

Outlines in Bible Prophecy

Interpreting Bible Prophecy

- *Allegorical or Literal?*
- *Amillennialism*
- *Replacement Theology*
- *Postmillennialism*
- *Premillennialism*
- *Preterism*
- *Idealism*
- *Guidelines for interpretation*

© J W de SILVA

All diagrams, charts, figures, maps and sketches in this study are the work of the author and they are not to be reproduced or transmitted in any form or means whatsoever without written permission from the author. The material is extracted from the publication "Outlines in Bible Prophecy" © J W de Silva

Introduction

The ancient Greeks believed their god *Hermes* was able to interpret the words of their gods to men. The word **hermeneutics** is derived from this belief. It is a term that is used to refer to any matter involving what many call the “science” or “theory” of interpretation. The expression **biblical hermeneutics** refers to the field of study that examines how the Bible should be interpreted. Sadly, in many circles this examination has become an end in itself. Many books have been written about it and college semesters are devoted to debating how we should interpret the Bible and its prophetic word. If we have yet to do so, may we come to appreciate that Bible prophecy was given by holy men who spoke as moved by the Spirit of God and for our plain understanding (2 Pet 1:19-21). As believers we have the unerring inspired word of God in our hands and His Spirit indwelling our hearts. The Bible is its own interpreter – if we are prepared to bow to it and to the teaching of the Spirit of God.

Unfortunately, many have not done so! As a consequence we are faced with diversity in doctrine and a distraction through the debate as to how we are to interpret the Bible. There are two rival methods of interpreting the prophetic word – the **allegorical** and the **literal** methods. They encircle the entire debate as to how we should interpret Bible prophecy.

The allegorical method of interpretation

The allegorical method looks for a **non-literal** meaning in a prophecy. The biblical text is given a figurative or a **spiritual** meaning, which explains why the allegorical process is often referred to as **spiritualizing** prophecy, or simply as “spiritualization.” The expression “figurative” is also used to represent the same thing. For example, the “Promised Land” is taken to be “heaven”; the prophecy of Christ coming to reign on earth is taken to refer to Him “reigning in our hearts.” In this last example, a literal future appearance of Christ as King on earth is denied.

Such spiritualization has far reaching consequences for the interpretation of prophecy. It means that biblical interpretation is governed by the imagination of the **reader**. If Christ’s Second Advent is not literal, it can mean just about anything we want it to mean. This is why the allegorical method generates a wide diversity in biblical interpretation. It gives the reader unlimited scope to develop an interpretation that meets his or her own view of Christianity and Christ. The Bible becomes a purely mystical book. There is, too, an inherent failing of the allegorical method in that it prevents an interpretation being tested against the grammar and context of the Bible, simply because an interpretation is made without any reference to them. Interpretation inevitably becomes a matter of “one’s own view.” We are warned “that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Pet 1:20).

The literal method of interpretation

The literal method accepts the **plain** meaning of a text, which is determined by biblical grammar and the context of the passage in which the text appears. References in the Bible to Christ’s Second Advent, for instance, are taken according to their plain meaning. He comes physically; He will be physically present and visible on earth; He will reign over an actual kingdom on earth. Under this method, our interpretation is determined by the words used by the **writer** and we consider the grammatical construction used as well as the context. The opportunity for the reader to formulate an interpretation that meets his/her pre-conceived views is therefore minimized. The literal method affords an

Outlines in Bible Prophecy

opportunity to test an interpretation against the rules of grammar, Bible context and Bible history, resulting in an interpretation that is inherently consistent with and approved by God's word itself.

The evidence

Biblical and secular history confirms that the program of Bible prophecy irrespective of the way in which it is presented has been fulfilled literally. The bondage and subsequent deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt and the prophetic dreams of Joseph were fulfilled literally. The "seed of the woman" and the "bruising of His heel," though expressed figuratively were fulfilled literally in the Lord's virgin birth and death at Calvary respectively. The prophecy of the Lord's birth-place was fulfilled literally (Mic 5:2; Matt 2:1); Daniel's prophecy of the Messiah being "cut off" was literally fulfilled at Calvary (Dan 9:26); the prophecy of the Child given and the Son born in Isaiah 9 was fulfilled literally in Bethlehem – His First Advent (cf Lk 1:32-33); the reign of four Gentile empires over Israel prophesied by Isaiah and Daniel was literally fulfilled – Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman. Clearly, the historical record in the Bible as to how prophecy *has* been fulfilled *must* instruct us as to how its unfulfilled prophecy *will* be fulfilled. The Bible is its own interpreter!

