Why Unraveling the Truth Is Worth Your Time

A road map for the skeptical reader, and for the pastor who has heard it all before

Joseph Hill

Start with the skepticism

If you are a Christian who has been handed another end-times book, you have earned your skepticism. The shelves are full of them. Most of them promise that the signs are converging now, name a date or come within a wink of one, and are quietly forgotten when the date passes. If you are a pastor, you have had to clean up after a few of them. So let me say at the outset what this book is not. It does not predict anything. It does not sell a chart. It does not ask you to trust the author; I am a businessman and a former deliverance minister, not a professor, and the book says so on its first pages. It asks you to do one thing you already believe in: read the text, in its own words, as the people who first heard it would have heard it, and follow where that leads.

What follows is the trail of bread crumbs I followed myself. Each one is a thing you can check tonight with a Bible and a concordance. If the first three do not hold, close the book. If they do, you will want to know where the trail ends.

Crumb one: the time words

Jesus said, to men standing in front of Him, "there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matthew 16:28). He said, on the Mount of Olives, "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (24:34). He told the twelve, "you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes" (10:23). He told Caiaphas and the council, "you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (26:64). Revelation opens by saying it concerns "the things which must soon take place" and that "the time is near" (1:1, 3), and closes the same way (22:6, 10). James wrote, "the coming of the Lord is near … the Judge is standing right at the door" (5:8-9). Peter wrote, "the end of all things is near" (1 Peter 4:7). John wrote, "it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18).

The book's first question is simply this: what did those words mean to the people who heard them? Every ordinary use of "soon," "near," "this generation" and "some standing here" in the rest of Scripture means what it says. The book asks why these passages, and only these, are read as if they meant the opposite, and it traces when that reading began and who began it. Chapter 1 is this question and nothing else. Read it first.

Crumb two: the prophets' own language

"Coming on the clouds" sounds to a modern ear like a physical descent from the sky. To an Israelite it was the oldest language in the prophets for God arriving in judgment on a nation. "Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and is about to come to Egypt" (Isaiah 19:1), and Egypt fell to Assyria, and no one saw a figure on a cloud. Psalm 18, Psalm 97, Nahum 1:3, Micah 1:3, Joel 2:1-2, Zephaniah 1:14-15: the same picture, every time a judgment, never a visible descent. The book sets these texts side by side with Matthew 24:30 and asks the reader to decide whether

Jesus, who spoke in the prophets' idiom everywhere else, abandoned it here. You do not need Greek for this crumb. You need Isaiah.

Crumb three: the war that fulfilled the words

Here is where a skeptic should slow down, because this is where the book stops asserting and starts documenting. Within forty years of the Olivet Discourse, Jerusalem was surrounded by armies, the Temple was burned, and not one stone of it was left on another. The historian who recorded it, Josephus, was a Jewish priest and general who watched it from the Roman camp and had no interest in confirming anything Jesus said. The book quotes him at length, by book, chapter and section, in the standard translation: the famine, the mothers who ate their children, the false prophets who led the people to the Temple roof, the with over a million dead, the ninety-seven thousand enslaved, and the numerous portents and signs he and Tacitus both recorded in the sky over Judea in the spring before the war. Chapter 11 walks through Matthew 24 verse by verse beside Josephus and asks, at each verse, whether the thing Jesus foretold is in the record. The question is not whether you find that reading comfortable. It is whether the record says what the book says it says, and the citations are there so you can look.

Crumb four: the date of Revelation

Everything about how you read Revelation turns on one question: was it written before the war of AD 66 to 70, or twenty-five years after it under Domitian? The late date rests, when you follow it to its source, on a single ambiguous sentence in Irenaeus written a century later, and the book quotes the sentence, in Greek and in English, with the scholars on both sides who have examined it. It then sets out the internal evidence: a Temple still standing and being measured (11:1-2), a line of kings counted to a sixth who "is" (17:10), a number that spells Nero's name in Hebrew letters (13:18), and seven churches whose letters know nothing of the persecution the late date requires. Chapter 12 is the longest single argument in the book, and it is the one I would ask a pastor to test hardest, because if it falls, so does much of what follows. The chapter says that itself.

Crumb five: who decided this, and when

Here is the crumb that changed how I read church history. None of the ideas most Christians assume are "what the Bible teaches" about the end arrived all at once. Each has a planter and a date. The literal thousand-year earthly kingdom goes back to Cerinthus and Papias in the first and second centuries; the merging of Daniel's little horn, Paul's man of lawlessness and John's beast into one future "Antichrist" to Irenaeus around 180; the reading of the Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 funeral songs as the devil's biography to Tertullian and Origen around 200; the thousand years as the age of the church to Augustine in 426; modern futurism to a Spanish Jesuit named Ribera in 1590, writing to take the Reformers' charges off Rome; the secret rapture and the two-stage coming to John Nelson Darby around 1830; and their spread through the English-speaking church to the notes of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. Chapter 20 documents each of these sixteen seeds with its source. You may still hold some of them when you finish. You will no longer be able to hold them as if they came from the apostles.

Crumb six: the part of the Bible you were never taught

Psalm 82 opens, "God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers," and ends by sentencing those rulers to "die like men." Deuteronomy 32:8, in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint, says the Most High divided the nations "according to the number of the

sons of God," and a later scribe changed it to "sons of Israel." Daniel's messenger was delayed three weeks by "the prince of the kingdom of Persia." Paul says our struggle is "against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness" (Ephesians 6:12). The book takes these texts at their word: there is a celestial administration over the nations, it rebelled, it was judged, and what remains of it is what the church was given authority over. Chapters 4 and 5 lay this out from the texts; Chapter 25 sorts the five categories of the rebel structure and shows which were removed and which are still in the field. If you have ever wondered why Paul tells a victorious church to put on armor, this is the answer, and it is not a new answer. It is the first-century one.

Where the trail ends

If the time words mean what they say, if the prophets' language means what it meant, if the war is in the record, if Revelation was written before it, and if the doctrines that say otherwise each have a human planter and a date, then one conclusion follows, and it is not a gloomy one. The kingdom is not coming. It came. Christ is not going to reign. He reigns. The church is not a lifeboat waiting for rescue from a doomed world; it is the body through which the King is already putting His enemies under His feet, and the authority Jesus gave the seventy and the apostles was never withdrawn. The last third of the book is about what a church does once it knows that: how it prays, how it disciples, how it faces the powers Paul named, and how it stops looking at the headlines for signs and starts looking at its own city for work.

What you will not find

You will not find a date. You will not find contempt for those who read it differently; the men who planted the distortions are named, but the millions who inherited them in good faith are the people this book was written for, and it says so. You will not find full preterism: the book holds that the gifts of the Spirit never ceased, that every believer rises at death into the life Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5, and that the Great Commission is a present command. You will not find an argument from authority. Where scholars agree with the book they are quoted by page; where they disagree they are quoted by page, and the reader is told where to find the other side at full strength.

How to read it if you are short on time

Read Chapter 1 for the question, Chapter 11 for the war, Chapter 12 for the date, and Chapter 20 for the history of the ideas. If those four do not earn the rest, you will have lost an evening and gained four chapters of primary sources you can use in your own teaching. If they do, Chapters 4 and 5 will give you the foundation and Chapters 23 through 27 will tell you what to do about it. Appendix A answers the objections you are already forming, in order. Appendix E says what would prove the whole thesis wrong, because I do not think a reader owes attention to an argument its author will not let be tested.

That is the trail. I followed it for fifteen years before I was willing to write it down. I am asking for a few evenings.