

Does “Soon” Mean Soon?

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The book of Revelation in the King James Version of the Bible begins with this prologue:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants *things which must shortly come to pass*; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: *for the time is at hand.* (Rev. 1:1-3)

Many have demonstrated that Revelation was probably written in the AD mid-sixties.¹ Proponents of this date are in a position to offer historical events as a possible fulfillment: the devastation of Judea culminating in the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. However, most Bible students have accepted an AD mid-nineties date for this prophecy. Since no events from the year 90 through to the present appear to qualify as the fulfillment, they conclude that Revelation can't be fulfilled. This introduces tremendous tension: How can “shortly” be reconciled with a prophecy that remains unfulfilled after more than 1,900 years? Two common responses have evolved:

1. Some suggest that the original Greek for “shortly” does not really mean that at all; it means *suddenly*. It is argued that thousands of years might elapse before the events of Revelation are fulfilled, but when they do take place, they will occur suddenly. But should we not hesitate to discard the work of the translators? If shortly means suddenly, why did they agree on shortly? Granted, no translation is perfect; however, numerous versions have been produced over the last four centuries and they consistently reaffirm the King James interpretation of the Greek:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants — things which must *shortly* take place...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.* (Rev. 1:1-3, NKJV)

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must *shortly* take place...Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; *for the time is near.* (Rev. 1:1-3, NASB)

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must *soon* take place...Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because *the time is near.* (Rev. 1:1-3, NIV)

Popular prophecy writers and T.V. evangelists consistently promote the suddenly interpretation, but translators steadfastly refuse to cooperate. The eminently qualified scholars behind our modern New International Version have not given an inch on this issue. They have rendered the Greek for “shortly” as “soon”; not a hint of support for the suddenly proponents. Even if we do accept suddenly as the intended meaning, we soon collide with another obstacle in verse 3: “the time is at hand.” Modern translations render it “the time is near.” What now? Have four centuries of Bible translators been wrong on this too? Perhaps we should be suspicious when someone claiming to understand Revelation can't get past the introduction without radically redefining keywords. John's vision came with a sobering warning:

...if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22:19, NIV)

Some don't consider taking words away from Scripture to be a problem as long as they insert

¹ Recommended reading: *Before Jerusalem Fell*, Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.; *Redating the New Testament*, John A. T. Robinson; *Who is this Babylon?*, Don K. Preston.

their own words as substitutes. Readers are cautioned to carefully consider the consequences should it turn out that God does not approve of this practice: “God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” No doubt, some will carelessly assume that this does not mean what it says either. (The NIV will be quoted exclusively from here on.)

2. Many Christians are less willing to stray from the translation provided. They will admit that “soon” must mean just that, but with a very significant twist. They reason this way:

With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. (2 Pet. 3:8)

They suggest that words like “soon” and “near” in prophecy should be interpreted from God’s perspective, not ours. Is this valid? Should a {1 day = 1,000 years} model be adopted to interpret Revelation’s timing indicators? Consider the context. No matter which date is preferred, the circumstances are essentially the same. During the sixties, as well as the nineties, Christians were suffering persecution under the Romans. Anyone refusing to worship the Emperor was put to death. Those most fortunate — Roman citizens — simply had their heads cut off. Others were torn apart by wild animals or burned alive. Suddenly, in the midst of this holocaust, an encouraging prophecy appears:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants *what must soon take place...* (Rev. 1:1); *I am coming soon*. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. (3:11); The angel said to me, “*These words are trustworthy and true*. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants *the things that must soon take place*. Behold, *I am coming soon!*” (22:6-7); Behold, *I am coming soon!* My reward is with me... (22:12); He who testifies to these things says, “*Yes, I am coming soon*” (22:20)

A thousand years? If the first-century Christians interpreted all these promises through a {1 day = 1,000 years} filter, it’s difficult to see how they would have been encouraged. They were in constant fear of Roman authorities who were hunting them down for immediate execution. It’s hard to believe that they would have been impressed by news of something to occur a thousand years or more into the future. It seems much more likely that they would have taken Christ’s assurances literally. Here’s a sampling of their expectations:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins *to rescue us from the present evil age...* (Gal. 1:3-4); ...wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, *who rescues us from the coming wrath*. (1 Thess. 1:10); *According to the Lord’s own word...*the Lord himself will come down from heaven...the dead in Christ will rise first...*After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thess. 4:15-17); ...*the Lord’s coming is near...The Judge is standing at the door!* (Jas. 5:8-9)