The Lord's disciples expected a literal kingdom to be restored on earth. The Jewish disciples in Acts Chapter 1 were undoubtedly referring to a literal restoration of Israel, a restoration to the nation's prophesied place of glory and power on earth. Israel was at that time subjugated by Rome. The Lord's answer speaks only of the timing of the kingdom; He says nothing about it being a "spiritualized" kingdom in which the Church replaces Israel.

"When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, **wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?** And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:6-7).

It is sufficient to faith that Christ spoke of Himself as the literal fulfilment of OT prophecy – in regard to His Person, His work and in regard to Israel.

"And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, **This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears"** (Lk 4:17-21).

Three doctrines of interpretation

Three main-stream doctrines emerge from the debate between the allegorical and literal schools of interpretation.

- **Amillennialism**
- **Postmillennialism**
- **Premillennialism**

Outlines in Bible Prophecy

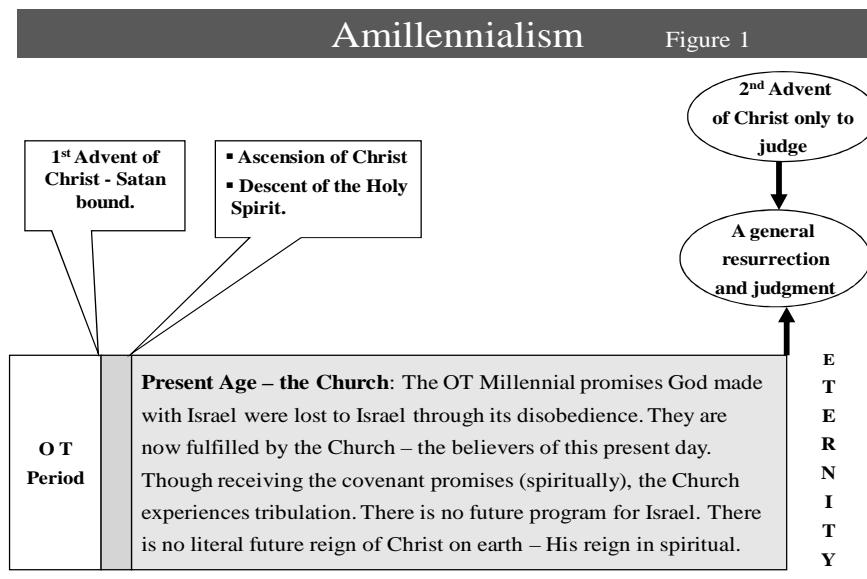
The first two **doctrines** are the result of interpreting Bible prophecy allegorically. The third is the outcome of interpreting it literally. There are “peripheral” interpretations of Bible prophecy such as **preterism** and **idealism**.

Preterism (from the Latin ‘past’) in its extreme form claims all Bible prophecy has been fulfilled. The Tribulation, the coming of the Antichrist and Armageddon has already taken place – consummated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. This idea is founded on the Lord’s words that “this generation shall not pass, till all things be fulfilled” (Matt 24:34). We know, however, that here the Lord was speaking *descriptively* of a generation of Jews, one characterized by unbelief and disobedience. The generation of disobedient and Christ-rejecting Jews continues even today and will do so into the future. If Revelation was written before 70 AD (not c. 96 AD), as preterists insist, we ask: When was the Mark of the Beast (Antichrist) implemented? When did the Euphrates dry up? If Jerusalem was forever removed in 70 AD from being the burdensome stone, why has it returned as such? When was the Abomination of Desolation installed in the reconstructed Tribulation Temple? In answer to these questions, preterism resorts to spiritualization. Revelation is taken as symbolic not prophetic.

Idealism, on the other hand, treats the whole Bible symbolically, which means there is virtually no prophetic program at all.

Let us now outline the three major doctrines - amillennialism, postmillennialism and premillennialism.

Amillennialism (Figure 1)



© J W de SILVA

The term “amillennial” essentially means no **literal** millennium – there is no literal 1000-year reign of Christ on earth. The following points list the main assertions of amillennialism reflecting its allegorical basis. Note too, that the promises and principles of the OT are applied “spiritually” to the Church.

