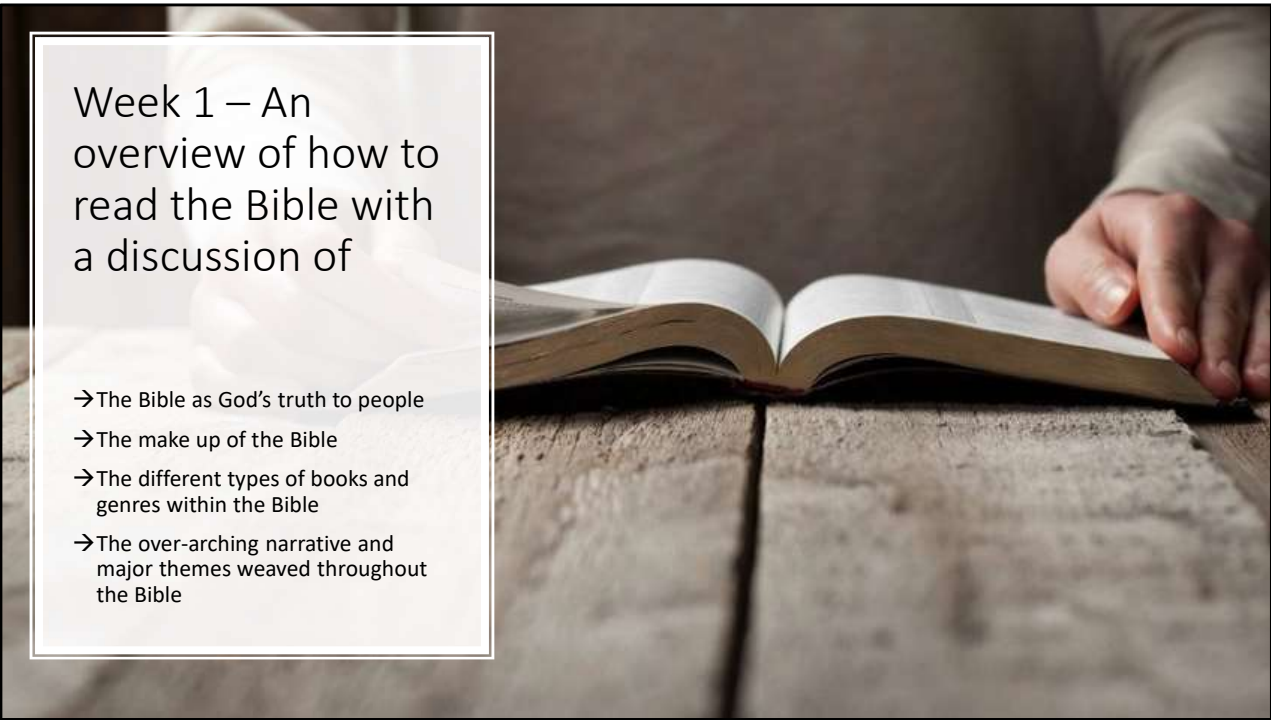




# Reading Prophetic Literature

Graham Grove, 2019

A photograph of a person's hands resting on an open Bible, which is placed on a rustic wooden surface. The person is wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

## Week 1 – An overview of how to read the Bible with a discussion of

- The Bible as God's truth to people
- The make up of the Bible
- The different types of books and genres within the Bible
- The over-arching narrative and major themes weaved throughout the Bible

