



Problems With Prophecy

Differentiating Prophecy and Interpretation

Impetus

- Last year started with a lot of hope amongst Christadelphians
- The Queen celebrated her 70th year on the throne on the 6th of February
- The end seemed nigh
- On September 8th, 2022 the Queen passed away
- Many people were left confused, in shock, and feeling hopeless
- **If prophecy did not come true, is the Bible even true at all?**

Impetus

- This is not the first time our community has so confidently made bold statements on prophecy that turned out to be wrong
 - Nor even the first time on the specific prophecies related to a Queen of England
- Took a brief look at eschatology and reception history of common prophetic texts
 - There are some issues both specific and general
- Designed this class to share some of these findings with you all

Overview

- Broadly define and explore “prophecy” and “the apocalypse”
- Highlight common elements in prophecies
- Give an account of our reception history on two subjects
 - The restoration of Israel
 - The identity of the sixth bowl of wrath
- Highlight some concerns and considerations for how we interpret prophecy

- OT verses will be from the Koren Tanach, NT verses will be from the Berean Literal Bible

Overview

- Broadly define and explore “prophecy” and “the apocalypse”

- Highlight common elements in prophecies

Disclaimer: My goal is neither to discourage nor mock, but rather to provide some thoughts on eschatology and how we may improve our own Bible study

- Give an account of our reception history on two subjects
 - The identity of Babylon
 - The identity of the sixth bowl of wrath
- Highlight some concerns and considerations for how we interpret prophecy

Definitions - Prophecy

- The divinely-empowered forthtelling of a future event

“Because of this I speak to them in parables: ‘Because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.’ And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, saying: ‘In hearing you will hear and never understand; and in seeing you will see and never perceive. For the heart of this people has grown dull, and they barely hear with the ears, and they have closed their eyes, lest ever they should see with the eyes, and they should hear with the ears, and they should understand with the heart, and should turn, and I will heal them.’” (Matt 13:13-15)

Definitions - Prophecy

- The divinely-empowered forthtelling of a future event (Matt 13:13-15)
- The declaration of a matter that could only be known through divine inspiration

“Then they spat in His face and struck Him. And others slapped Him, saying, “Prophecy to us, Christ, who is the one having struck You?” (Matt 26:68)

Definitions - Prophecy

- The divinely-empowered forthtelling of a future event (Matt 13:13-15)
- The declaration of a matter that could only be known through divine inspiration (Matt 26:68)
- To publicly expound on Scripture (*e.g.*, exhort, teach, reprove)

“Every man praying or prophesying having anything on his head dishonors his head. And every woman praying or prophesying with the head uncovered dishonors her head; for it is one and the same with having been shaven.” (1 Cor 11:4-5)

Exploration - Prophecy

- Prophecy comes from the Holy Spirit; true prophecy cannot be held back nor modified

“Balaam answered, ‘I can only repeat faithfully what Yahweh puts in my mouth...When he blesses, I cannot reverse it.’” (Num 23:12&20)

“No prophecy at any time was brought by the will of man, but men spoke from God, being carried by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Pet 1:21)

Exploration - Prophecy

- Prophecy comes from the Holy Spirit; true prophecy cannot be held back nor modified (Num 23:12&20; 2 Pet 1:21)
- Tool to discern between true and false followers of God

“If the prophet speaks in the name of Yahweh and the oracle does not come true, that oracle was not spoken by Yahweh; the prophet has uttered it presumptuously: do not stand in dread of that person.” (Deut 18:22)

Exploration - Prophecy

- Prophecy comes from the Holy Spirit; true prophecy cannot be held back nor modified (Num 23:12&20; 2 Pet 1:21)
- Tool to discern between true and false followers of God (Deut 18:22)
- Within Scripture, the plans of God for humanity are outlined

“Surely the Lord God will do nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared, who will not fear? the Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:7-8)

“And He spoke to them a parable: “Behold the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout already, looking for yourselves, you know that already summer is near. So also you, when you see these things coming to pass, know that the kingdom of God is near.” (Luke 21:29-31)

Definitions – Apocalypse

- To uncover, to open up something that has been veiled

“Then Saul’s anger burned against Jonathan, and he said to him, ‘Thou perverse and rebellious son, do not I know that thou hast chosen the son of Jesse to thine own disgrace, and to the disgrace of thy mother’s nakedness?’” (1 Sam 20:30)

