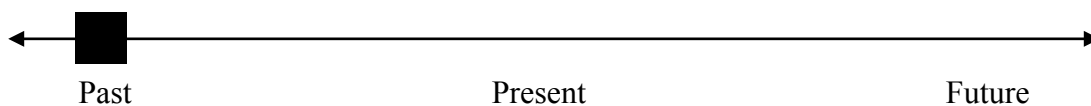
² Supersessionism (i.e., Replacement Theology) is a type of ecclesiology that asserts that God has abandoned his covenantal promises to national Israel and has replaced the Jews with the Christian church that now supersedes them as the new chosen people of God. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and some Protestant churches view themselves as replacements of Israel. For example, the Roman Catholic priesthood exists today in place of the Levitical priesthood and practices the rites and rituals of the Old Testament sacrificial system in light of Christ (e.g., the sacrifice of Mass) within elaborate cathedrals that are architecturally designed to reflect the elements of the wilderness tabernacle and Jewish temples of the Old Testament (e.g., the holy water stoup placed at the entrances of the cathedrals, their central altar, etc.).

Conversely, in Rom 11:1–2, 5 ESV, the apostle Paul wrote, “¹ I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. ... ⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.” Further into this chapter, Rom 11:11–24, Paul employed a metaphor of an olive tree that has Jewish roots and trunk but is missing some of its original Jewish branches, which were pruned for their adamant rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. However, many Jewish branches remained. Furthermore, wild branches were grafted into the tree, symbolizing Gentile conversions to the new messianic Jewish faith that was eventually called Christianity.

As such, supersessionism merits rejection because of the anti-Semitism that has emerged in Christian history due to the development and spread of supersessionist ideology that eventually resulted in the atrocities of the Holocaust in World War II (1939–1945). Christians should recognize the “Jewishness” of the roots of the Christian church, harken back to those previous teachings of the Old and New Testaments, and lovingly embrace Jewish people as our fellow brothers and sisters, inviting them into deeper communion with us through acceptance of Jesus as the true Messiah of both ethnic and spiritual Israel.

feet of iron and clay the Holy Roman Empire (i.e., papal Rome) and the divided nations of Europe (AD 538–present), and the rock the eternal kingdom of God.

- **Preterism** was first expounded by Luis de Alcazar (1554–1613), a Roman-Catholic theologian of the Society of Jesus (i.e., the Jesuit Order) from Spain, in his posthumously published work *Vestigatio arcani sensus in Apocalypsi* (1614) during the Counter-Reformation (1545–1648). This term derives from the Latin word *praeteritus* (meaning “gone by”), the past participle of *praeterire* (composed of *praeter* “past, beyond” and *ire* “go”). Those who subscribe to preterism hold that the function of apocalyptic prophecy in the Bible is strictly *forthtelling* (as opposed to *foretelling*)—that is, addressing social, political, and religious issues in Israel and Judah (in the Old Testament) and in the fledgling Christian church (in the New Testament). Accordingly, preterists understand that the apocalyptic events *described* in the prophecies of Daniel were written and/or fulfilled *already* in the second century BC and that those in the book of Revelation in the first century AD. In other words, on this view, apocalyptic prophecy has no *predictive* power but merely depicts through symbols people, places, and events that existed/occurred in the times at which it was written (i.e., the *past*).



- **Futurism** holds that the purpose of apocalyptic prophecy is both *forthtelling* and *foretelling*, particularly predicting events that will be fulfilled *literally* and *globally* in the *future* age of the end of time. While some proto-futurist interpretations were in use in the early centuries of church history, they were not popular by any means and were largely shunned. The first developed forms of futurism originated from the pens of two Spanish Roman Catholics of the Jesuit Order, Francisco Ribera in *In sacrum beati Ioannis Apostoli & Evangelistiae Apocalypsin Commentarii* (1590) and Manuel de Lacunza³ in *La venida del Mesías en gloria y majestad* (1790). While futurism caught the attention of some, Protestants nearly (if not entirely) rejected it in full, seeing it as another papal attempt to counter their historicist interpretation by casting the apocalyptic figure of the antichrist not in the present as the pope himself (as Protestants taught) but far into the future, identifying him with a single person of Jewish decent who would arise at the time of the end and lead many away from Christ. Futurism really did not make significant theological inroads into Protestant thought until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the rise of a revamped form of it—dispensationalist futurism (or simply **dispensationalism**). Thus, it is a relatively new and prevalent methodology primarily accepted by Evangelical Christians (e.g., non-denominational Christians, some Baptists, Pentecostals, etc.).⁴ First systematized by John Nelson Darby and the Plymouth Brethren in the mid-nineteenth century, dispensationalism was popularized in the United States and disseminated rapidly by James Inglis, James H. Brookes, and Dwight L. Moody in the late-nineteenth century; C. I. Scofield with his Scofield Reference Bible in the early-twentieth century; and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins with their *Left Behind* fictional book series in the late-twentieth century—as well as by other prominent Evangelical leaders and evangelists, such as, Jimmy Swaggart, Perry Stone, Hal Lindsey, David Jeremiah, John F. MacArthur, John Hagee, and the teaching faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary in Texas.



