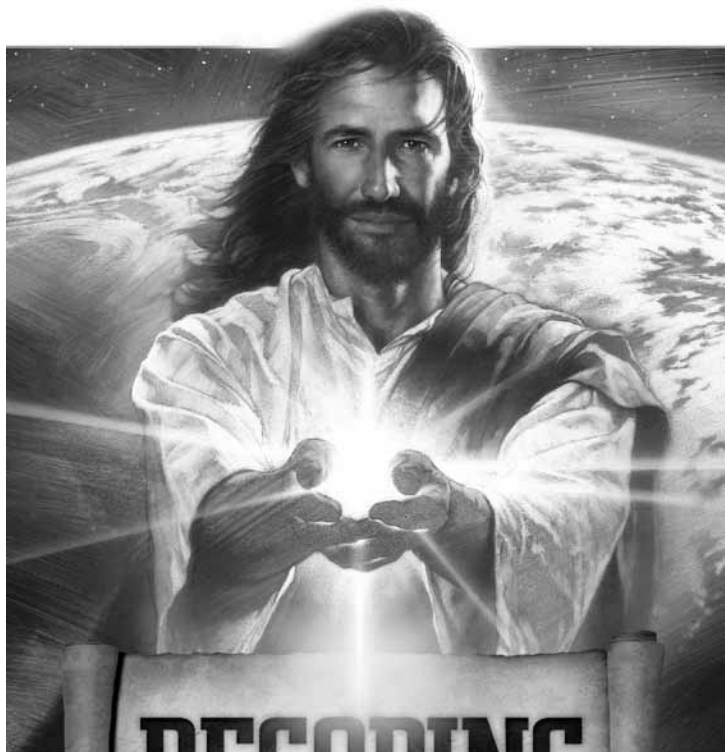


RON E. M. CLOUZET



**DECODING
BIBLE PROPHECY**



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To Lisa Lynn,
my loving wife and faithful ministry partner

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INTRODUCTION

“Judgment Day May 21.”

Having captured my attention, the large billboard on NW Fourteenth Avenue in Orlando, Florida, went on to proclaim: “The Bible Guarantees It.” You likely saw this billboard, too. There were twelve hundred of them scattered over America’s highways and major intersections, plus another two thousand across the rest of the world. Tens of thousands of believers distributed literature in every major city and painted, “Save the Date! Return of Christ. May 21, 2011,” on bus benches and even on their own cars, warning people of the day of reckoning.

In spite of many skeptics, Harold Camping, president and general manager of Family Radio, convinced hundreds of thousands that the looming Judgment Day of May 21 was exactly what the Bible predicts. But of course the day came and went without incident, and Camping set yet another date for doomsday.

The truth is that the Bible did not—and does not—proclaim the date for the end of the world, no matter how large the letters on the billboards. There is every reason to believe Harold Camping is a sincere and faithful Christian, but the conclusions of his Bible study—published on his Web site for all to see—leave much to be desired. He simply ignored basic

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rules of biblical interpretation.

You may wonder, *If godly people who make a habit of studying the Bible can miss it by a mile, what about the rest of us? How can we ever understand complex Bible prophecy?* The Pharisees during the time of Christ were professional Bible students, yet they missed the greatest event ever—the coming of their Messiah!

You need not despair. Jesus said that God’s Word, the Bible, “is truth” (John 17:17), and that if we know the truth, the truth will make us free from the devil, who “does not stand in the truth” (John 8:44). Paul commended a young man by the name of Timothy for studying the Scriptures, which made him “complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17). If Timothy could be so successful studying the Bible, so can you.

Keep reading. Help is on the way. In this little book, you will learn basic, sound principles of Bible and prophetic interpretation that will help you avoid basic pitfalls when studying God’s Word. You will learn the meaning of mysterious symbols and the key to deciphering major prophecies. You will get into some specific passages of Scripture and come out at the end, saying, “So that’s what that’s all about!”