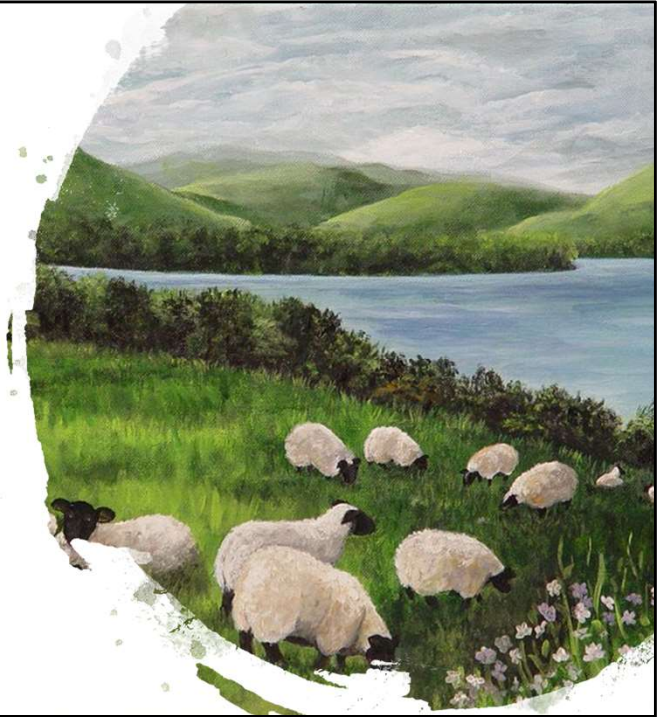



## Week 2 – Narrative

- A review of the big picture of story of Israel culminating in Jesus
  - Creation
  - The history of the patriarchs and the call of God to save all people through Abraham
  - Exodus and the grace of God seen in the Commandments
  - The time of Judges
  - The time of kings with a unified country
  - The time of two kingdoms
- The Exile
- The return
- The time of silence
- Jesus and the Gospels
- The church going to the nations
- A grammatic-historical hermeneutic - Interpreting passages based on context
  - Literary context
  - Historical context

## Week 3 – Poetry and Wisdom

- A review of the poetic and wisdom books and passages within other books
- Understanding the literary devices in Hebrew poetry
  - Parallelism
  - Imagery and metaphor





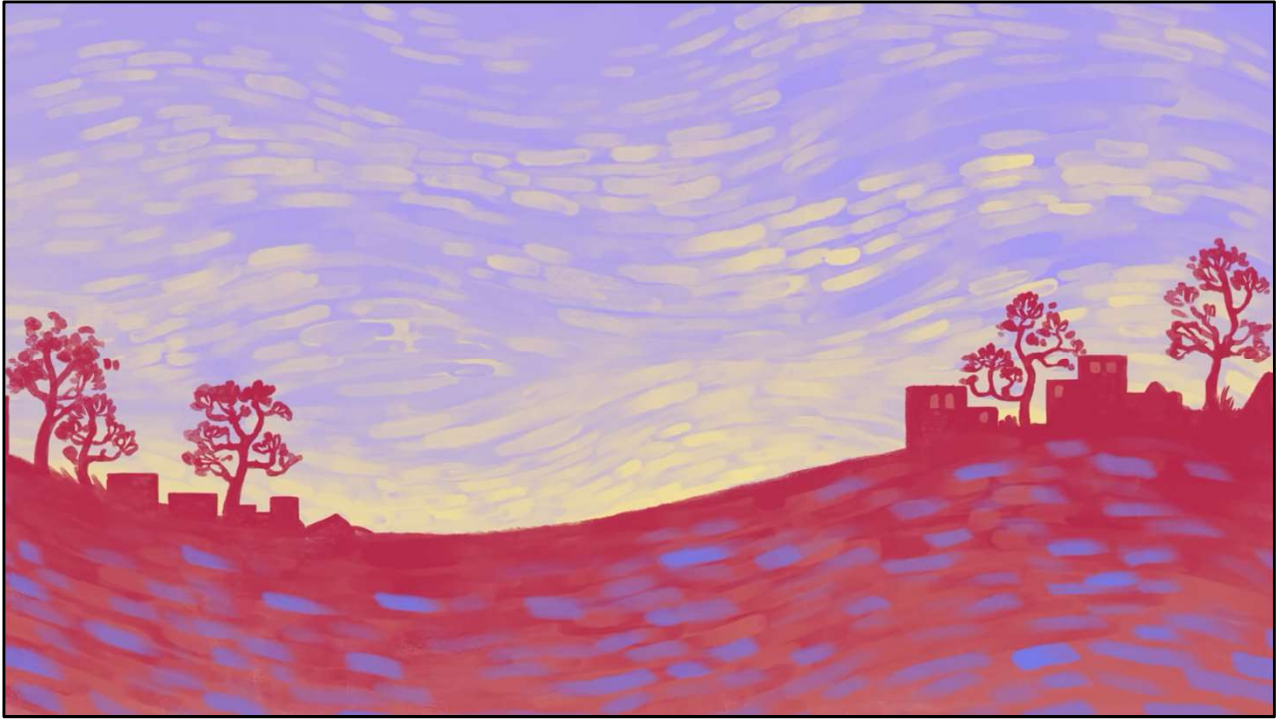
Which brings  
us to the  
Prophets!

