

# Scripture Interpreting Scripture

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## Introduction

In this brief note I take up three specific passages and one general principle. The general principle is that we must allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, something that cannot take place until we compare Scripture with Scripture. The specific passages used as examples are Matt 5 in comparison with Exod 20; Matt 24 in comparison with Dan 8, 9, 11, and 12 (especially Dan 11 and 12); and finally, Rev 12, 13, 17 in comparison with Dan 7 and 11 (especially Dan 7).

## Matthew 5/Exodus 20

### Commandments #5-#9

In Matt 5 Jesus begins His sermon on the mount with a series of blessings, and then offers comments on specific commandments. The first of these is, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you . . ." (Matt 5:21-22). These words cannot be fully understood in isolation from the ten commandments, one of which says, "You shall not murder" (Exod 12:13). For whatever reason, Jesus begins with commandment #6.

He continues with commandment #7, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you . . ." (Matt 5:27-28). And the commandment says, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod 12:14).

A third time Jesus quotes from one of the commandments, this time from commandment #9, but less directly than before: "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' 34 But I say to you, . . ." (Matt 5:33-34). This corresponds fairly closely to commandment #9. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod 20:16).

Jesus continues with a commentary on the *lex talionis*, i.e., the "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" law of Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21, which raises the issue of retaliation. The above law seems harsh, but it is actually a call for moderation. If a man takes one tooth, don't take three in response; only take one.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42

Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." (Matt 5:38-42).

If we look for this principle among the ten commandments, we can see it – distantly - in #8, "You shall not steal" (Exod 20:17). Jesus does not quote this commandment, but He is commenting on it. His comment on commandment #8 is, in effect, "Give" (Matt 5:42). The commandment says not to take; but Jesus tells us to give.

The closeness of the quotations, or references, become less direct as we proceed, but Jesus has created a pattern and there is a question whether He continues developing it. In Matt 5 the commandments we can recognize are out of order (#6, #7, #9, #8), but four of the last five commandments are present in one form or another. The context He has created invites us to ask whether Jesus also refers to commandment #10? And when the question arises, is it legitimate to look for an answer?

## Discussion

Things have been fairly tidy so far, because we can see that Jesus' is referring back, not just to the Old Testament, but to the law of ten commandments. If someone needs a direct quotation before they can see a reference to earlier material, they can stop reading here. The last part of the sequence is the most difficult. Bear in mind that in the law there is an internal sequence of decreasing physicality.

One can kill with poison, but if with a blow, that is a violent act. Adultery is physical, but not violent, unless we are talking about rape, which is not in the immediate context. Stealing can be done by lifting a hand. Lying can be done by moving nothing more than one's tongue. And coveting requires no action at all. It takes place only in the mind and heart. So there is an increasing level of innerness, if I could put it that way; a diminishing level of physicality. The final verses of Matt 5 are consistent with this fact.

## Commandment #10

I will not quote the entire passage, but when Jesus says, "You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (vs. 48), He is talking about an inner state of mind. Yes, we serve God through our actions, but at the end of the chapter, that is not the point He emphasizes. "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (vs. 46). It is in our hearts that we love. It is in our hearts and minds that we believe God and despise our neighbor. Jesus is telling us that, even if nothing is done, we can fulfill or not fulfill the tenth commandment, by the way that we think, in the privacy of our own minds. The point Jesus makes is that in our inmost thoughts we must be godlike. We should think of others as God thinks of them.

I suggest that this part of the sermon on the mount is a commentary on the last five commandments of the law. In Exod 20 the same Lord, on a different mountain,

comments on the first five, if we take vs. 2 as a comment on vs. 3. On the one hand we have the preexistent Son; and on the other, the incarnate Son. But it is the same Person speaking.

The God of the exodus begins by saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (vs. 2). He then adds, "You shall have no other gods before me" (vs. 3). If the order were reversed, i.e., if the command clause came first, it would be natural to ask, "Who are you? Why do you demand our worship? Why is that the right thing to do? So God puts the explanation clause first. He begins by reminding Israel of what He has done for them, and then tells them how He wants them to respond. Verses 2 and 3 belong together. The two verses form a natural pair.