Millions today misinterpret Bible prophecy, in part because they don’t know how to study it or because they trust others who supposedly know more than they do. Hang in there! Bible prophecy was meant to be a great blessing, and Satan knows it. He will try his best to bring confusion instead of clarity.

Make no mistake, this is a small book, but is not light reading. We get right to it in each chapter. Some statements and Bible references deserve more development, but this is not the book for that. Don’t worry about some things that may

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not be perfectly clear yet. Commend yourself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit as you read. Seek to know God's will and His ways. And if something still does not make sense, be patient. God will put you in contact with further help.

At the end of the first century, the angel of the Lord made a promise to John the revelator that we can still believe today: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Revelation 1:3).

The blessing is promised. Let's begin without delay!

CHAPTER 1

PROPHECY: A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH

David Koresh claimed to have the gift of prophecy, the gift to understand God's messages and convey them to his followers. The leader of a religious cult known as the Branch Davidians, Koresh considered himself to be the spiritual descendant of the biblical King David. He developed the "House of David Doctrine," which meant fathering twenty-four children with different women, some only teenagers. These children, he said, would one day serve as ruling elders during the millennium after the return of Christ.

Acting on reports of illegal weapons and child molestation, federal authorities besieged Koresh's Mount Carmel compound near Waco, Texas, for fifty-one days, seeking to enter. The standoff ended on April 19, 1993, with the now-infamous conflagration at Waco that left seventy-six dead, including at least seventeen children—and David Koresh himself.

"I am the Lamb," Koresh proclaimed to his flock, asserting his status as messiah, and "you are Koreshians." Revelation was his favorite Bible book. He also saw himself in the ancient Persian king Cyrus who was God's instrument of deliverance for the children of Israel after their Babylonian captivity (see Isaiah 44:28–45:4). "My Father, my God who sits on the throne in heaven, has given me a book of seven seals. . . . If America could learn these seals, they would respect me. I'm

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the anointed one. . . . It's the fulfillment of prophecy," he would preach.

In 1995, two years to the day after David Koresh died, Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in retaliation for what he considered to be the government's abuse of power against Koresh's cult. One hundred sixty-eight persons died, and almost seven hundred were injured.¹

The Koresh and McVeigh stories are extreme examples of what can happen when otherwise decent people misinterpret the nature and purpose of Bible prophecy. It becomes a matter of life or death. Surprisingly often, good and evil, truth and falsehood, are indistinguishable for us human beings. This is due to our sinful human nature. Light often appears dark, and the dark we take for light. "There is a way that seems right to a man," wrote wise Solomon, "but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25).

The nature of the prophetic word

Knowing our problem, God, in His marvelous concern for our welfare, devised a way to make up for that difficulty. It's called *revelation*. He revealed Himself—His will and His truth—through numerous prophets through the centuries of time, so we could actually tell what is truth from what isn't. A relatively small, yet sufficient, portion of that revelation was written down. We call that written portion the "Bible" or "God's Word." Such *special* revelation is God's gift to us. Paying attention to it brings life. Ignoring it leaves us like sitting ducks for Satan's imps to blow us right out of the water.

"And so we have the prophetic word confirmed," wrote the apostle Peter, "which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises

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in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:19–21).

This statement is a mouthful, worthy of at least a brief analysis. Four concepts come to mind. First, Peter calls the Bible “the prophetic word.” He does so simply because the Bible was written by prophets, that is, individuals who spoke for God. The Greek *prophetes* (prophet) means “foreteller.” So, God’s Word is a *prophetic* word. However, prophecies are not *only* statements that have to do with the future—*predictive* prophecy. There is also *prescriptive* prophecy, or present truth. In other words, the prophets in the Bible not only *foretold* things to come, but they also *forthtold* things; they proclaimed eternal truth. Most of what we find in the Bible is not predictive in nature, but prescriptive.² Either way, the important thing, says Peter, is “to heed” God’s Word “as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns” in our hearts.