³ He used the pseudonym Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra.

⁴ Dispensationalism is still generally rejected by Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Lutheranism, and Reformed Protestantism today.

- **Principle 8:** In apocalyptic prophecy, **numbers are often symbols** for some greater meaning.
 - For example, in Scripture, the number seven (7) signifies perfection and completeness, usually but not exclusively in reference to God and his work (e.g., Gen 1–2:4a), and can be used in association with his covenantal people. In Dan 4, Nebuchadnezzar II is divinely punished for *seven* years with a complete and perfect judgment on account of his egoistic arrogance in not giving glory and thanks to the one, true God (Rom 1:18–25) for his regal accomplishments. Also, Judah is said to have been exiled in the land of Neo-Babylonia under the oppressive reign of Nebuchadnezzar II for *seventy* (70) years (7 x 10) in Dan 9:1–2 by a judgment executed by God (Dan 1:1–2; cf. Jer 25:1–2, 11–12). Similarly, Revelation exhibits *seven* churches of Jesus (Rev 2–3), *seven* seals on a scroll (Rev 6–8:1), *seven* trumpet warnings (Rev 8:2–11:18), *seven* messengers (Rev 14:6–20), *seven* bowls of plagues (Rev 15–16), and *seven* shouts of woe and hallelujah (Rev 18:1–19:10).
 - In contrast to seven, the number six (6), being one count short of seven, signifies imperfection and incompleteness. As such, the number six (6) is often connected with sin and its wayward profligates (i.e., Satan, demons, and the wicked). For example, the number of the antichristian sea beast in Rev 13:1–10 is *six hundred and sixty-six* (666) (Rev 13:18).
 - Another example of the symbolic nature of numbers in apocalyptic prophecy can be seen in the Bible’s use of the number twelve (12), which represents the covenantal people of God and the eternal kingdom of heaven, their inheritance. The *twelve* sons of Israel (i.e., Jacob) gave rise to the *twelve* tribes of Israel that composed the number of God’s chosen people in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus founded the church upon the leadership of his *twelve* apostles. In Rev 7:4–8 and 14:1–5, God’s people are symbolically numbered 144,000 (12 x 12 x 1,000), a multiple of *twelve*. Furthermore, the heavenly new Jerusalem has *twelve* gates of pearl with the names of the *twelve* tribes of Israel inscribed upon them and with *twelve* angels posted at the gates (Rev 21:12–13, 21). The city’s wall was erected on *twelve* foundations, each of which bore a different name of one of the *twelve* apostles (Rev 21:14), and it measured 144 (12 x 12) cubits tall (Rev 21:17), another multiple of *twelve*. The *twelve* foundations were adorned with *twelve* different kinds of gemstones (Rev 21:19–20). The length, width, and height of the city measure 12,000 (12 x 1,000) stadia (Rev 21:16), again a multiple of *twelve*. The tree of life within the city bears *twelve* different types of fruit over the course of *twelve* months (Rev 22:2).
- **Principle 9:** Apocalyptic prophecies often “**repeat and enlarge**” upon earlier ones within an apocalyptic literary work, following the principle of **recapitulation**—that is, the repetition and expansion of an earlier apocalyptic prophecy in a later one with additional details and a new emphasis.
 - For example, the subsequent kingdom prophecies in Dan 7, 8, 11:1–12:4, and 12:5–8 (A, A’, B”, B””, A”) repeat the original in Dan 2 and expand upon it with unique details and new emphases.
 - Also, the apocalyptic prophecies featuring the number seven (7) in the historical section of Revelation (1:1–11:18) before the cosmic conflict vision (Rev 11:18–14:20)—the seven churches (Rev 2–3), the seven seals on a scroll (Rev 6:1–8:1), and the seven trumpet warnings (Rev 8:2–11:18)—cover the same history, each with fresh details and a new emphasis.
- **Principle 10:** Apocalyptic prophecies should be interpreted in accordance with their micro-, meso-, and macro-**literary structures**.
 - For example, *chiasmus* (from the Greek term χιάσμα [*chiasma*]), also known as a **chiasm**, is a literary structure featured prominently in apocalyptic literature. It derives from the Greek verb χιάζω (*chiázō*), which means “to cross” or “to shape like the letter X/χ.” A chiasm has an A-B-B’-A’ (even-numbered) or A-B-C-B’-A’ (odd-numbered) configuration, in which the content of A matches A’, B matches B’, etc. See the literary structures of Daniel and Revelation that follow.