“The priest shall set the woman before the Lord, and loosen the hair of the woman’s head, and put the offering of memorial in her hands, which is the meal offering of jealousy: and the priest shall have in his hand the bitter water that causes the curse...” (Num 5:18)

Definitions – Apocalypse

- To uncover, to open up something that has been veiled (Num 5:18; 1 Sam 20:30)
- In terms of prophecy, it is the act of God revealing things previously unknown to men through divine means

“Then was the secret revealed to Daniel in a night vision. So Daniel blessed the God of heaven.” (Dan 2:19)

“In that day Lot went out from Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed all. It will be according to these in that day the Son of Man is revealed.” (Luke 17:29-30)

Exploration - Apocalypse

- Typically, Apocalypse colloquially means the complete destruction of the world and those specific prophecies related to that
 - Poor description of the events at hand
- Most prophecy relates to the revealing of the Son of Man
 - The gospel, or euangelion, is the promise of eternal life from days of old, the restoration of humanity
- Exact timing is unknown

“But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of the heavens, nor the Son, except the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” (Matt 24:36-37)

Exploration - Apocalypse

- Apocalyptic texts include:
 - Parts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel
 - Joel 3
 - Daniel (second half)
 - Zechariah (last 2 chapters)
 - Intermittent sections of the NT
 - Apocalypse/Apocalypse of John/Revelation
- Many other texts from before and after that are apocalyptic in theme
 - Apocalypse of Adam
 - Apocalypse of Peter x2
 - Apocalypse of Paul x2
 - Apocalypse of James x2

Elements of Prophecy

- Prophecies can be quite blunt and straightforward

“J esus said to him, “Truly I say to you, during this night, before the rooster crowing, you will deny Me three times.” ... And P eter remembered the word of J esus, He having said, “Before the rooster crowing, you will deny Me three times.” And having gone out, he wept bitterly.” (Matt 26:34&75)

Elements of Prophecy

- Prophecies can be quite blunt and straightforward (Matt 26:34&75)
- More often, prophecies are conveyed through symbolism

“And it came to pass at the end of two years, that Pharaoh dreamed: and behold, he stood by the River. And behold, there came up out of the River seven cows, well favoured, and fat of flesh; and they fed in the reed grass. And behold, seven other cows came up after them out of the River, ill favoured and lean of flesh; and stood by the other cows upon the brink of the River. And the ill favoured and lean fleshed cows ate up the seven well favoured and fat cows. So, Pharaoh awoke.” (Gen 41:1-4)

Elements of Prophecy

- Prophecies can be quite blunt and straightforward (Matt 26:34&75)
- More often, prophecies are conveyed through symbolism (Gen 41:1-4)
- These symbols often need a prophetic figure to interpret the prophecy correctly

“As for thee, O king, thy thoughts came to thee upon thy bed, as to what should come to pass hereafter: and he who reveals secret things makes known to thee what shall come to pass. But as for me, this secret is not revealed to me for any wisdom that I have more than any living, but in order that the interpretation shall be made known to the king, and that thou mightest know the thoughts of thy heart.” (Dan 2:29-30)

Other Definitions

- Eschatology is the study of the final events of the world and humankind
- Reception refers to how a text is given a plain language meaning through interpretation
- Armageddon is a composite name probably related to a mountain that deals with the final battle in Rev 16
- Ask me about any others that come up...

Our First Problem

- Many apocalyptic texts do not contain a plain language reading
- They also contain information that we are to use to understand the unfolding plan of God
- This leads into eschatology and reception history
- Christadelphians have not been shy when it comes to providing interpretations of these texts, especially given our origins

Quick History

- John Thomas was well involved in the Adventist movement during the broader Restorationist movement amongst Protestant Christians
 - Aimed at restoring early church practices
 - Denied the validity of any ecumenical council
 - Adamant on the soon coming second advent, the Apocalypse
- Never found a place where he felt that people did not compromise their honest searching of the scriptures
- John Thomas' most seminal works are *Elpis Israel* and *Eureka*
- The details of the Apocalypse were 'intelligible mysteries'
 - Through study we may come to know the specifics