But there is more. In Exod 20 an explanation accompanies each of the first five commandments. Thus, we have an explanation built into commandment #1 (Exod 20:2), #2 (vss. 5b-6), #3 (vs. 7b), #4 (vs. 11), and #5 (vs. 12b). Then the explanations stop. "You shall not murder." Full stop. No explanation. Just don't do it. And so on. Then in Matt 5 the explanations resume, and we have explanations on each of the last five commandments. The explanations we have discussed are on commandments #6 (Matt 5:22-26), #7 (vss. 28-32), #9 (vss. 34-37), #8 (vss. 38-42), and #10 (vss. 43-48). Some of these connections lie entirely on the surface; some are more subtle. But the concept remains, that to understand fully what Jesus is saying in Matt 5 we must study it together with Exod 20.

## Matthew 24/Daniel 8, 9, 11, 12

Similarly, to Matt 24:15 fully we must study it together with Dan 8, 9, 11, and 12. In Matt 24:15 Jesus says, "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), . . . ." These words take us back to Dan 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; and 12:11. Of the first three passages, the most direct contextual link is with Dan 9. I say this because in the immediate future from Jesus' perspective a foreign prince (Vespasian [AD 69-79]) "shall destroy the city and the sanctuary" (9:27). This is the event about He was warning His disciples.

What makes Jesus' use of the words "abomination of desolation" so interesting is the fact that He applies the prophecies of Daniel to events that had not yet transpired during His lifetime. This becomes an issue especially in regard to Dan 11, which critical scholars and Evangelicals alike apply to the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. But Jesus does not make that application. He points to events still future in AD 31, i.e., to the destruction of Jerusalem, which would happen almost immediately, and to the events of Dan 11:31 and 12:11 perhaps not immediately. How far into the future these latter events would be, He does not tell us, but He does tell us they were still future at the time when He was speaking.

We cannot interpret Matt 24 meaningfully apart from the passages Jesus refers to in that verse. The application Jesus made then is clear to us now, because we know

from hindsight that Jerusalem would be destroyed in AD 70. This is the point He was making in Matt 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 19:44; and 21:6. Separating the above Scriptures from each other is a sure guarantee that we will misunderstand them. He is telling us in Matt 24, and its parallels, how to interpret Dan 9 and 11.

## Revelation 12, 13, 17/Daniel 7, 11

### Tracing the source of the imagery

I have been arguing that Scripture must interpret Scripture. There is a third example I would like to introduce. If we ask where Rev 17 gets its heads and horns imagery, the most immediate answer is that Rev 13 speaks similarly. In chap. 17 there is a beast with "seven heads and ten horns" (17:3), and in chap. 13 a beast with "ten horns and seven heads" (13:1). A natural conclusion is that Rev 17 inherited its heads and horns motif from Rev 13.

But where did Rev 13 get these things? From Rev 12. In chap. 13 the sequence is "ten horns and seven heads" (13:1), while in chap. 12 it is "seventh heads and ten horns" (12:3), as in Rev 17. That is a verbal difference, but not a conceptual difference.

If we ask whether there was an Old Testament source for this imagery, there was, in Dan 7. But there are differences that come along with this similarity. In Dan 7 there is not one beast, but four. No single beast has seven heads. The first beast has one head, the second has one, the third beast has four, and the fourth beast has one ( $1+1+4+1 = 7$ ). Similarly, for the horns, the first beast of Dan 7 has no horns, the second beast has no horns, and the third beast has no horns, but the fourth beast has ten horns ( $0+0+0+10 = 10$ ).