The Double Chiastic Literary Structure of the Book of Daniel

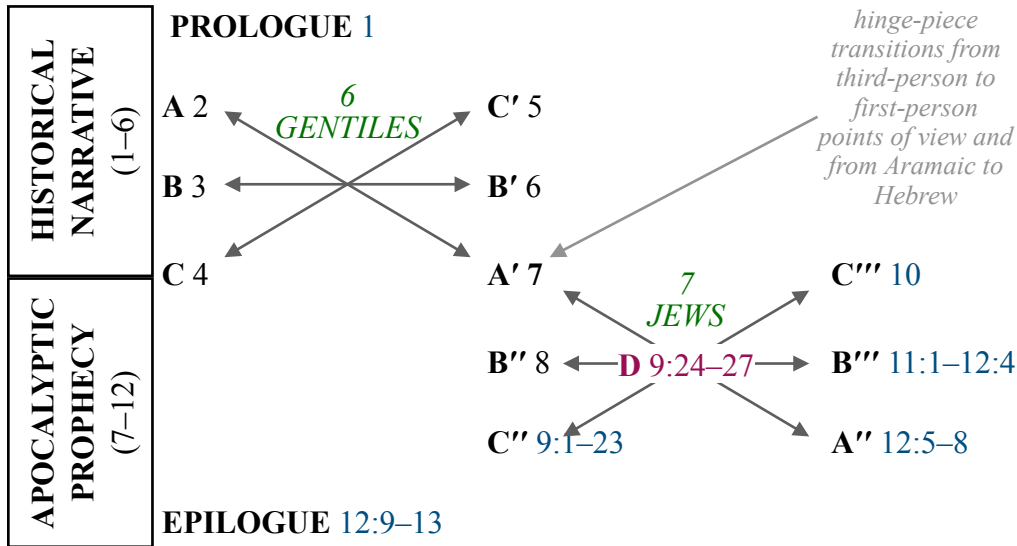
HISTORICAL NARRATIVE (1-6)	A HEBREW	<p>PROLOGUE Historical Introduction (1) <i>the introduction of the book with a historical narrative that sets the contextual stage for the subsequent historical narratives and apocalyptic prophecies</i></p>
	B ARAMAIC	<p>A Kingdom Prophecy (2)⁶ <i>a kingly image of five different materials and the rock</i></p> <p>B Trial: The Fiery Furnace (3) <i>Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah tested</i></p> <p>C King's Prophecy (4) <i>the judgment and redemption of Nebuchadnezzar II</i></p> <p>C' King's Prophecy (5) <i>the judgment and destruction of Belshazzar</i></p> <p>B' Trial: The Lions' Den (6) <i>Daniel tested</i></p> <p>A' Kingdom Prophecy (7) <i>a series of four unclean beasts, a little horn, and the Son of Man</i></p>
APOCALYPTIC PROPHECY (7-12)	A' HEBREW	<p>B'' Kingdom Prophecy (8) <i>a series of two clean beasts and a little horn</i></p> <p>C'' Trial: Praying for Return (9:1-23) <i>Daniel's prayer of repentance and for return</i></p> <p>D King's Prophecy: Reconstruction (9:24-27) <i>Jerusalem's decreed reconstruction by Artaxerxes I (457 BC) and foretold destruction by Vespasian and Titus (AD 70) and the Messiah's covenant of sacrificial atonement</i></p> <p>C''' Trial: Fasting for Return (10) <i>Daniel's fast of mourning for return</i></p> <p>B''' Kingdom Prophecy (11:1-12:4) <i>a series of battles between two kings, of the north and of the south, and Michael, the great prince</i></p> <p>A'' Kingdom Prophecy (12:5-8) <i>the end of all these things</i></p> <p>EPILOGUE Prophetic Conclusion (12:9-13) <i>the conclusion of the book that prophetically seals of the historical narratives and apocalyptic prophecies until the time of the end</i></p>

