

Anchor Deeply

The Bible tells the story of how God created people who would become His chosen people. It was written over a long period of time.

How can we interpret it correctly? There are many different ways to interpret the Bible. Let's try to interpret the Bible the same way that the Bible interprets itself. There are two ways to look at how the Bible interprets itself: First, how did people at Jesus' time interpret the Bible they had, and second, how did prophets use the Bible they had as a foundation for what they wrote?

Let's try to do both of those things. The reason for doing this is to make it clear why we should trust that the Bible really is the Word of God. When we read the Bible, we are receiving God's message that He wants us to understand.

How was the Bible written down? In Jesus' lifetime, all of the Old Testament had been written down on form of scrolls of material made of animal skins. Scrolls were very difficult to use compared to the books that we have now. For one thing, they were 15 to 45 feet long. If you wanted to look a certain part of the scroll you had to unroll one part of the scroll and roll up the other part of the scroll. If you just kept unrolling and unrolling, the material would get bulky and hard to handle. The scrolls were very precious, and they needed to be handled with great care. Carefully unrolling and rolling was something done with great concern so that the scrolls would not be damaged.

Another difference is that the books of the Bible were not divided into chapters and verses, like we have in our Bibles. All fo the words were run together without any spaces between the words. They were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, all languages most of us don't know.

Another difference is that each of the larger books of the Bible were written on a separate scroll. Many of the shorter books of the Old Testament were written together onto one scroll.

The form for writing the words we use now is very different from what existed in Jesus' lifetime. The meaning and the message is the same. But the form that we hold in our hands is very different.

Another major difference between that time and our own, is that almost no one owned a copy of the Bible. There was no printing press. The printing press made it possible for everyone to own a copy of the Bible. Before the printing press was invented all copies of the Bible had to be copied by hand. This took a great deal of time. Because it took so much time, copies of the Bible were incredibly rare and very, very expensive. Entire villages might have only one copy of the Bible. Many villages had no copy of the Bible. Instead of one, long piece of animal skin, a codex had pages. Our books today are based on the design of a codex. They have pages bound together.

Here's something very important to understand about how the Bible should be interpreted. Suppose a Christian wanted to refer to Genesis 1:29. How would they do that? If it was a Christian, the Bible would be in the form of a codex. A codex was an invention first made by the Romans. Christians picked up on the idea of the codex. They used it almost exclusively as a way to keep copies of the Bible. They didn't use scrolls the way the Jewish people had.

Even though they used a codex they still had no chapters or verses. How did they get everyone to understand they were talking about Genesis 1:28? Perhaps it was part of a sermon. Or, perhaps it was just part of a conversation between Christians. They would repeat part of the verse. For Genesis 1:28 they might say, “God said ... fill the earth.” Now everyone who knew the Bible pretty well knew exactly what the other Christian was talking about. That was a very familiar verse.

This leads us to consider how prophets used words from the Bible to write new things God had shown them when they wrote new parts of the Bible. They would use a phrase. We will look at that phrase I just used “fill the earth” from Genesis 1:28 to see how this was used when new parts of the Bible were written. The phrase “fill the earth” was included in the idea of the “latter days.” Genesis 49:1 builds on the idea of “fill the earth” and uses a new phrase “latter days, to build on that idea. This phrase was then picked up again later in the book of Numbers.

In Genesis 1:29 God explains what's going to happen with human beings. He commands them to rule over the earth and to fill the earth. Human beings will fill the earth. That is the end of the story.

In Genesis 49:1 we learn that Jacob blessed his son, Judah, and spoke of the “latter days”. This phrase the “latter days” refers to a time in the future, nearer to the end of the story. In most English translations we won't find this phrase the “latter days”. But that is the phrase that is used in Numbers 24:14. I almost forgot to mention that a major difference between the Bible of Jesus' day was that it was written in a very different language. The Bibles we read are translations from that language into our own language.