Think back to before you were a Christian or when you first became a Christian and when you first heard of the Old Testament prophets...

At this time:

What came mind when you thought of the prophets?

What did you think the prophets were all about?



## The prophets gave:

A message from God about God

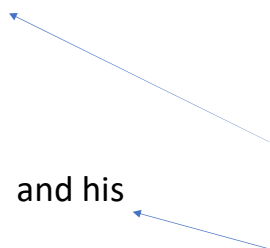
A message for and about the present

A message about the future

A message about the coming king and his kingdom

Theologians who proclaimed  
God's word to his people,  
preaching about the working  
and will of God – past, present  
and future

Two main aspects:  
Calling out failures and calling  
for repentance  
And  
Giving God's hope and vision  
for the future



## The prophets contain

A mix of:

- Poetry and Prose with
  - Startling images
  - Humour and outrageous puns
  - Scolding satire
- Narrative

They contain:

- Visions
- Laments
- Denunciations
- Calls for repentance
- Oracles

Terminology: Lament?  
Denunciation? Oracle?



## Fact Detour: Books that are primarily prophetic in genre

Major prophets
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations (who wrote this?)
Ezekiel
Daniel (Apocalyptic)

New Testament Apocalypse
Revelation (who wrote this?)

Minor prophets
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah (Narrative)
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

# Poetry or prophecy?

*Prophecy is translucent – it gives incomplete details*

Much of prophetic literature is also poetry

Skills for interpreting poetry can be applied to prophecy

Commonly used poetic literary devices

- Metaphor

- Hyperbole

- Parallelism

“He will make oppressors eat their own flesh  
and drink their own blood” (Isaiah 34:9)

“He will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands  
like the garden of the Lord” (Isaiah 51:3)

“The life blood  
of prophecy”



## Context

*Historical context is important*

Prophets can be divided into:  
8<sup>th</sup> century prophets and pre-exilic prophets  
Exilic and post-exilic prophets

Terminology: Exile?

## The prophets in history

Habakkuk (?) Joel (?)

Northern Israel  
Destruction (722 BC)

Amos (760-746 BC) Jonah (759 BC)  
Hosea (750 BC)  
Isaiah (740-700 BC) Micah (737-696 BC)

Babylonian Exile (587 BC)

Nahum (630 BC) Zephaniah (641-610 BC)  
Jeremiah (626 – 587 BC) Daniel (604 BC)  
Ezekiel (6<sup>th</sup> century)  
Lamentations (6<sup>th</sup> century) Obadiah (6<sup>th</sup> century)

Zechariah (520-518 BC) Haggai (520 BC)  
Malachi (420 BC)



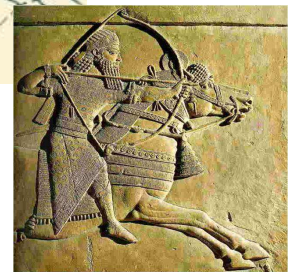
Recap on the 8<sup>th</sup> century

Prophets:

- Isaiah + Micah to Judah
- Amos + Hosea to Israel

Message of:

- Broken covenant seen in the
  - Disintegration of society
  - Religious corruption
- Announcement of judgement
- With a call to repentance
- And a promise of restoration



Ezekiel → Glory of Lord symbolizes presence of God with his people – was in the temple but Ezekiel shows how God was with those in Exile (and that God had abandoned the Temple, Jerusalem and Judah) but that he would bring restoration  
Ezekiel → Old kingship inadequate, new kingship will be Davidic and over a united people but as an under-shepherd who will have a special relationship to God

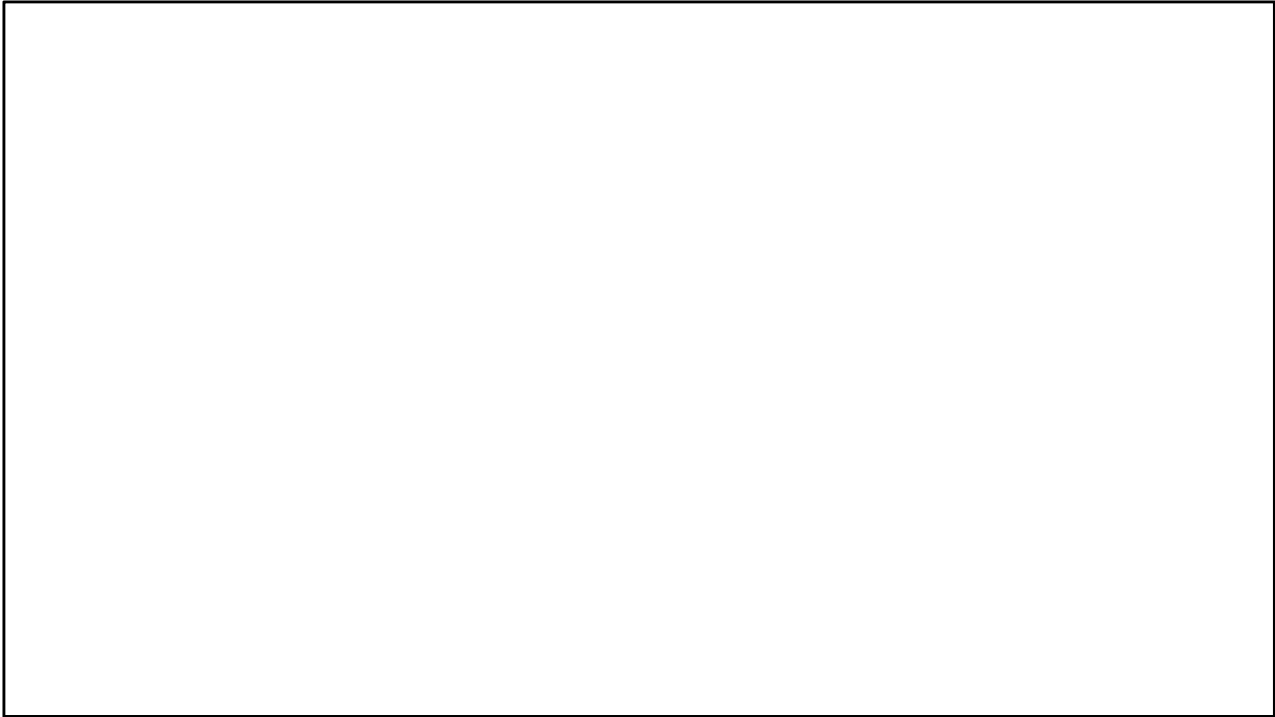
Isaiah 7:18-25

- About Judah's coming devastation by Assyria because of Ahaz's lack of faith in Yahweh
- Prophecy spoken to Ahaz between 736 and 734 BC
- Ahaz paid tribute to Assyria to attack Israel and Syria (2 Kings 16) rather than remain faithful to Yahweh (2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28) → Israel was then conquered by Assyria which then proceeded to exert pressure on Judah
- Fulfilled in 701 BC when Judah was invaded by Sennacherib in Hezekiah's reign
- Verses 1-9 → Ahaz needn't fear his enemies if he trusts God
- Verses 10-16 → Ahaz rejected trust in Yahweh; note the Christological prophecy of a virgin giving birth to a son called Immanuel occurs here