6
GENTILES

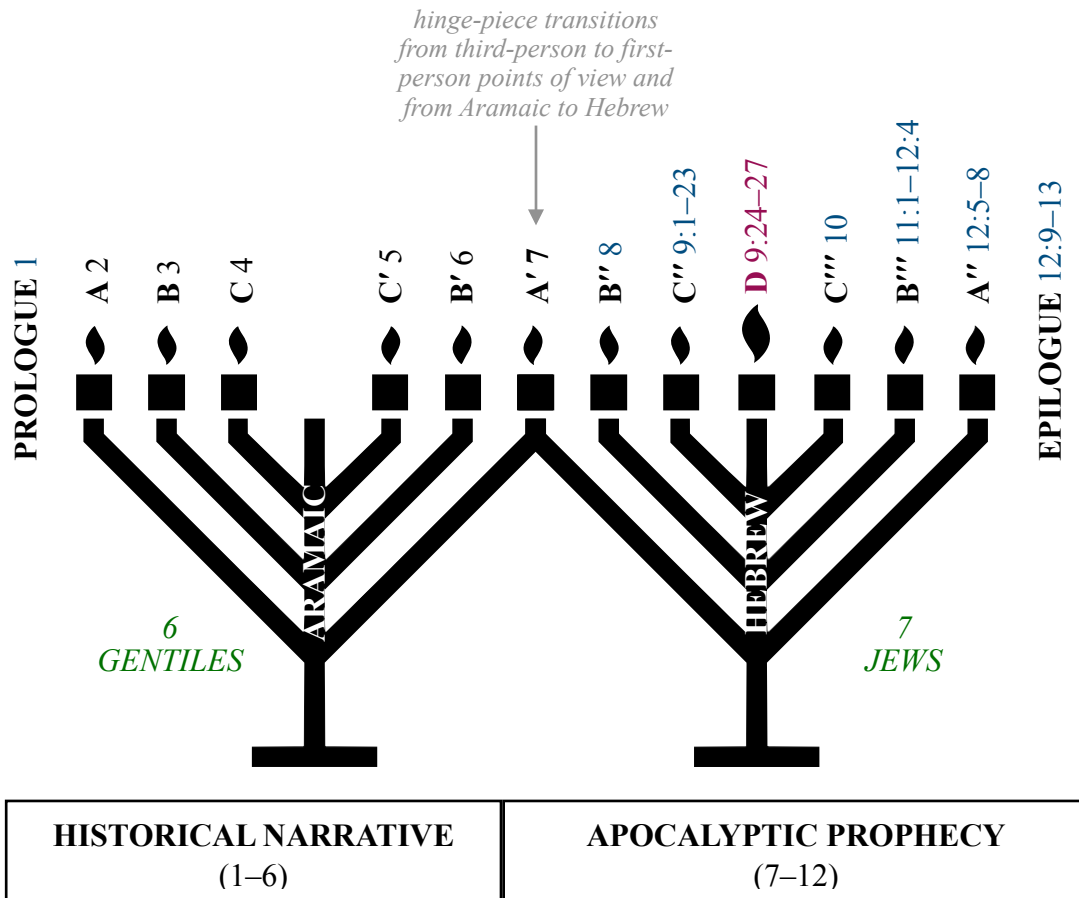
7
JEWS

hinge-piece transitions from third-person to first-person points of view and from Aramaic to Hebrew

⁶ The change from Hebrew to Aramaic occurs in Dan 2:4, after the word אֲרָמִי ('ārāmī), and switches back to Hebrew in Dan 8:1.