Clearly, they believed that Jesus really was coming soon. Their confidence was based on “the Lord’s own word” (1 Thess. 4:15). If Jesus was planning to wait a thousand years or more, it is inescapable that these hapless victims would have to be considered abandoned and all honest people would be compelled to wonder what Christ was thinking when he came up with his words of “encouragement” in Revelation. Genuine Christian encouragement is not supposed to work this way:

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? (Jas. 2:15-16)

According to James, moral support that isn't backed up with action is worthless. Yet the popular teaching presents the founder of Christianity liberally pouring forth encouraging words, promising a supernatural rescue, and then doing absolutely nothing. Is it any wonder critics ridicule Christians for believing in Jesus? Any unbiased, thinking person would protest, “If Jesus promised all this to these poor people and then failed to deliver, he is either a colossal failure or a liar.” Why would a prospective convert be willing to trust such a character? It's amazing that Christian evangelism progresses at all based on such a “tough sell.”

If the word “soon” doesn't mean what humans would expect it to, all the verses containing it are meaningless. What purpose do they serve? Jesus could have omitted them because they are completely impotent and hollow. For people watching their loved ones being slaughtered, empty promises would have been downright cruel. Doesn't it seem strange that God would give a prophecy to be understood only from *his* perspective when the message was clearly given to humans “to show his servants what must soon take place”; something they were supposed to “take to heart?” How do you show people something by speaking in terms they can't understand? The predictions in Revelation are horrific; they include lots of death and destruction. If this prophecy was not fulfilled, all the predicted calamity will occur in the future; possibly within our lifetimes. A lot is riding on our understanding of the word “soon.” In fact, it is not an exaggeration to assert that *one's entire view on the timing of end-time events is dependent on this single word*. If “soon” really does mean soon, then all futurist systems collapse. Nowhere in the Bible are we told to apply the {1 day = 1,000 years} model to any prophecy. However, as mentioned previously, the concept does come from the Bible. How can we know whether it should be applied to Revelation?

Answer: Compare Revelation to Daniel.

There is no other book in the Bible more like Revelation than Daniel. Both books include end-time prophecies replete with images of wild, blood-thirsty beasts, and both mention one enormously significant symbol. Understanding how it is used clears up all confusion over the words “soon” and “near.” We can know whether God means a long time or a short time. It's no great secret; it's easy. He has provided a key to unlock all mystery over this issue. It's called a *seal*.

During the 6th century BC, the prophet Daniel received some of the most astonishing visions ever recorded, including detailed information regarding empires to rise and fall over a period of several centuries. However, his last vision was somewhat incomplete. Details about “the time of the end” were a little cryptic:

The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, “*It will be for a time, times and half a time*. When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed.” (Dan. 12:7)

Daniel's reaction? “I heard, but I did not understand” (Dan. 12:8). What did “a time, times and half a time” mean? The vision did not really make sense without properly understanding the ending. So Daniel asked, “My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?” (v. 8b). The response? “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end” (v. 9). The vision was written on a scroll (v. 4), but the seal or seals referred to were not literal. The contents of Daniel were well known and widely distributed between Daniel's era and the time of Christ. These seals were figurative. The sealing symbolized a lock on understanding “the outcome.” The timing was not right. The vision's fulfillment would not unfold for hundreds of years. Only at “the time of the end” would it be understood. This account in Daniel is a clear

description of how God might be expected to handle a prophetic vision that would be fulfilled after a long time: he would seal it.

Now, if thousands of years were to pass before Revelation’s fulfillment, should we not expect to see its visions sealed as well? Instead we read this:

Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near. (Rev. 22:10)

How much plainer could this be? Those who suggest that Revelation was not fulfilled soon after it was written disregard this vital point.