Our Second Problem

- Prophecies interpreted through a historicist lens have confirmable predictions
- Some of these came true, but many did not
 - John Thomas himself edited these points in future editions of both works
 - Did not help with language such as “undeniable” and “incontrovertible”
- The identity of former symbols in past events are also subject to some speculation
 - Quite possible some events are improperly interpreted based on faulty evidence
- Let us take a look at two examples of our own reception history

Prophecy of Israel

- Many times the Jews were removed from their land

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring upon this city and upon all her towns all the evil that I have pronounced against it, because they have made their necks stiff, that they might not hear my words.” (Jer 19:15)

“And when you see Jerusalem being encircled by encampments, then know that her desolation has drawn near. Then those in Judea, let them flee to the mountains; and those in her midst, let them depart out; and those in the countries, let them not enter into her.” (Luke 21:20-21)

Prophecy of Israel

- Many times the Jews were removed from their land (Jer 19:15; Luke 21:20-21)
- Israel was long prophesied to be scattered across the world

“And I will scatter thee among the nations, and disperse thee in the countries, and will consume thy uncleanness out of thee.” (Eze 22:15)

Prophecy of Israel

- Many times the Jews were removed from their land (Jer 19:15; Luke 21:20-21)
- Israel was long prophesied to be scattered across the world (Eze 22:15)
- They would eventually be restored

“I will whistle to them and gather them; for I have redeemed them: and they shall increase as they have before increased. And I will sow them among the peoples: and they shall remember me in far countries; and they shall live with their children and shall return.” (Zech 10:8-9)

Prophecy of Israel

“It is a book, not for these times only, but for all the years preceding "the time of the end", and thence to the epoch of the restoration of the kingdom and throne of David. It is named ELPIS ISRAEL, or Israel's Hope: for the kingdom of which it treats is that which is longed for by all intelligent Israelites, and for which, said Paul, "I am bound with this chain." (Elpis Israel, xix)

“Now, let it never be forgotten in the investigation of the things of the kingdom of God,” that the Israelites have never possessed the country as defined in this survey since it was revealed to them through the prophet. The twelve tribes have not even occupied the land together; and those of them that have dwelt there after the return from Babylon to the overthrow by the Romans, held but a very small portion of it, while the Gentile Kingdoms lorded it over all the rest.” (Elpis Israel, 237)

Prophecy of Israel

- At the time this was stated, Jews lived abroad in various countries
- They had been consistently expelled from various countries, such as Spain in the 15th century
- Active movement of all Jews in Russia into the region of Poland
- Cultural genocide was practiced by every countries with a significant Jewish population
- Jews only had legal equality in France though more countries granted this in the latter half of the 19th century
- One of the most powerful Islamic empires ruled their land
- It was a “bad bet”

Prophecy of Israel

- It is likely then that the re-establishment of Israel is what was indeed prophesied
- It was an improbable event
- Not completely to the vision of John Thomas
 - Thought they would initially control the land promised to Abraham
- These prophecies are generally more easy to interpret
 - Lack a lot of the symbolism that can cause for difficult interpretation



Bowls of Wrath

- First bowl associated with the beginning of the French Revolution
- Second bowl associated with the British naval victories over the French
- Third bowl associated with Napoleon's victories on land
- Fourth bowl associated with the dissolution of the HRE by Napoleon
- Fifth bowl associated with the subjugation of the Papal States
- Sixth bowl associated with the Ottoman Empire dissolving and the unleashing of the three frog-like spirits



Sixth Bowl of Wrath

- What exactly is said of the sixth bowl of wrath?

“And the sixth poured out his bowl upon the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way might be prepared of the kings of the rising of the sun. And I saw coming out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits, like frogs; for they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go forth to the kings of the whole inhabited world, to gather them together unto the battle of the great day of God the Almighty.” (Rev 16:12-14)