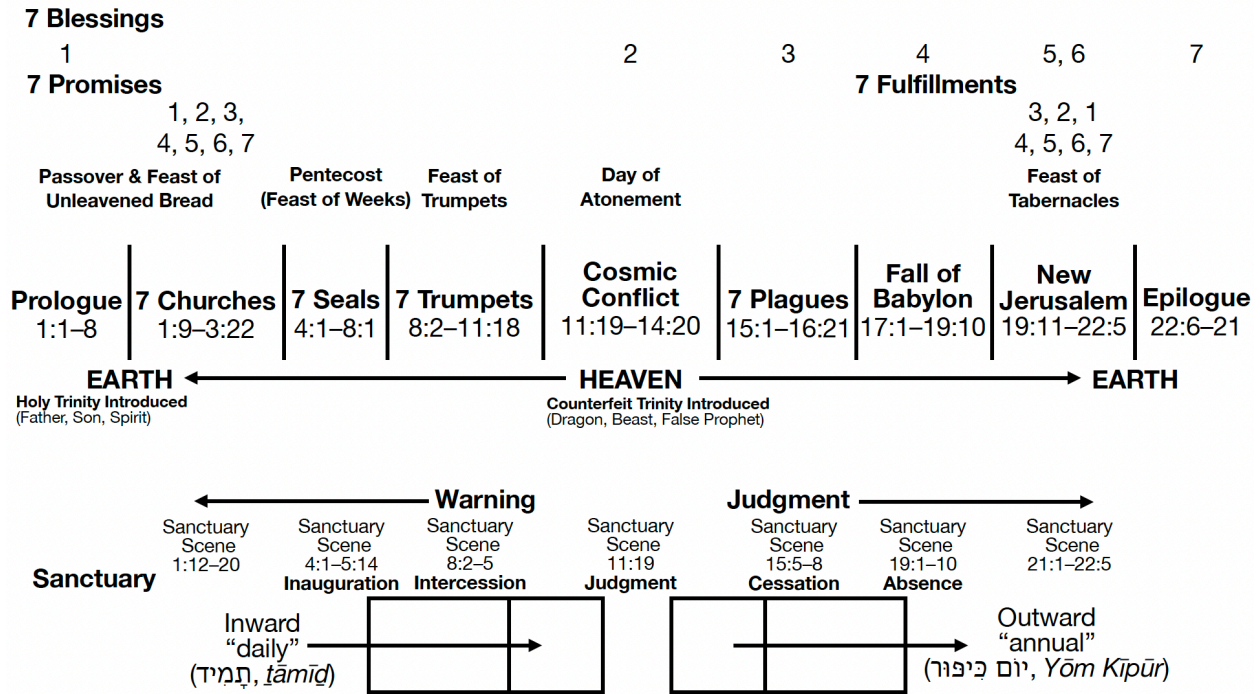
Black = Aramaic Blue = Hebrew



Black = Aramaic Blue = Hebrew

The Chiastic Literary Structure of the Book of Revelation

HISTORICAL PROPHECIES (1:1–11:18)	<p>Prologue (1:1–8)</p> <p>A Sanctuary Scene (1:9–20): Christ as High Priest <i>Messages to the Seven Churches</i> (2:1–3:22)</p> <p>B Sanctuary Scene (4:1–5:14)—Inauguration: Christ as Eschatological King <i>The Scroll with the Seven Seals</i> (6:1–8:1)</p> <p>C Sanctuary Scene (8:2–5)—Intercession <i>The Seven Trumpet Warnings</i> (8:6–11:18)</p>
COSMIC CONFLICT (11:19–14:20)	<p>D Sanctuary Scene (11:19)—Judgment <i>The Cosmic Conflict & the Seven “Messengers”</i> (12:1–14:20): Christ as Apocalyptic Victor</p>
ESCHATALOGICAL PROPHECIES (15–22)	<p>C' Sanctuary Scene (15:1–8)—Cessation <i>The Bowls of the Seven Last Plagues</i> (16:1–21)</p> <p>B' <i>The Fall of Babylon & the Seven Shouts: Three Doubled Woes & Four Hallelujahs</i> (17:1–19:10) Sanctuary Scene (19:1–10)—Absence</p> <p>A' <i>The Millennium, the Final Judgment, & the New Jerusalem</i> (19:11–22:5) Sanctuary Scene (21:1–22:5)</p> <p>Epilogue (22:6–21)</p>



Seven Blessings

Text	For Whom	Blessing
1:3	the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and ... those who hear, and who keep what is written in it	for the time is near
14:13	the dead who die in the Lord from now on	they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them
16:15	the one who stays awake, keeping his[her] garments on	he[she] may not go about naked and be seen exposed
19:9	those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb	invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb
20:6	the one who shares in the first resurrection	over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years
22:7	the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book	"I am coming soon"
22:14	those who wash their robes	they may have the right to the tree of life and they may enter the city [of New Jerusalem] by the gates

Seven Promises (1–3) and Seven Fulfillments (19–22)

Early Texts	Promise to Be Fulfilled	Later Texts
2:7	will eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God	22:2, 14
2:11	will not be hurt by the second death	<u>20:6</u> ; 21:7, 8
2:17	will be given hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it that no one knows	<u>19:12</u> ; 21:11, 18–20
2:26–29	will reign with a shepherd's rod of iron over the nations; will be given the morning star	<u>19:15</u> ; 21:23; 22:5, 16
3:5, 6	will be clothed in white garments; name will never be blotted out of the book of life	19:7, 8; <u>20:12, 15</u>
3:12, 13	will be made a pillar, bearing God's name and Christ's new name, in the temple of God, located in the city of God, the new Jerusalem	21:2, 10, 22, 23
3:21, 22	will sit with Christ on the throne that belongs to him and the Father	20:4; 22:1, 3

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