In Numbers 24:14 we find a prophecy made by a very bad person who was a prophet of the true and living God. His name is Balaam. He makes several prophecies about the latter days. In the story of Balaam, we learn that he is hired by a king in order to curse the Israelites. It's supposed to be a curse given with the power of a prophet of the true God. Because he is a prophet of the true God, he is unable to curse the Israelites. The king who hired him begs him repeatedly to curse the Israelites and Balaam tries and tries but fails. Balaam's prophecies about the latter days and what Israel will do show that Israel like the descendants of Judah will conquer its enemies and rule over them.

Peter the apostle uses this phrase the “latter days” he's writing in a different language than the book of Genesis was written in. But in our translations, we see it as the latter days. He sees the latter days prophesied in Genesis 1:29 and again in Numbers 24:14 and also in Genesis 49:1 one as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

- God's plan for humanity in [Genesis 1:29](#)
- God's plan for His people in [Genesis 49:1](#)
- God's plan for His people [Numbers 24:14](#)
- God's plan becomes an emerging reality ([Acts 2](#))

Phrases like “latter days” are like threads that weave a fabric that is woven together and becomes the story the Bible tells. Prophets used phrases like building blocks as they wrote new parts of the Bible. They wanted people who read the Bible to understand that God had told part of the story at an earlier time, and now He was telling another part of the story of His plan for His people. The Bible is held together by many interconnected phrases like “latter days.” The fabric that is woven together can be understood as a unified story. Understanding

the unity of the Bible can help believers have a growing confidence in God's ability to communicate His plan for His people. This can encourage Christians to have stronger faith in God.

Growing stronger trust in the reliability of the Bible helps believers grow closer to God by gaining knowledge of His Word.

To gain more confident in God's Word, we will look at how the Bible interprets itself.

The Last Days, at the Beginning

[Genesis 1:26–28](#) “Then God said, “**Let us make man in our image**, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “**Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.**””

These verses give us a very, very short version of the story of God's plan for humanity. He creates them in His image. We can assume that His plan for humanity is tied to the fact that He created them in His image.

We also see that God intends for humanity to rule over the earth. Humans are to be in control of every living thing on the earth. Exactly what this means isn't clear, but that is God's plan.

We also see that God plans for human beings to “fill the earth.” This is a statement about the end of the story. When human beings fill the earth, rule over the earth, and bring the image of God to every part of the earth, then the story will end. Each one of these ideas is mysterious. How will human beings fill the earth? In what sense will they rule over the earth? How can human beings bring the image of God to the entire earth?

And so the story begins. It begins with a sense of mystery. What's going to happen? What is God doing? What part will human beings have in making God's plan succeed?

Jacob Mentions the Latter Days

[Genesis 49:1](#) “Then Jacob called his sons and said, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.” (ESV)

If your first reaction to this verse is that you can't find the phrase “latter days” you are not alone. Every person who reads the Bible in the English translation will have difficulty finding the phrase “latter days” in this verse. That is certainly true in the English Standard Version, which I just used. However, the words in Hebrew are the same as those used in the other verses we will look at in the Old Testament. When the same Hebrew phrase is used in these other parts of the Old Testament it is translated as “latter days” in [Numbers 24:14](#). First of all, the words “in the days to come” means the same thing as “the latter days.” But in the Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, the words are exactly the same.

What did Jacob have to say about the “days to come” or “the latter days”? Actually he had a great deal to say. We will focus only on Jacob's words to his son, Judah:

[Genesis 49:8-12](#) ““Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion’s cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The **scepter** shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the **peoples**. Binding his foal to the **vine** and his **donkey**’s colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.”

[Genesis 49:12](#) tells about a descendant of Judah in “the latter days.” Judah’s brothers will bow down to him ([Genesis 49:8](#)). We know that many years later, the tribe of Judah became larger than any of the other tribes. When Moses took a census, during the time that the Jewish people wandered in the wilderness, Judah was much larger than any other tribe ([Numbers 1:27; 26:22](#)). We are also told that “the peoples” will obey him ([Genesis 49:10](#)). The word “**peoples**” refers to Gentile nations. The word “**scepter**” refers to a king. This repeats the idea that in the “latter days” a descendant of Judah will be a great king who will rule over other nations.

In [Genesis 49:11](#) Jacob says that in “the latter days” a king from the tribe of Judah will rule over all of Israel and the other nations. The land of Israel will have incredibly good harvests. The curse God put on the ground at the time of Adam ([Genesis 3:17&18](#)) will be reversed.

