

Rules of thumb for reading the apocalyptic literature of Daniel 7-12

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1. Think surrealist painting or political cartoon.

If you look at surrealist paintings or political cartoons, their images often look bizarre and exaggerated, for eg. a man with an apple for a face, or a staircase that goes nowhere. The artists often deliberately use such caricatures to try to capture your attention, make you feel something, and tell you something true about the world in their drawings. It is the same with apocalyptic literature. Their symbols are trying to expose truths about how human kingdoms are really like. Understanding this will also help you avoid wooden literalism.



2. Recognise the versatile nature of the symbols. Symbols can potentially have multiple layers. In Daniel 7, for instance, the 4 beasts are described as kings in verse 17, but kingdoms in verse 23. So which is it? Answer: it can be both! The king embodies the kingdom, and the kingdom takes on the character of its king. This kind of fluidity is common in apocalyptic imagery. Same goes with numbers. Take 10 for instance. Could it be literally ten? Possible. But based on biblical usage elsewhere, can it represent totality? Absolutely.

3. Keep the main message in focus. Don't lose the forest for the trees. Remember that at its heart, apocalyptic literature is pastoral literature. The purpose of these visions was for God to encourage his suffering people to persevere until the end. They weren't to lose sight of God's kingdom that was being established.

4. Don't be too quick to look forward, look back first. These visions have real historical referents, often linked to events between Daniel's era and

the time of Jesus. Sometimes they will be explicitly pointed out within the text of Daniel 7-12 itself. Missing this by assuming everything is about the distant future can lead one quickly astray.

5. See the pattern, but don't play codebreaker. While historical details are present, the visions also reveal a general pattern of how human empires operate across time. They're more interested in theological truths rather than a detailed chronology. To cite one Old Testament scholar, it presents a theology of history rather than a specific timetable of history.

6. Be Sensitive to Biblical Theology and Intertextuality. Interpret Daniel's visions within the whole biblical story. These texts echo earlier themes, like covenant faithfulness, divine judgment, and God's kingship, and connect with other prophets. Recognize these links to keep interpretation grounded in the unity of Scripture.

7. Keep Christ at the Center Above all, interpret the apocalyptic visions through the lens of Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises and the sovereign King who will bring God's kingdom to completion. This also guards against speculative or fearful readings and invites confident hope that the end of suffering and triumph of God is secured in Him.

Further reading (both are in the church library)

- Tremper Longman, *How to Read Daniel*, pages 8-12
- George Guthrie (ed.) *Read the Bible for Life*, chp 12, 'Reading Revelation' (J. Scott Duvall)