- Verses 17-25 → message of judgement against Judah because of Ahaz; note the image of reversal – good, populated land becoming depopulated wilderness

#### Ezekiel 12

- Vision some time between 598 and 587 in the exilic community of Tel-abib
- Literary context → Ezekiel had seen the glory of the Lord departing the Temple because of the people's idolatry and in chapter 11 the Lord left Jerusalem revealing he would bring destruction to the city but also promising a remnant would be returned with a new heart
- 1-20 – two sign actions → relate to coming judgement and destruction of those in Jerusalem
- Application → listen to God's messenger (and for us this means the Bible); god will fulfil what he has promised



## Worked example: Isaiah 7:17-25

Read Isaiah 7:17-25

What's the historical context?

→ Prophecy spoken to Ahaz (king of Judah) around 735 BC

→ Ahaz paid tribute to Assyria to attack Israel (2 Kings 16:7) and he put his trust in Assyrian gods (2 Kings 16:10) rather than remain faithful to God

What about the literary context?

→ Isaiah 7:1-9 → Ahaz needn't fear his enemies if he trusts God

→ Isaiah 7:10-16 → Ahaz rejected the message and command that God sent him

Read Isaiah 7:17-25 again

Describe the emotion of the passage.

What's the key theme then of 17-25 to Judah?

→ Because Ahaz rejected God and would not trust him, there would be judgement against Judah

So how can that speak to us today?



## Present orientation: Workshop

Read Amos 1-2

→How did it speak to people it was written to?

→Who might be the equivalent of Israel in our context?

→Therefore – how should it speak to us

Prophecy speaks about the present to those in the present but warns of (and gives hope about) the future

Predictive prophecy is difficult to interpret

Prophets saw visions and had insights about the future but no way of differentiating timing of events, so that

- Some prophecy speaks about the very near future
- Some prophecy speaks about the coming of Christ
- Some prophecy speaks about the second coming and beyond

Prophecy can be conditional

Many prophecies have 2 (or sometimes more) fulfilments

- One in the near future
- The other in the far future

The Bible is our main aid in predictive prophecy

- The Bible itself often tells us which prophecies were fulfilled during the OT and NT periods
- In most instances, NT writers applied OT prophecies concerning Israel and Zion to the church

## *Future orientation*



Terminology: Zion? Israel?

## Future orientation

Approach predictive prophecy with caution + humility

- Clarity of text determines degree of confidence in interpreting
- Bible itself often interprets prophecy
- Strive to understand major theme rather than all details
- Ask questions about purpose, e.g.
  - Was the purpose of this prophecy to
    - (a) encourage perseverance
    - (b) warn of accountability
    - (c) something else?
  - What does it say about
    - God's nature
    - Nature of people
    - Sin
    - Hope
- *What modern life situations are similar to the one addressed by the prophecy?*

Read Isaiah 11:1-12

What was the historical context? What was the current king like?

- During the time of Ahaz (king of Judah) – an evil king
- This was a time of war, oppression and suffering
- During this time Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel

What's the main theme and emotion conveyed?

- A future king is coming and his kingdom will be good

What will the future king be like? He will...

- Rise from David's family (because God is faithful to his promises)
- Be good and bring wisdom (verses 2-3)
- Be just, protecting the innocent and bringing justice against the oppressor (verses 4-5)
- Bring peace (verses 6-9)
- Will rule all peoples (verse 10) and restore the lost (verses 11)

How does the Bible itself interpret this prophecy?