Outlines in Bible Prophecy

1. There is no literal 7-year Tribulation on earth for Israel. OT passages referring to the Tribulation allude to the on-going trials and persecution experienced by the Church in an evil world. The words of Christ are taken out of context to support this view. "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). The Lord is speaking here of tribulations and not "The Tribulation."
2. Christ's millennial reign under the Davidic Covenant is spiritualized to refer to God ruling in the hearts of men, the intermediate state between death and resurrection, or even to the New Heaven and New Earth.
3. David's "house" includes every believer past and present and is not Israel (2 Sam 7:16).
4. David's future "throne" refers to heaven from where Christ (David's Seed) rules the Church (i.e., Ps 89 is spiritualized).
5. The Promised Land under the Palestinian Covenant is spiritualized to refer to a heavenly blessing bestowed to all believers.
6. The 1000 years of Revelation 20 merely symbolizes an undefined and long period of time.
7. Christ's Second Advent is to end the increasing sin in the world, after which He will judge the unrighteous.
8. The "Rapture" of the Church is not distinguished from Christ's Second Advent. The redeemed are taken into heaven or the New Earth after the Second Advent of Christ.
9. There will be a general resurrection of all the dead at the Second Advent of Christ. This general resurrection includes all believers and all unbelievers. The "first resurrection" of Revelation 20 refers to "new birth." Liberal amillennialists deny a literal resurrection, which means there can be no literal judgment. Believers are "judged each day."
10. Satan was bound at the time of Christ's First Advent (Augustine).
11. The Antichrist is not a real person but a sinful condition in men's hearts.
12. Israel forfeited the covenant promises because of its disobedience. Therefore the Church, though seen as distinct from Israel by some, is fulfilling the covenants God made with Israel spiritually. The Church is the "spiritual" or the "new" Israel.
13. There is no such thing as a future Jewish remnant or a restoration of Israel as a nation.
14. The prophecies in the book of Revelation in the main have been fulfilled or are in the process of being fulfilled spiritually.

The origin of amillennialism

We have noted that the doctrinal basis for amillennialism emerges from the allegorical interpretation of Bible prophecy. Allegorical interpretation itself has a long history – going back to the first century AD during the days of Aristobulus and Philo. Philo was a Hellenized Jew of the first^t century who interpreted the Bible by combining Greek philosophy with Judaism. He influenced the Alexandrian School during the Greco-Roman period, which was a School noted for its allegorical view of the Bible – as seen in the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. It rivaled the School of Antioch and its literal interpretation of Scripture. The allegorical method was given great momentum in the fourth century by Augustine, the North African Bishop of Hippo (c. 386-395 AD). It would appear that he is the theologian most responsible for the renaissance and popularity of allegorical interpretation and the amillennial doctrine it spawns. Although he initially accepted a literal interpretation of Scripture, he later adopted the allegorical method. This was because it served the imperial interests of the Church of Rome, which are contrary to Christ returning and reigning supreme on earth. In his work, *City of God*, the Church of the kingdom opposes the *city of Satan* on earth. Furthering the kingdom of God is therefore synonymous with advancing the greatness and glory of the institutional church - Rome. With the

Outlines in Bible Prophecy

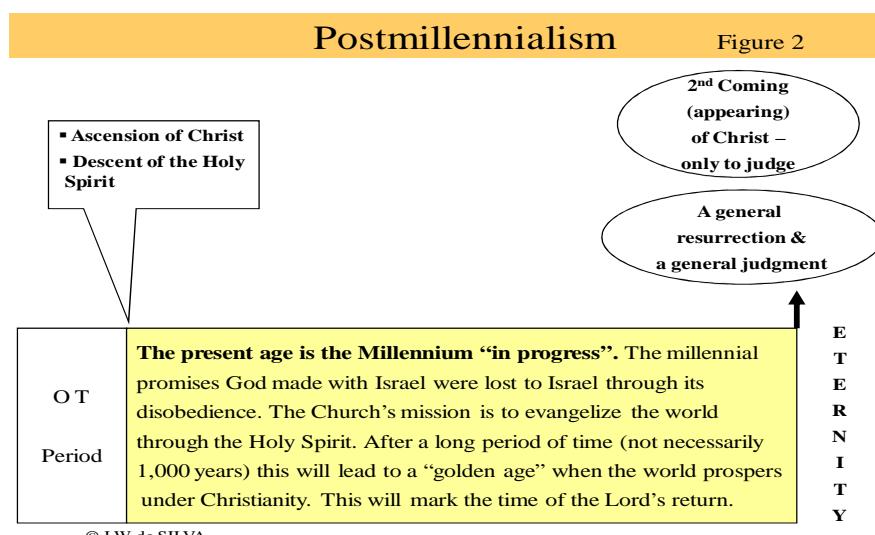
ascendancy of Rome, the allegorical method and amillennialism became predominant and popular within Christendom.

The Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, while rejecting some of the teachings of Rome, retained its allegorical interpretation of prophecy. Calvin misrepresented and then rejected a literal 1000 year reign of Christ on earth.¹ Today, an allegorical interpretation of Bible prophecy is championed by amillennial teaching (found within the Roman Catholic Church, “ecumenical Christianity” and many Protestant denominations).

Replacement Theology

Replacement Theology is a consequence of amillennialism. The doctrine claims that because of Israel's disobedience the Church has been brought in to fulfill the covenant promises God made with Israel. Israel has been *permanently* “replaced” by the Church in God’s prophetic program. The prophecies in Scripture concerning the restoration of Israel to the Promised Land and the Second Advent are “spiritualized” to refer to blessings upon the Church. A careful study of the Bible will reveal that the Church has a distinct identity and destiny to that of Israel.

Postmillennialism (Figure 2)



Postmillennialism claims that Christ will return **after** a “millennial” period. Some postmillennialists view the Lord’s Second Advent as a series of “advents” throughout history, e.g., Constantine’s conversion and the Reformation. The present Church Age is regarded as the Millennial Kingdom *in progress*. The 1000 year kingdom of Revelation 20 is simply figurative of an undefined long period of time, during which there will be advances in righteousness, peace and material prosperity through the preaching of the gospel and the convicting work of the Spirit of God. This will lead to a *golden age*, the kingdom of God on earth in which an overwhelming majority of people will be saved. The time then will be right for the

¹Calvin confused the Millennial Kingdom of Revelation 20 with the Eternal Age, declaring that Christ’s reign cannot be confined to a limited period. In his *Institutes* he stated the literal reign of Christ on earth is a “fiction” that is “too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation.” He interpreted the thousand year period of Revelation 20 allegorically, interpreting it as the “various disturbances that awaited the church, while still toiling on earth.” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, XXV.V

Outlines in Bible Prophecy

Lord's return to judge those who have not received the gospel. It is wrongly claimed that the "stone" in Nebuchadnezzar's dream smiting the Great Image refers to Christ's First Advent; the stone filling the earth represents the *gradual* but inevitable "Christianizing" of the world through the gospel. Such spiritualization ignores the fact that the stone *strikes at the feet of the Image* (the future final *Gentile federated empire*) and summarily destroys the whole Image (all Gentile power). It *then* becomes a great mountain filling the world.

It also disregards Scripture which plainly declares God's purpose today is not to "Christianize" the world, but to redeem and *take out* of the world a people unto His name – the Christians (Acts 15:14). This is the meaning of the word "Church" (ecclesia).

Some postmillennialists have had to concede not all people will be saved, and they even allow for a final apostasy just prior to Second Advent. The tares (in diminishing quantities) grow alongside the wheat until the harvest (the final coming of Christ). This, unbiblical rosy view of the future by postmillennialism, has led some to label it as "optimillennialism," which stands in marked contrast to the "pessimillennialism" of amillennialism and premillennialism.

Further, the postmillennialist, like the amillennialist, claims that Israel as a nation has been set aside forever and has no part in any future prophetic plan - though again a few accept a literal but innocuous restoration of Israel. Needless to say, postmillennialists have had to revise much of their spiritualization, especially as history has shown that whenever man has appeared to advance in goodness, he only slips back into further wickedness.

Despite its social attraction, the claim that the Church is called to Christianize the world is wholly unbiblical. The Bible warns of increasing unrighteousness, not progressive righteousness to be the order until the Lord returns. This is made very clear in the Lord's letters to the seven churches which reveal the declining spiritual condition within Christendom from its early days to the end of the Church period at the Rapture.

Paul warns Timothy that in the last days of the Church Age "perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness [Laodicea], but denying the power thereof: from such turn away" (2 Tim 3:1-5 cf 1 Tim 4:1).

In fact, we can justly conclude that the Rapture will be coincident with the time when the iniquity of the present age has come to the full; when a longsuffering God will call away the Church through His Son and bring in a time of judicial tribulation on earth. The coincidence between ripened iniquity and divine judgment is well established in Scripture. Abraham's seed had to wait four generations to enter the Land because "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full" (Gen 15:16). The rebellion of Pharaoh reached its height and then God came down in judgment upon the firstborn. It was not until the iniquity of Babylon rose to its profane worst at the feast of Belshazzar that the Medo-Persian alliance breached the city limits and claimed the Empire. Future Babylon too will be brought to its inglorious end at the time when her "cup is full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication" (Rev 17:4). Then there is the divine judgment upon the Antichrist at the Second Advent, after he has installed himself as god in the temple – the "abomination that maketh desolate." Apostate Israel will be judged and its transgressions brought to an end when the "transgressors" come to the full (Dan 8:23).