This point is critical. If we ignore what God said through His prophets, we will continue to abide in “a dark place.” Have you ever been temporarily blind? All you want is to come to the light. Every fiber in your being longs for light so you can see things around you as they really are. This is why God’s prophets in the Old Testament were also known as “seers” (see 1 Samuel 9:9). Darkness distorts your perspective, stops your progress, and renders you vulnerable to falls and injuries. Light is life. God’s Word is regenerative; it produces something in us that was otherwise dead. Note what God said in Isaiah 55:8–11:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.

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“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.
For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven,
And do not return there,
But water the earth,
And make it bring forth and bud,
That it may give seed to the sower
And bread to the eater,
So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

But now back to Peter’s enlightening statement. Have you noticed he said we should pay attention to the word of prophecy “until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19)? What does that mean? Is that a mere reference to daylight following night? No. In the Bible, the “morning star” is a reference to Jesus Christ! “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am . . . the Bright and Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16). So, the explicit objective of all Bible prophecy is for readers to discover Jesus in the text.

This is the clear objective of the book of Revelation from the very start. The book begins with the words: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His servants” (Revelation 1:1). Most Bible readers understand that classical prophecy speaks directly to ethical and moral issues based on the fact that they have a relationship with God. What they don’t often realize is that apocalyptic prophecy—prophecy dealing with the end times—also speaks to ethical

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issues in our lives. Whatever God says there is not only for our information, but especially for our transformation. And the reason is the tie with Jesus. As we study prophecy, Christ Himself becomes more clear to us, and we feel compelled to surrender to His loving and just will for our lives.

How God inspired His Word

Thirdly, Peter's statement informs us who really is behind this Word of God: holy men of God who spoke "as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). The Bible is not a book written by holy men, such as certain documents that some religions see as sacred because they were written by men considered holy. Being "holy" is not enough to discern right from wrong. It doesn't mean perfection. Holy men are responsive to God, but they are still men. Peter declares, however, that the Bible was written by the Holy *Spirit*, that is, by God Himself, who inspired the holy men who walked humbly with Him.

There is an important implication to this point. Many people assume that because the Bible is God's Word it cannot reflect the frailties of the human instrumentalities He used to reveal it to us. But that is a misunderstanding of the inspiration process. The apostle Paul said that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God . . . that the man [or woman] of God may be complete" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). The Greek word translated as "inspiration" is *theopneustos*, which literally means "God-breathed." God the Holy Spirit *breathed* His words and thoughts to the prophet. The prophet, then, wrote them down in his own words.

Except for the Ten Commandments and those places in the Bible where we find a "thus says the Lord," God did not dictate words to the prophets, but inspired them with thoughts, fully engaging their minds in the communication process. The

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writers' unique personalities, language skills, and personal experiences were preserved in the process. The prophets were not holy word processors but holy *men*, subject to the weaknesses and failures of men. Take, for instance, the book of Revelation, a book of apocalyptic prophecy. Scholars agree that John's Revelation is written in a peculiar form of Hebraized Greek, due to his constant use of Old Testament imagery and phraseology. Some believe that his use of the *Koine* (common) Greek is not linguistically perfect because he first wrote the book in his Aramaic mother tongue.³

Another example where the individuality of the Bible writers is apparent is in the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If God had dictated His words to the Gospel writers, all four would have used the same wording for each related incident. But the authors had different objectives in writing the story of Jesus.⁴ It is the different wording and nuanced details in each Gospel that show how God worked through each prophet or apostle just as he was.

Perhaps an analogy will help us better understand. If two men are walking by a busy city street and witness a collision at the corner, when authorities ask them what they saw, they are likely to use different words and even emphasize different details in their reports. Both stories are true and complement one another, but they are not identical.

Regardless of human limitations, God's Word "is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, . . . and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). God's Word "is a lamp" to our feet "and a light" to our path (Psalm 119:105). It is quite categorically the infallible Word of God even if written in human language. The reason? Its authors were men "moved" by the Holy Spirit.