- Jesus is this future king
- The peace he brought though wasn't through a political kingdom – it was through forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God

Has this prophecy been fulfilled? Does this prophecy have one or two fulfillments?

## Future orientation: worked example



Note the imagery  
– this is truth but  
it is not literal

## Recap on the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> century

Prophets:

- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel
- Daniel
- Many of the minor prophets

Time of:

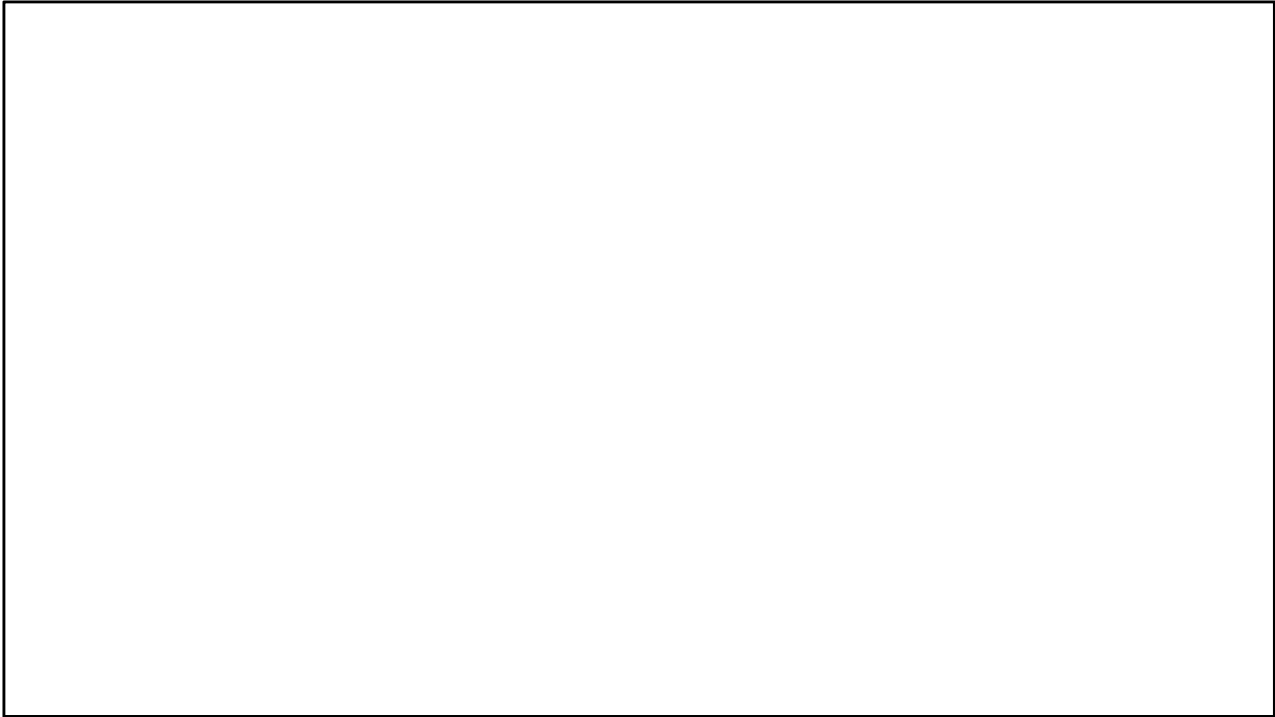
- Sieges and exile (605 and 597) and the destruction of Jerusalem (586)

Message of:

- Judgement for abandoning God
- God remaining with his people
- A future hope of restoration







## Present orientation: worked example

Read Ezekiel 12:21-28

What was the historical context?

→ This vision occurred some time between 597 and 587 in the exilic community of Tel-abib but before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple

What was the literary context?

→ Ezekiel had seen the glory of the Lord leave the Temple in Jerusalem because of people's idolatry revealing he would bring destruction on the city

Read 12:21-28 again – What is the message the people of the day were meant to hear?