Sixth Bowl of Wrath

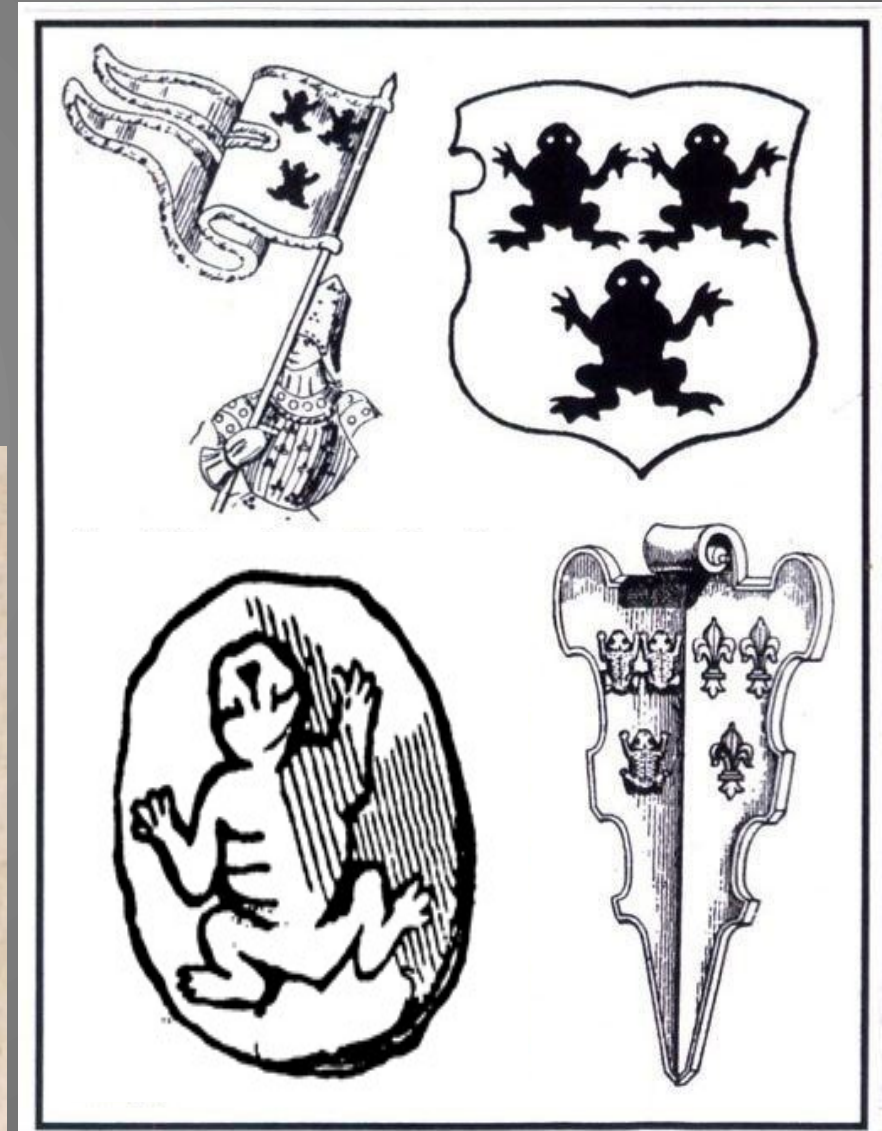
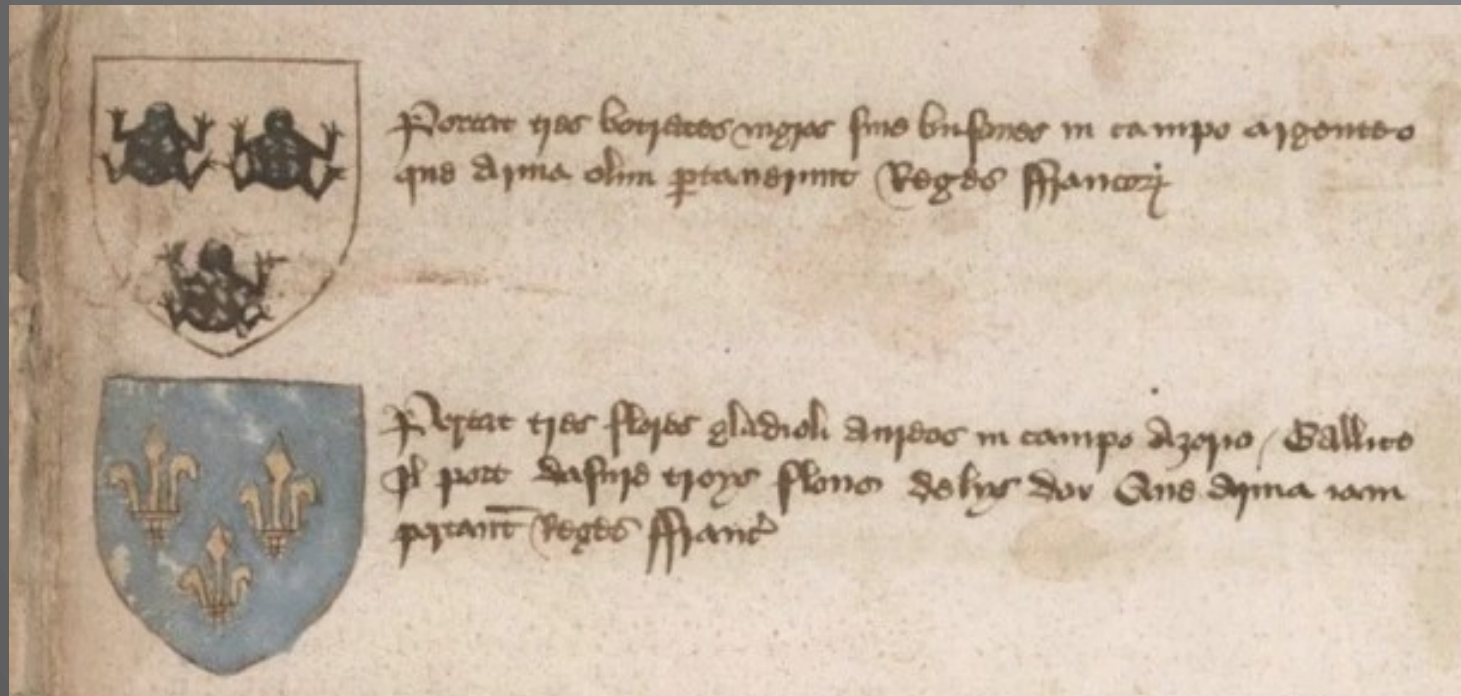
- What is the great river Euphrates?
- Many writers from the 16th to 19th century saw the Ottoman Empire as the Euphrates
 - They occupied this territory at the time these authors wrote
- In the 19th century, many successful rebellions and conquests made it clear the Ottoman Empire was going to fall
- The Euphrates has been slowly drying since this time period and to this very day
- It may be said that the sixth trumpet and sixth vial are in some way coinciding events, but this isn't particularly clear
- The sixth bowl is understood here to release the barrier for the kings of the east who are related then to the return of Christ