Outlines in Bible Prophecy

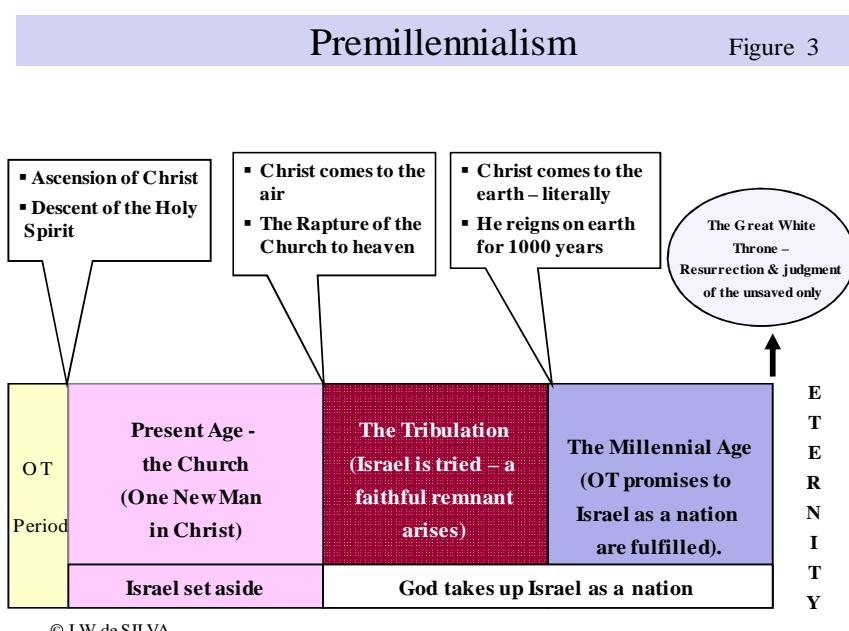
The Charismatic Movement

Postmillennialism has increased its popularity due to its growing acceptance within the charismatic movement – the fashionable modern-day tongues and ecstatic experience fraternity. Many within this movement aggressively promote the postmillennial idea of “Christianizing”

the world. The world is to be “claimed for Jesus.” Peace and material prosperity are preached through a gospel of “prosperity” – which is in reality a message of spiritual poverty. Christians are to possess the world for Christ, through the Christianizing of governments, businesses and social institutions.

Its popular and “pro-active” slogan to “name it and then claim it for Christ,” is unscriptural. The Bible does not teach that Christians are to *claim* the world for Christ; but that Christians should *proclaim* Christ to the world while standing apart from it. It is Christ, the Son of man, who has the sole prerogative to claim the world for Himself. This He will do as the Son of man when He returns in power and glory as prophesied in Scripture. “All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name” (Psa 86:9). “And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3). Christ will rule with a “rod of iron” (Rev 19:15).

Premillennialism (Figure 3)



The principal claims of premillennialism are based on a literal interpretation of Bible prophecy. It is the view endorsed by Scripture.

1. The Rapture of the Church is an event distinct in time and purpose from the Second Advent of Christ to the earth.
2. After the Rapture of the Church a literal 7-year period called the Tribulation will be ushered in. It is a time when God refines His firstborn nation Israel to prepare a faithful remnant before Christ's Second Advent. The Church will not be present on earth during this time.
3. The Tribulation will be terminated by Christ's Second Advent – His return to the earth in Person.

Outlines in Bible Prophecy

4. At His Second Advent Christ will defeat His foes and liberate remnant Israel. He will then set up His literal 1000 year reign on earth – the Millennium.

There are a number of key elements underlying this premillennial and literal program.