The description of tying a **donkey** to a grape **vine** provides a picture of such an abundance of grapes that a donkey will be tied to enormous grape vines, and allowed to eat the grapes until it doesn’t want any more. Remember this was spoken by Jacob to his sons, who have moved to Egypt to survive a terrible famine in the land God had promised to give them. The idea of a donkey eating grapes was a symbol of incredible abundance. In later generations the Jewish people would hear these words and marvel that God had promised such bountiful harvests in the dry, desert-like land of Israel.

What can we say about the fulfillment of these prophesies? Some of this prophecy was partially fulfilled when David was king. The land of Israel became a strong nation, and defeated many of its enemies. A complete fulfillment of the prophecy, however, will happen when Jesus Christ returns and rules as the King of Kings.

Balaam Mentions the Latter Days

[Numbers 24:14](#) “And now, behold, I am going to my people. Come, I will let you know what this people will do to your people in the latter days.”

Ironically, Balaam was hired by King Hiram to curse the Israelites. Instead, because God controlled every word that Balaam could prophesy, Balaam repeatedly blessed Israel. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t curse Israel. Balaam initially told King Hiram that he wouldn’t be able to curse Israel, but King Hiram paid him money, so that he would try harder. Balaam tried three times to curse Israel, but each time he couldn’t do it, he was only able to bless them.

What did Balaam say about Israel and the latter days? Israel would conquer many of the other nations. The phrase ‘the latter days’ reminded those who read these words that God’s plans for the future were already set in motion from the time of Jacob. God’s plan revealed by Balaam is another expression of an older plan. God told some details about the plan that hadn’t been revealed until Balaam gave his prophecy.

One new detail in [Numbers 24:17](#), is given alongside a detail previously mentioned in [Genesis 49:10](#): “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: **a star** shall come out of Jacob, and **a scepter** shall rise out of Israel;

it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.” A **scepter**, is a symbol for a king who rules over a nation. In this case, a king who would rule over many nations. The new detail is that a star will come from out of Jacob. Both [Numbers 24:17](#) and [Genesis 49:10-11](#) look forward to a future time when God would send a deliverer who would conquer all the enemies of God and God’s people.

Other words and images found in [Genesis 49](#) are repeated in [Numbers 24](#): a lion crouches, ready to attack, and no one dares to rouse him ([Genesis 49:9](#) and [Numbers 24:9](#)). Specific nations that will be defeated are mentioned.

Balaam’s God-given prophecy connects with Jacob’s prophecy. Some parts are the same, and some new details are added. The similar details assure the reader that the same God who spoke in the past through Jacob also spoke through Balaam.

The words of Balaam are identified as a prophecy of the true God. Both prophecies were written down by Moses who wrote the book of Numbers and Genesis. Moses’ established a pattern of adding new details to older prophesies. The new prophesies did not stand on their own. The old prophesies were tied together with the new prophesies, so that those who heard them would know the same God had spoken both times. We will see this pattern repeated by Peter. And, by the way, this pattern of adding new details to older prophecies is repeated many times throughout the Bible. The Bible is like a fabric woven together by these repeated prophesies and the new prophesies that repeat the old, and add what is new.

We can learn a lot about how to interpret the Bible from these three passages. In [Genesis 1:29](#) God explained His plan for humanity. In [Genesis 49:1](#) the message was repeated, by saying that God had a plan for the future. Then, [Numbers 24:14](#) expands on God’s plan for the future.

Peter Mentions the Latter Days

A time will come when God will send a great king who will rule the world. Some of these prophecies can be taken symbolically, or spiritually, or both. For example, Jesus said that His body was the Temple ([John 2:21](#)). And Paul said that the body of believers is a temple ([1Corinthians 6:19](#)). So, the Temple in the new creation might be a very different kind of Temple than the stone Temple in Jerusalem during Isaiah’s lifetime. In fact, in [Revelation 21:22](#) John says that in the new creation there will be no temple in Jerusalem because God Himself will live among His people. So, the whole earth, or even all of the new creation, will function as a Temple where God’s presence will dwell.