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Misinterpreting prophecy

One last point from Peter's comprehensive statement is that "no prophecy of Scripture is of any *private* interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man" (2 Peter 1:20, 21; emphasis supplied). This is very important. The Bible is not to be interpreted any way we wish. Many Christians today read the Bible and say, "This is what it means to me." In other words, "It doesn't really matter what the Bible *says*; what matters is what it says *to me*." This is a very dangerous attitude. If we are to accept the words of the prophets as God's messages to His people, our objective should be to find out what *God* is actually saying—not what we would like Him to say.

Theologians and Bible scholars have two nifty words for this concept. *Exegesis*, meaning "to guide," is the proper approach to Bible study. We, the students, place ourselves *under* the Word, to be guided by it. We let the Bible tell *us* its reality, and not the other way around. *Eisegesis*, on the other hand, means "to guide into." That is what many people, sometimes even scholars, do. They come to the Bible with a certain body of knowledge and presuppositions and impose these onto their reading of the text. *Eisegesis* is reading into the Scriptures what we think they should mean.

For example, in the well-known prophecy of seventy weeks of Daniel 9, we read, "And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, and till the end of the war desolations are determined" (verse 26). This is part of an important prophecy we'll be looking at later. For now, I'd like to focus on just one word—*prince*.

Most people assume this "prince" must be an evil individual, interpreting him as the antichrist of the end-time tribula-

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tion or as Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Seleucid king of the second century B.C. They consider this “prince” to be evil because of what the text says “the people of the prince” will do—destroy the city and the sanctuary, resulting in desolations, and so on. It’s true that King Antiochus did some things that desecrated the temple, but he never destroyed the city of Jerusalem, so he can’t be the “prince” mentioned in this prophecy. More importantly, however, neither Antiochus nor any other evil individual can possibly be the “prince” mentioned in verse 26, for the simple reason that the previous verse—verse 25—has already identified who the prince is! In verse 25, the angel tells Daniel, “Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem, until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times.”

Now, read that verse again. Do you see that the Bible itself identifies who this prince is? The prince is the Messiah! The fact that most English versions capitalize the word *prince* in verse 25 but not in verse 26 does not mean it’s not the same person in both verses. The Hebrew language in which the book of Daniel was originally written has no upper- and lowercase letters, so capitalization is a relatively modern tool that appears in Bible translations, but it is not an inspired tool found in the original languages—whether Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic.

Why, then, do people assume “the prince” in verse 26 is not Jesus and that it refers to some sort of evil prince or anti-christ? Because they read into the text what they have heard somewhere, were taught in the past, or assume based on other factors. They make the Bible fit into their frame of reference instead of making their thoughts fit into what the Bible says. When we come to a difficult Bible passage, the best thing to

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do is simply to allow the Bible to speak. That is the first rule of prophetic interpretation, as we will see later.

You may have more questions about the prophecy of Daniel 9, but be patient; we'll get to it in the next chapter and later.

You see the point, don't you? *Mis*interpreting Scripture can be very dangerous to your *spiritual* health. It can lead you astray. It can make you think a Bible text that applies to Jesus really applies to satanic agencies—the complete opposite of the Bible's intent. Even full-time students of the Bible, such as the Pharisees during the time of Jesus, fell into this trap. They interpreted Jesus' miracles as coming from the devil instead of coming from God (see Matthew 12:22–28).

Need for a surrendered heart

The Pharisees so easily misinterpreted Jesus' actions and words. For example, when He told them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), they thought He was speaking of the literal temple in Jerusalem, rather than metaphorically referring to Himself as the “temple” (see verse 19–21). The reason they so easily misunderstood was because their hearts were not right with God. They did not surrender themselves to God's Word even though publically they revered it. They made a pretense of loving it, but in reality they used it for their political or personal purposes. Jesus condemned that attitude. He said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition” (Mark 7:6–9).

What a profound statement, in the light of much of what happens in the name of religion today! Most misunderstand-

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ings about prophecy—or about the Bible in general—are due to religious tradition or to our own personal presuppositions. We just get used to thinking in a certain way or doing things a certain way, and become surrounded by others of like mind, all the while darkening counsel by our lack of understanding, as God accused Job of doing (see Job 38:2). In spite of a myriad of commentaries and endless books written on Bible subjects, confusion remains about what it really says.