1. The Church is not Israel neither is Israel part of the Church – each has its own identity and destiny.
2. A vital distinction exists between the Jews, the Gentiles and the Church. David's house is the *nation* of Israel.
3. David's future throne will be a literal throne on earth, as it was during his days on earth. This has nothing to do with the Church and Christ now reigning over it from the Father's throne in heaven.
4. The Church has a heavenly destiny which will be realized at the Rapture when Christ comes to the air for His Bride, the Church. Israel has not been set aside forever. There will be a future faithful Jewish remnant which will receive the unconditional covenant promises.
5. The covenant promises God made with Israel are to be fulfilled literally, i.e., the promise of the land to Israel means exactly what is says. Israel will be restored as a united nation and will occupy Palestine as the sovereign nation.
6. There is no general resurrection. There is a first and a second resurrection, the former involving the righteous dead and the latter the unrighteous dead.
7. The "first resurrection" of Revelation 20 refers to the raising of all the righteous dead. They have no part in the "second death."
8. There is no "golden age" on earth under the Church, only a future Millennial Kingdom of blessing under Christ. Until that time the world degenerates into further apostasy and wickedness. The Church is not called to Christianize the world but to be apart from it.
9. Christ will have His day of personal glory on earth as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Premillennialism is sometimes referred to as **Chiliasm**, which is in the Greek and means a **thousand years**. It is also sometimes referred to as **Millennialism** which is from the Latin meaning a **thousand years**

Guidelines for Interpreting Bible Prophecy

1. **Apply a literal meaning.** The prophetic word was not given to allegorizing academics nor to pondering philosophers, but to people of every-day speech and understanding (even "babes" Matt 11:25). We have noted that the Bible supports a literal interpretation of prophecy.
2. **Anticipate exceptions.** While the literal interpretation of God's prophetic program is endorsed by His word, we must allow the Bible to determine through grammar and context any exceptions to this. For example, Revelation 13:1 does not teach that a beast literally comes out of the sea. The term *beast* is figurative or symbolic of a terrible thing and the *sea* is symbolic of the Gentile nations. The terrible thing it symbolizes is the future literal revived Roman Gentile Empire as confirmed by other passages of Scripture. Again, to take literally a prophecy that speaks of Christ ruling with a *rod of iron* (Rev 12:5) or a future kingdom being a *kingdom of brass* (Dan 2:39), will also result in absurdities. These symbols are representative of the *character* of the thing spoken of. As in the instance Revelation 13:1, they do not negate a literal fulfilment of the prophecies with which they are associated.
3. **Accept allegories.** The Bible does use allegory as part of its rich divine revelation. Two illustrations will instruct us here.

Outlines in Bible Prophecy

- a. John 15. The Lord uses an allegory referring to Himself as the **Vine** and His disciples as the **branches**. He does not mean He is a literal vine and the disciples are literal branches. He uses symbolic language to illustrate the *spiritual* relationship between Himself and His disciples as one that bears the same relationship as a vine to its branches. It would be an error in interpretation to take this allegory with its symbolic language and give it a **literal** meaning and miss its spiritual lesson.
 - b. Galatians 4:22-25. "For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar." Paul uses an allegory – he takes the **literal history** of Hagar, Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac and extracts a **spiritual meaning** from it. This does not give us liberty to allegorize literal Bible **prophecy**. Apart from the fact that the Bible endorses a literal interpretation of the prophetic word, we note that prophecy is not history. It is one thing to extract a spiritual *lesson from* historical events; it is quite another to *spiritualize* future events.
4. **Accommodate consistency.** It is vital to observe consistency in biblical interpretation. Take for instance the allegorical view that Christ's Second Advent refers to His reign in our hearts. If this is so then why should this reign be limited to 1000 years or have any limitation at all? Moreover, why should Israel's prophesied dispersion be taken literally yet its prophesied regathering taken spiritually? Why should all the prophesied judgments upon Israel be taken literally but the prophesied blessings be regarded as purely figurative?
 5. **Account for time.** Prophecy is sometimes written as if the event is in the *present*. The prophecy of Isaiah concerning Christ's First Advent is an example. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given" (Isa 9:6). This event was fulfilled centuries later. In other instances the prophecy is given as a *past* event. "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities" (Isa 53:5). These words point forward and they represent the confession of the faithful Jewish remnant as they reflect upon Calvary at the Second Advent.
 6. **Allow Scripture to interpret itself.** It is vital to compare Scripture with Scripture because the same prophecy is often confirmed elsewhere in a different but complementary manner, in type, in a parable or by direct word. Consider for example the first prophecy in the Bible, which foretells the First Advent of Christ and His death.
 - **Symbolical:** Genesis 3:15: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."
 - **Historical:** Luke 23:46: "And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost."
 - **Literal:** Hebrews 2:14: "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil."
 - **Spiritual:** Romans 5:8: "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

"And Jehovah said unto me, Thou hast well seen; for I am watchful over my word to perform it"
(Jer 1:12).