Or does it have ten horns? Is the number 10, or 7 (three are removed), or 11 (one is added), or 8 (three are removed and one is added)? We could do this different ways, but the text simplifies our task by saying, "and it had ten horns" (vs. 7). Thus, Dan 7:7 is what John has in mind when he says that the composite beast of Rev 12:3 had "seven heads and ten horns," that the sea beast of Rev 13:1 had "ten horns and seven heads," and that the composite beast of Rev 17:3 had "seven heads and ten horns."

In Rev 13 John emphasizes the phase of beastly power current at the time the mortal wound is inflicted, but this is still a composite of the other beasts, seen from the historical point of view John wishes to emphasize. But his imagery is based on the idea that head #1 is the same as empire I, i.e., Babylon. The sequence of heads and the sequence of empires are not two sequences, but one. Some have tried to understand the heads of Rev 17 by making the "is" phase of the beast correspond to the first century AD,<sup>1</sup> but there is greater insight in the assumption that the empires and heads

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<sup>1</sup> See Ekkehardt Mueller, "Interpreting the Beast of Revelation 17: A Suggestion," Biblical Research Institute Release 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, May 2005).

starting together. Thus, Babylon is both the first empire and the first head, and this pushes the perspective of Rev 17 into the end time.<sup>2</sup> This would make sense because Rev 16 (the plagues) and 18 (the final punishments on spiritual Babylon) are also clearly situated in the end time.

One factor that makes this latter hypothesis attractive is that Rev 16 and 18, on either side of 17, have an eschatological focus. The one describes the plagues, the other the final punishments on Babylon. So why would John place the beast of Rev 17 in the first century? In Dan 7, "four great beasts came up out of the sea" (Dan 7:3); in Revelation John sees "a beast rising out of the sea" (Rev 13:1). Previously John sees the beast "in heaven" (Rev 12:3). We could emphasize things like this and lose sight of the fact that it's the same composite beast, and the source of the imagery in all three chapters, including Rev 17, is found in Daniel.

### Bringing the imagery together

Consider three additional facts: (a) the fact that the sea beast of Rev 13a is wounded; (b) the fact that it is helped by the land beast of Rev 13b; and (c) the way that these themes come together in Rev 17. The best way to approach the mystery of the seven heads, is by not confining ourselves to them. We must keep all seven in view.

The series begins with Babylon. Thus, the period of the fourth head corresponds to the period of the fourth beast (#4 = IVa). In Daniel the second form in which we see the fourth empire (IVb) corresponds to the rest of the series in Revelation. Thus, we could speak of empire IVb[i], IVb[ii], and IVb[iii]. These correspond to heads #5, #6, and #7. Head #5 corresponds to the period after secular Rome, during the Middle Ages (=IVb[i]); head #6 is the period of religious and civil freedoms we now enjoy (=IVb[ii]), and head #7 represents a return to the behaviors of an earlier day. Think of this like taking a bite out of a cookie. One part of the cookie is on the left, then the part we bit out, and the rest of the cookie on the right. The pattern is chiasmic (=ABA').

In Dan 11 we see the initial period of papal power in vss. 29-39, a period of wounding and recovery in 11:40-43, and a period of restored power in 11:44-45. The important thing to notice here is that spiritual Rome persecutes dissent when it can (A/A'); it doesn't only when it can't (B). We are now living in the (B) part of this sequence. In vss. 40-43, where we are, there is nothing about persecution, whereas in vss. 29-39 and 44-45 there is. In vss. 40-43 we read only of the king coming in and appropriating "the treasures of gold and of silver, and all the precious things of Egypt" (vs. 43). The papacy is doing this now – having a prominent role in the fall of Russian communism, addressing a joint session of congress here in the United States, helping the Lutheran church in Sweden celebrate the 500 year anniversary of the Reformation. This is not hostile activity, but it is activity. It is the papacy coming in and appropriating what it can of social capital. That is vss. 40-43. Verses 44-45 are still to come. In Rev 17 these verses correspond to the period of head #7.

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<sup>2</sup> See C. Merwyn Maxwell, *God Cares, vol. 2: The Message of Revelation for You and Your Family* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 471-479.

