

“They’re Digging in the Wrong Place”: Two Keys to Properly Read *Revelation*

Indiana Jones and the Staff of Ra

It’s a classic movie from 1981—*Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I am presuming most of my readers have seen it, at some point. But there is a relevant scene from it to the discussion I want to have about properly interpreting the Apocalypse of St. John, also known as the book of Revelation.

The setup to the scene: Indiana Jones (world-renowned archeologist) has been drawn into a pursuit for the lost Ark of the Covenant. Through a past relationship, Indiana has access to a key piece of archeology—the headpiece to the Staff of Ra. If the headpiece is mounted on a staff of the correct height, and that staff is placed in the map room in the precise time of day...then the exact location of the current resting place of the Ark will be revealed—the Well of Souls.

Just one problem—while Indiana has the headpiece, the Nazis are also after it. Seems Hitler had a thing for the occult; he was nuts for this kind of stuff. They had discovered the ancient city of Tanis, thought to be the general location of the Ark. They just need the headpiece. They attempt to get it from Marion, daughter of Indiana’s former mentor and former fiancée to Indiana. After a narrow escape from a burning bar in Tibet, foiling the Nazi’s attempt, Marion and Indiana strike up a partnership: he gets the headpiece, she gets out of the dive she had been running and back to the States in style.

However, when Indiana and Marion arrive at the site of Tanis, they find a Nazi excavation underway. It seems they had found the Well of the Souls and possibly the location of the Ark!

“How did they get a copy of the headpiece?” Indiana wonders. “They’re no pictures, no duplicates of it anywhere.”

“I only tell you what I saw with my own eyes,” says Sallah, Indy’s friend. “A headpiece like that one [Indiana’s]...except around the edges which were rougher. In the center the Frenchmen [French archeologist Belloq] had embedded a crystal, and surrounding the crystal, on one side, they were raised markings, just like that one.”

But when Indiana and Sallah (who is a local digger on Belloq’s excavation) consult an Egyptian shaman, who can read the inscriptions on *both* sides of the headpiece, they are given the *correct* information.

“Come! Come! Look!” says the shaman, reading from one side of the headpiece. “This is a warning—not to disturb the Ark of the Covenant.”

“What about the height of the staff?” Indy asks impatiently. “Did Belloq get it off of here?”

“Yes! It is here. This is the old way. This means six kadam height.” He points to the inscription.

“About seventy-two inches,” says Sallah.

“Wait!” The shaman turns the headpiece over. “And take back one kadam to honor the Hebrew God Whose Ark this is.”

Indiana gets up and thinks. “You said their headpiece only had markings on one side? You absolutely sure?” Sallah nods.

“Belloq’s staff is too long...”

Then Indiana and Sallah together: “They’re digging in the wrong place!” *They’re digging in the wrong place.*

Here's what had happened. When the Nazis tried to steal the headpiece in Marion's bar in Tibet, the place was set on fire. The headpiece, which had been hanging on a gold chain around Marion's neck, was placed on a table. In the middle of a roaring blaze that's consuming the bar, the Nazi henchman Toht sees the headpiece and puts his hand completely around it. But the headpiece is scalding hot. In a fit of agony, Toht drops the headpiece and runs out into the snow to soothe his burnt hand. Marion subsequently recovers the headpiece carefully. It is later revealed, when Toht makes a casual "heil Hitler" greeting, that the markings of one side of the headpiece had been *burned into his palm*. It is from *this* that Belloq had the first side interpreted. But not having the second side, he *incorrectly* starts his dig for the Well of the Souls...in the wrong place.

The First Key: The Internal Source Code of the Old Testament

You may be wondering, "Why is Pastor retelling a scene from a movie from forty-five years ago?" Because the scene(s) described give us the perfect analogy for reading the book of Revelation in the proper way, and *the importance of drawing the correct interpretive conclusions*. For there are many, many people over the last 200+ years who have used the wrong keys, and made disastrous interpretive moves. They have been digging in the wrong place. And if your calculations based on key, fundamental presuppositions are wrong, it will lead you to interpret the entire book in a wrong manner. So, with the analogy of "they're digging in the wrong place" in play, we must consider what is the right one. In this article, I present two keys to ensure that one reads the book of Revelation in the way it was meant to be read.

The first key is *the internal source code of the Old Testament*. The book of Revelation has 404 verses. Of those, 278 (68.81%) are directly tied to OT references—both citations and language/images that come from the books. This is crucial then: *if you don't know the Old Testament, you won't be able to properly read and then interpret and then apply Revelation*. Let me say this again. If you don't know the OT, then Revelation will remain a "closed" book. We might think of it this way. Revelation is written in a secret code. The key to the code is the OT. It was written using the source code and can only be fully understood by using that same code. Without it, you're digging in the wrong place.

The problem, of course, for many modern Bible readers, is that so few people are conversant in the OT, especially the Prophets...especially the Prophets that use "apocalyptic" language.¹ The chief of these would be Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah (books that on their own are incredibly difficult to read and interpret). But many modern Bible pundits ignore this obvious fact and draw wrong conclusions about the strange imagery and language throughout Revelation because they fail to use the OT. I give you one example.