→ Listen to God's message and act accordingly; heed his warning of judgement

How is this message relevant to us?

→ Like the Israelites of old, we too have a message from God – for us this is not found in a living prophet but in the Bible – so let's take heed of this message and the warnings inside, in particular, worshipping and placing our faith in things other than God will lead to our ultimate destruction



## Future orientation: workshop

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14

What was the historical context? What had happened to the Israelite people of Judah and to their nation? Why had this happened?

How does God explain the prophecy to Ezekiel - What do the dry bones represent? What does breathing life into them represent?

In the light of Jesus and Pentecost, how can we additionally interpret the meaning of these dry bones and breathing life back into them for today?

In the light of Revelation, how can we add a third layer of future orientation into this prophecy?

# Apocalyptic Literature

= a genre of prophetic writing of visions brought by a heavenly messenger about the end times

Apocalypse in the Bible

→ Daniel 7-12

→ Revelation

→ Parts of Joel, Zechariah and Isaiah

Features include:

→ Determinism – history has been predetermined by God

→ Revelation via visions

→ Symbolism – and understanding symbols helps us determine meaning

# Revelation – The Setting



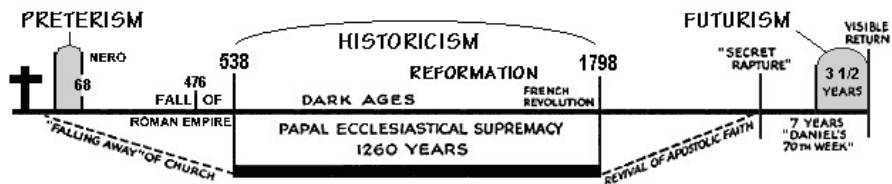


## Revelation – The Style

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## Revelation – views on interpreting

Preterist	Specific events from the Cross to the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD)
Historicist	Specific events from the Cross through the history of Rome, the Middle Ages, Reformation and through to today
Futurist	Specific events at some unknown time in the future
Idealist	Imagery describing these throughout history but not specific historical events



## Understanding Apocalypse

Set modest goals – don't try to understand everything

Remember that the primary purpose of apocalyptic literature was to encourage suffering saints, not spell out details of future

Establish the theological thrust of the passage – what is God saying to his suffering people?

Take symbols and numbers seriously, but not literally

Ask – how would the original readers have understood this?

Approach humbly - don't draw parallels to historical events too quickly and without significant thought

\* Remember humility \*  
\* Don't over-interpret \*

# Workshop

Read Revelation 12:1-6

What was the historical context? Who was the vision initially for?

What are the emotions you feel? Who or what is good? Who or what is bad?

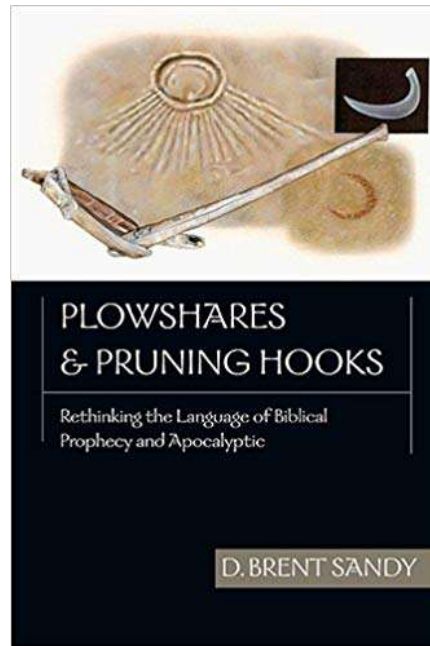
Are there any numbers or other symbols that you think you know the meaning of?

What events in history might this represent? What general concept could this vision represent? What Could this represent any general themes to do with good and evil?

What is the key theme that you see in this vision for the original readers and listeners?

How does this message speak to you today?

A worthwhile read →







Thanks!  
Next week → Reading the Letters