A sound approach is to ask ourselves: “Am I really surrendered to God’s Word or do I hold on to certain interpretations of Scripture because I’ve become identified with them?” Sometimes, we feel that if we were to change our minds about what the Bible says on this or that point, we would lose a bit of our identity in the process. This can happen to any of us. But it is only as we surrender ourselves to God’s Word that the way is made clear to understand His will. Didn’t Jesus, the Master Himself, say, “If anyone wills [is willing] to do His [God’s] will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God” (John 7:17)? First, surrender your will to God, and then knowledge of God’s doctrine will follow.

“For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). In my travels all over America and the world, I have seen firsthand evidence of the power of God’s Word when people actually come *at* the Word with a submissive spirit of learning, rather than coming *to* the Word with preconceived ideas. Those belonging to the latter group cannot see what is so obviously before their eyes. The Spanish adage applies, “There is no worse blind man than the one who refuses to see.” But for those who come humbly before God’s testimonies, what light floods their souls; what joys fill their hearts; what insights flood their minds about the true love and character of God! This is life abundant!

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Prophecy and prosperity

A long time ago, Ahab, the wicked king of Israel who was married to Jezebel, invited Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, to join him in war against Syria at Ramoth Gilead. Jehoshaphat feared God and suggested they should “inquire for the word of the LORD” before doing so. Accordingly, Ahab “gathered the prophets together, four hundred men, and said to them, ‘Shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?’ ” (2 Chronicles 18:4, 5). These prophets, whose main objective was to please the king, said, “Go up, for God will deliver it into the king’s hand” (verse 5).

Jehoshaphat, suspicious of such a glib endorsement, asked Ahab if, perhaps, there was still “a prophet of the LORD” from whom to inquire (verse 6). So, they brought Micaiah, but as they did so, Ahab’s messenger told him, “Now listen. . . . Let your word be like the word of one of them [the four hundred prophets], and speak encouragement” (verse 12). But Micaiah considered faithfulness to God more important than agreeing with the king, so when he prophesied, he was true to God’s message. He warned Ahab that God had predicted that going to war would bring about Ahab’s death (see verse 19).

In spite of this prophecy, the kings joined forces and went to war against the king of Syria at Ramoth Gilead. Knowing God had said he’d perish there, Ahab put on a disguise so no enemy soldier would recognize he was the king of Israel and try to kill him (see verse 29). But someone shot a random arrow into the sky “and struck the king of Israel between the joints of his armor. . . . And about the time of sunset he died.” (verses 33, 34). So much for trying to outsmart God!

Just two chapters later, we read that the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Timmanites from Mount Seir joined forces—this time against Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. The king sought

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God's counsel, saying, "Our eyes are upon You" (2 Chronicles 20:12). He recognized that God can see clearly, while we cannot. He recognized that he must depend on God. God sent Jahaziel to the king of Judah and all the people. In God's name, Jahaziel told them to go to war and that they would not need to fight this battle, "for the battle is not yours, but God's" (verse 15). Based on this prophetic word from the Lord, Jehoshaphat did something as historic as it was amazing. He sent a choir ahead of the soldiers to meet the enemy! And "when they began to sing and to praise, the LORD set ambushes against the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; and they were defeated" (verse 22). The singing brought such confusion to these idolatrous nations that Ammon and Moab fought each other, including the inhabitants of Mount Seir, until they were destroyed (see verse 23).

The lesson? When Ahab refused to listen to God's prophecy, he died. But when Jehoshaphat listened to God's prophecy, even when it didn't make sense to fight three larger armies, he was victorious. The corollary of all this was immortalized in Jehoshaphat's admonition to the people of Judah: "Believe in the LORD your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper" (verse 20).

It's equally true today. Paying attention to the word of God's prophets is a matter of life or death. The book of Revelation declares, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Revelation 1:3).

Is the time near?