## Discussion

In Rev 17 head #5 is healthy, #6 simultaneously both "is" and "is not," and #7 is healthy again. The onlooking world "will marvel to see the beast, because it was [#5] and is not [#6] and is to come [#7]" (vs. 8). In Dan 11:29-39 the king is powerful (he "is"), in vss. 40-43 he is wounded and then recovering (he "is not"), and in vss. 44-45 he has regained all the power he once had (he "is to come"). And when this happens, "he must remain only a little while" (Rev 17:10). In Dan 11 this corresponds to the king's final attack on the people of God and the second coming.

In Dan 11:44-45, where the king attacks God's people, "Yet he shall come to his end, with none to help him" (Dan 11:45), why are there none to help him? In these verses he has just conquered everything there is to conquer, so we should be reading "with none to oppose him," but the text says "with none to help him." The reason for the king's downfall is that Michael arises. More accurately, it is not just that Michael arises; it is what He does next. When He rises from His seat in the heavenly sanctuary, where the judgment has been in session since 1844 (Dan 7:13-14), it is because the judgment is over and there is nothing more to say, So He leaves. When He does this, He takes all the angels of heaven with Him to the earth (Rev 19:11-21). In the judgment He receives "dominion and glory and a kingdom" (vs. 14). When the judgment is over it is time to remove the usurper and claim what is rightfully His, which includes the living saints and all those who have died in faith during past ages.

When we talk about persecution in Dan 7, 11; Rev 12, 13, 17, a second analogy that might help is a hurricane. When a hurricane passes a certain spot in the ocean, an island or whatever, there is terrible devastation, then a period of idyllic calm. But then the devastation returns when the other side of the storm makes landfall. Here is the power, weakness, power motif of Dan 11:29-39, 40-43, and 44-45 (=ABA'); and the health, unwellness, and restored health of Rev 17:8a, 8b (=ABA'). The imagery shifts, but the point remains constant. The "is" then "is not" sequence is stated from the perspective of the sea beast. In vs. 10 we get the same sequence from the perspective of the land beast ("five of whom have fallen, one is [=land beast], the other has not yet come"). We have become accustomed to the luxury of being able to speak our minds. I am tempted to say, let us enjoy it while we can; but that is not the point. What we must do while we can is work for the Master.

## Conclusion

If it troubles us that commandments #7 and #8 are out of order in Matt 5, or that Jesus does not directly quote commandments #8 or #10, or if we fail to connect Exod 20:2 and 3, we will miss the point that the law contains explanations of commandments #1-#5, and that in Matt 5 Jesus offers explanatory comments on commandments #6-#10. If we do not study the two series of explanations together, we will never understand what Christ was saying when He tells us to be perfect in Matt 5:48.

Similarly, if we don't see the connection between the passages Jesus mentions in Dan 8, 9, 11, and 12, and the application He draws from them in Matt 24, we will not understand that Jesus places the abomination of desolation in a timeframe still future from the first century AD, and we will have no protection from the critical model, which places these things in the second century BC.

And if we don't follow the chain of relatedness from Rev 17, to 13, to 12, back to Dan 7, and 11, we will never understand the sequence of heads and theories will abound. The best analysis of Rev 17 that I have found is that of Maxwell, and one reason why his discussion of the material is so good is that he comes to task of writing on Revelation (1985) fresh from the earlier task of writing on Daniel (1981).<sup>3</sup>

Daniel must inform our understanding of Revelation. More broadly, the New Testament must inform our understanding of the Old Testament. And more broadly still, Scripture must inform our understanding of Scripture. This is a point the Reformers fought to establish, before at least some parts of their movement faded off into scholasticism. We need to avail ourselves of the best scholarly tools, realizing that they will only be as useful as the perspectives we bring to them. But the point I wish to emphasize here is that we need the Holy Spirit. Only He can lead us "into all the truth" (John 16:12).

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<sup>3</sup> See C. Merwin Maxwell, *God Cares, vol. 1: The Message of Daniel for You and Your Family* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1981).