Sixth Bowl of Wrath

- What are the three unclean spirits?
- When the Euphrates dries up and the path is clear to Armageddon, three spirits go out and corrupt the nations to deceive them into battle
- Described as “frogs”
- Only place we have seen frogs previously is in Exodus 8
- May be the case that the author is contrasting false miracle working with the miracles performed by God
- May also be referencing the general unclean nature associated with frogs in a dietary sense
- John Thomas associates these frog-like spirits with the Second Empire of France
 - Not Napoleon’s empire, the lesser known empire from 1852-1870 run by his nephew

Sixth Bowl of Wrath

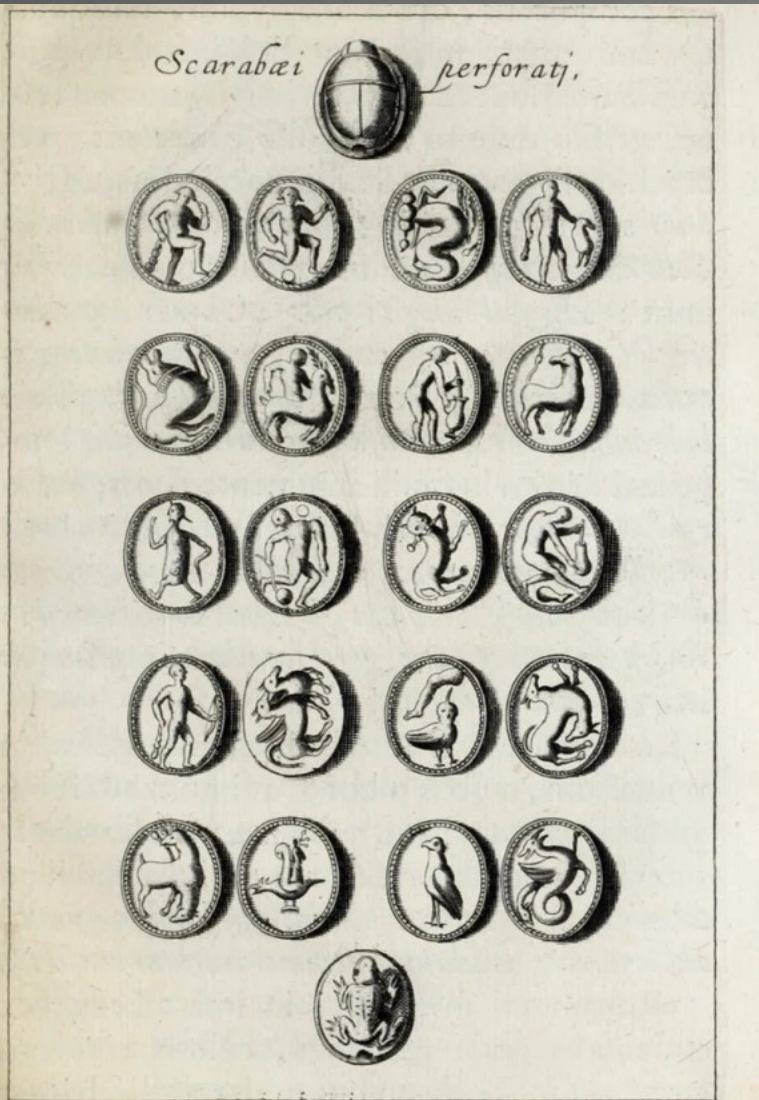
- Why France?
- In some late medieval and early modern sources, the original French kings were said to be represented by frogs



Sixth Bowl of Wrath

- Several issues
- Montfaucon accidentally included several Egyptian icons alongside those found in Childeric's tomb

Sixth Bowl of Wrath



Sixth Bowl of Wrath

- Several issues
- Montfaucon accidentally included several Egyptian icons alongside those found in Childeric's tomb
- Other symbols are clearly not authentic
 - Not authentic to the 5th century when Clovis lived
- This is a later story to symbolize a ruler going from a pagan background to a Christian one



Sixth Bowl of Wrath

- How did the French become associated with frogs?
- Might be due to the popular consumption of frog legs or a mocking of the peasant class that come from marshlands surrounding Paris
- English pejorative, not a self utilized symbol
- The longstanding animal symbols of France are
 - Bee
 - Eagle
 - Rooster



Our Third Problem

- The events of the 19th century that inspired this reception have come and gone
- The events of the sixth bowl of wrath directly proceed the second advent
- If we hold to this initial reception, then we have a problem with timing
- This is a common problem in historicist explanations, we come close to trying to know the hour or the day when Christ returns
 - We cannot

Our Fourth Problem

- People overemphasize the problems of their age as being uniquely impact on the history of the world

“Our Earth is degenerate in these latter days; there are signs that the world is speedily coming to an end; bribery and corruption are common; children no longer obey their parents; every man wants to write a book and the end of the world is evidently approaching”

(Akkadian tablet, 2800BC)

Our Fourth Problem

- People overemphasize the problems of their age as being uniquely impact on the history of the world
- When John Thomas was writing, the revolutionary spirit that shaped much of the 19th century was still strong
 - It would be like us writing about the impacts of the Cold War
- This is consistent through reception history, there is a huge three-part encyclopedia of Apocalypticism that just scratches the surface
- We are no better; I sometimes see menial changes in public policy described as fulfilling this passage or that passage

Considerations for Interpretation

- I am not saying the prophecy we have is unreliable, far from it
- We should be more careful in our pursuits of eschatology
- We should cleanly separate out prophecy from our own interpretation
- We should try our best to read the signs and the times without attaching an expected date of return
- We should be hesitant to ascribe too much weight in the age we live in as being uniquely important

“And we have the more certain prophetic word, to which you do well taking heed, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until this day shall have dawned and the morning star shall have arisen in your hearts.” (2 Pet 1:19)