

Bible Basics – Apocalyptic Literature & Understanding the Truth

Overview

We continue our bible basics with some important information about the literature used and how to better understand what it means.



Apocalyptic literature

A real problem for many Bible readers is the Book of Revelation. This book is typical literary style before and at the beginning of the Christian era. It is called apocalyptic literature. In the Old Testament, the Book of Daniel is similar to the Book of Revelation. This literary style is designated as persecution literature. Its purpose is to console the victims of some crisis by holding out to them the assurance of divine intervention in the near future. The problem for the reader is that apocalyptic literature uses mainly a mysterious or symbolical language, understandable only to one who knows all the ins and outs of what is being said or what is happening.

It is in a sense underground literature – written for privileged eyes. The writer wants to console his fellows in suffering in a language understandable to them alone. For example read Revelation 17:1-8 and 21:1-4 and see the bible (NAB) footnotes for the explanations of the symbolic names used in the text.

How do you know what is the truth?

Walking into a modern library, you find all the books neatly arranged under fiction and nonfiction. It is not that simple in the library called the Bible. How does one know whether one deals with history or some form of figurative speech?

We should always follow the teaching authority of the Church. We should also consult renowned Bible scholars who are experts in Hebrew literature. Sometimes, it is secular science which gives Christians the lead to reconsider their Bible understanding. The discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo made Christians aware that Genesis 1 is not a sacred lesson in science but a poem (story) on creation. This knowledge helped Christians to understand that Genesis 2 and 3 is not a lesson in Anthropology, but an allegory, teaching us the lesson that sin is the root of all evil.

However, one problem remains: You may hear interpreters of the Bible who are literalists or fundamentalists. They explain the Bible according to the letter. Eve really ate from the apple and Jonah was miraculously kept alive in the belly of the whale. Then there are ultra-liberal scholars (outside the Catholic Church!), who qualify the whole Bible as another book of fairy tales.

Catholic Bible scholars follow the sound middle of the road, keeping a balance between fundamentalists and scholars who are too liberal. You may make your own choice as long as it is not contrary to the teaching authority of the Church. As discussed previously, the signature (*Imprimatur*) of a bishop in your Bible assures you that opinions, expressed in footnotes and introductions, reflect what is generally accepted as sound doctrine in the Catholic tradition.