In Revelation 10:8ff, a voice tells John to take an opened scroll and eat it!

Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, "Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey." And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my

¹ Indeed, there is a whole genre of OT literature known as apocalyptic.

stomach was made bitter. And I was told, “You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.” (Rev 10:8-11)

“How strange! Why would God have John *eat* a scroll?” The answer lies in the OT source key:

And he said to me, “Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, “Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.” Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. (Ezek 3:1-3)

As you can see, Jesus uses the same source code (the internal key) in Revelation as He did in Ezekiel. The meaning is the same—ingest the words of God, and make them part of your very being. Take them to heart. Even difficult words, such as ones of lamentation, and mourning, and woe (Ezek 2:10). This is what makes them “bitter.” They are sweet in their taste but bitter when they are to be prophesied to the people. Knowing this internal connection to the rest of Scripture keeps one from misinterpreting Revelation in a way that is not the intended sense and instead see the continuity of prophecy and fulfillment in Christ.

The Second Key: The External Code of Historical Setting (Audience and Dating)

The second key is to *properly account for the historical setting of the book*. A key principle in interpretation is: who is the audience? Who is speaking and to whom is he speaking? This seems simple, but often ignored. But as communicators ourselves, we know that we say things to specific people in certain situations, and to know the audience matters. To apply this to an entire book, the fundamental question is: who is Revelation written to? Other attendant questions arise as well. When was it written? What was going on in the world *for them*? What were their historical setting and circumstances? To begin to answer these questions, one has to look no further than the very beginning of the book:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must *soon take place*. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, *for the time is near*. (Rev 1:1-3, emphasis mine)

The opening chapter then, and subsequent two detail the first vision given to John in the form of admonitions by Jesus to the seven churches in Asia. So, these things were written to Christians in Asia (modern Turkey) that were to happen soon, who will experience persecution in the coming days.

The question of audience also encompasses the date of the letter, *when* the recipients were experiencing *what* they were to experience, leading to the letter’s purpose. These questions are framed by simple maxim: *the Bible was not written to us but for us*. Let me explain. The sixty-six books of the Bible were written in times, places, in the midst of historical events, etc. The different books were written *to* different people. Very often, though, this is ignored and the Bible is interpreted as if the only audience that matters is the contemporary one. This is the greatest sin of modern interpreters of Revelation. People like Tim Lahaye² completely ignore the historical setting and *the very fact that* it was written to specific people in a

² Tim Lahaye, author of the *Left Behind* series, is representative of many theologians who attempt to unmoor Revelation from its historical and literary context and instead interpret it only in light of modern end-times prophecy.

very specific time. When we don't attend to these "external" issues (date, audience, historical context), then we are prone to misinterpret God's Word. People even might commit the sin of "adding to the words of the prophecy of this book." (Rev 22:18)

I highlighted two phrases in the above citation: *soon take place* and *the time is near*. However we read Revelation, we must say that it *did* apply to people of that day (the intended audience) and that the things described are, in some meaningful way, are going to happen *during their lifetimes*. This leads us to a question of dating. When was Revelation written? I reserve the full dating discussion for the Wednesday Bible Study, but allow me to assert that all of the New Testament was written before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in August of 70 AD. So, however we are going to decode and interpret Revelation, it must make sense *to the people of that time*. But people like Tim LaHaye have unmoored Revelation from its historical context and applied everything in it to the modern age (20th and 21st centuries). This is digging in the wrong place! This approach—to discount an early date and the historical audience—leads to some very wrong flights of fancy that greatly affect how one reads and applies Revelation.

The Danger of Digging in the Wrong Place and Beauty of Hitting the Mark

I use the extended analogy of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and the mantra "They're digging in the wrong place!" to encourage, and not simply rail against people who mislead and confuse. For there is real beauty in reading Revelation in the manner it was intended. That's what my short study aims to do—provide a framework for setting the book in so that one can rightly make sense of the strange details of the text. Because there is a way to read it. Faithfully. But the modern Christian has been titillated and misled to believe Revelation is solely about geo-political events of our age, which leads to consternation and even fear. Revelation instead was written to provide comfort to God's people during a time of suffering and great persecution. For this is the rallying cry of the book:

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

Revelation, while not written to us, is written *for us*. That is, there is great significance and teaching that can be rightly applied for our times and lives when read in the proper way. We might think of this as "hitting the mark" of digging where we're supposed to dig. When Indiana and Sallah gain access to the map room and find the true location of the Well of Souls, they are given entrée to the greatest treasure of all antiquity. They hit their mark. We too, when we read Revelation using the rich language and imagery of the Old Testament, and set the events depicted in their proper historical context, can gain much from this book. Of course, in some sense, Revelation is about "the end of the world." What the faithful Christian knows, though, is that the end has come NOW in Christ. Our end is brought to us by faith in Jesus. We need not worry about what might happen as the time for Jesus' return draws near. We, like the saints that received St. John's Apocalypse, are to stay true in the faith and endure a time of temptation and even suffering. For the Lamb has conquered all sin and death and He now reigns forever and ever.

Even if you're not a "bible study" person, please consider coming on Wednesday nights this November. I promise that it will be relevant to you and profitable for a greater understanding of a book so often misunderstood.