Daniel was given some information regarding who would eventually come to understand his mystery:

Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but *those who are wise will understand. (Dan. 12:10)*

Who were these people? Answer: Christ’s disciples.

...blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matt. 13:16-17)

Jesus was revealing the meaning behind the writings of the prophets. But did he mention Daniel’s mystery?

So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ *spoken of through the prophet Daniel* — let the reader understand — then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Matt. 24:15-16)

The meaning of the “abomination that causes desolation” is explained in Luke 21:

When you see *Jerusalem being surrounded by armies*, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains... (vv. 20-21)

Jesus defined “the abomination that causes desolation” as “armies” and told his disciples that at least some of them might live to see these armies devastating Judea — breaking “the power of the holy people” — the fulfillment of Daniel’s mystery.

Later, as severe persecution on the church signaled that “the time of the end” was near, copies of John’s Revelation began showing up. One of his visions described a scroll “sealed up with seven seals” (Rev. 5:1). But there was no delay on the understanding of *this* scroll:

I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! *See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.*” (Rev. 5:2-5)

The risen Christ was now available to break all seals on all prophetic visions. Is it possible that the scroll mentioned here is none other than Daniel’s mystery scroll? Why seven seals? Recall God’s warning to the Israelites when he first made a covenant with them:

If after all this you will not listen to me, *I will punish you for your sins seven times over. (Lev. 26:18)*

As Revelation continues to unfold, it becomes clear: this scroll symbolizes the undiluted wrath of God poured out upon his “holy people” culminating in “the seven last plagues” (Rev. 15:1). Daniel’s mysterious “time, times and half a time” could finally be understood. The historical record shows that Roman armies ravaged Judea for 3½ years; from the spring of AD 67 to the late summer of 70:

$$3\frac{1}{2} \text{ years} = 1 + 2 + \frac{1}{2} = \text{“time, times and half a time”}$$

It was “the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written” (Luke 21:22). The “power of the holy people” was “finally broken.” Their Temple and system of sacrificial worship was completely destroyed.

The evidence is overwhelming. In Revelation, “soon” must mean soon and “near” must mean near. If God told Daniel to seal his message when referring to a long time, and then told John *not* to seal his message, still having a long time in mind, what symbolism would he have left to use should he want to tell his servants about something that really would occur after only a short time? Some suggest that his people should have interpreted his intent as a long time no matter what he said (one day equals a thousand years). If so, it would have been impossible for God to communicate. He would say, “long time”; they would say, “He means a long time.” He would say, “short time”; they would say, “No, he still means a long time.” This is absurd. Surely, the word of God should not be interpreted in such a manner and all honest readers must reject the {1 day = 1,000 years} model as totally unusable for understanding Revelation.

Daniel’s mystery scroll

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|---|--|
| Was it supposed to be understood when received? | No. |
| Was it sealed? | Yes. |
| Why? | The fulfillment was centuries into the future. |

Revelation

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|---|---------------------------|
| Was it supposed to be understood when received? | Yes. |
| Was it sealed? | No. |
| Why? | The fulfillment was near. |

Question: Rev. 10:4 says, “...when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down.’” Won’t that seal be broken at some point in the future?

Answer: Apparently, not. Daniel was told that his vision would eventually be understood (Dan. 12:9-10). We have no similar promise regarding the message spoken by the seven thunders. Since John was not even allowed to write it down, it appears to be sealed permanently.

Conclusion

Numerous authors have proved that Revelation must have been written before AD 70. This presents the compelling possibility that its fulfillment is found in events relating to the devastation of Judea, the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem and the end of Judaism as it was known to that time. Much was to take place in the spirit realm, including the Resurrection of the Dead, the Rapture of the living saints (1 Thess. 4:17) and the Judgment of the Wicked. This interpretation relieves all pressure to distort the meaning of Revelation’s timing indicators. Accepting the teachings of pseudo-scholars who presume to second-guess a multitude of qualified translators is totally unnecessary. And when the comparison of Revelation to Daniel is

considered, applying a {1 day = 1,000 years} model is exposed as not only unnecessary, but clearly invalid.

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