What does the information we’ve considered here tell us about how to live today? All of the things that give us difficulty on this earth will not continue after the “latter days” are finally complete. True believers in Jesus Christ will survive the destruction of this creation, but evil, sin, and even temptation will be removed so that they will not exist in the new creation.

So, when are the “latter days”? Peter preached a sermon in [Acts 2](#), on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came in power, He actually uses the phrase “latter days” in his sermon.

17 “‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that **I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,**
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
18 even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

19 And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
20 the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

21 And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' ([Acts 2:17-21](#))

Peter was interpreting the prophecy of [Joel 2](#) in light of [Isaiah 2:2](#). He wove together portions of both passages of prophecy. When Peter did this he was following the pattern of using an older prophecy, and then adding new details of God's plan to that older prophecy. From [Joel 2:28](#) Peter quotes, "**I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.**" Then, from [Isaiah 2:2](#), he brings the prophecy that in the "last days" "**all the nations shall flow**" to Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost Jewish people from all over the Mediterranean world came to Jerusalem. As Peter saw the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the believers, he realized that the two prophecies were connected and that both told parts of what was going to happen.

Joel's prophecy had spoken only of the Jewish people. Isaiah's prophecy had spoken about how all the nations would come to the Temple in Jerusalem. Peter realized that the Holy Spirit was being poured out on all the Jewish people who came to believe in Jesus Christ. At that point they were gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. However, at the conclusion of the Feast, many of them would return to their homes which were scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. Peter must have remembered Jesus' command to go into all the world and preach the Gospel ([Matthew 28:19&20](#)). This was one way that the Holy Spirit was going to make this happen. The people who had just recognized Jesus as the Messiah would bring this message with them. Not only would they bring the message, they would bring the indwelling Holy Spirit. So, not only were people from all over the world coming to the physical Temple in Jerusalem, as believers they would leave Jerusalem as living Temples, filled with the presence of God, the Holy Spirit ([Ephesians 2:21-22](#)). The living Temple, was going to spread out into the world. And, by the way, if you believe in Christ, you are a living stone in that Temple ([1Peter 2:5](#)).

Jesus has come. The Holy Spirit brought the message and presence of Jesus Christ throughout the world. The prophecies were fulfilled. There is something tricky going on here that I need to point out. Throughout the New Testament there is a sense that the "new creation" has already begun, but it has not yet fully arrived. Sometimes this is called the "already/not yet" Kingdom of God. It has truly arrived. But it has not yet taken full control. When it does take full control the old creation will be wiped away, and only the new creation will remain. We can say that the "new life" Christians have through Christ, is fully present spiritually. However, it will not be fully present physically until Christ returns, and believers will have their new resurrection bodies (see [1Corinthians 15](#)). Until then, we will wrestle with sin, but when Jesus returns sin will be removed completely.

This explains a great deal about the struggles Christians experience. The Holy Spirit works in each believer, making them like Christ. However, until believers have their new resurrection bodies they will struggle with sin.

New life in Christ is real, but what is new is the believer's heart. Sometimes God will cause a believer to be healed physically, but not always. Believers can still cut a finger or stub a toe. Believers can still experience physical death. Believers can still lapse into acts of sin. The promise Christ has given is that one day these struggles will end, when the Kingdom has fully come, when Christ returns.

There are times when most believers grow weary of this struggle and feel like giving up. These promises assure believers of a good hope for the future that can help them stand tall and strong when facing bad realities. The bad reality is that the struggle will not end until Christ returns. On the other hand, the good reality is that the change of the believer's heart, including an attitude of love for God and others, is real. There is a genuine, real change that has taken place in the believer's heart and soul. It is not something the believer has done. It is what God has done in the heart of the believer.

Believers have a taste of heaven. They taste heaven when they read the promises in the Bible. They taste heaven when they feel the love of Jesus and the love of other Christians. They taste heaven when they enjoy worshipping God and praying to Him. But the fullness of Heaven has not yet arrived. But it will when Jesus returns.

Until Jesus Christ returns, all Christians must persevere. We are given the promise that it will be worth it in the "latter days."