

Appendix 2

What Are Some “Do’s” and “Don’ts” About Using Customs and Practices In Biblical Times In Our Attempt To Understand “Last Days” Bible Prophecy?

In our attempt to understand what the Scripture tells us about “last days” Bible prophecy, we must be careful about how we consider things that are found outside of the Scripture.

Indeed, we have already warned about looking for “signs in the heavens” for answers about coming events (Question 28). This includes “the great sign in heaven” (Revelation 12) and the so-called “blood moons.” As we emphasized, looking for information about the future from astronomical signs is not something that we should be doing.

In addition, there are other things, found outside of Scripture, that people use to claim special insight concerning predicted coming events. This includes certain customs and practices in biblical times.

It is sometimes claimed that we need to know the precise practices that were used in those days to be able to fully comprehend some of the teachings of Scripture, which includes our understanding of “last days” Bible prophecy.

Biblical Background And Customs

It is undoubtedly important that we attempt to understand, as best that we can, the background and practices of statements, events, predictions, and parables, etc., that are recorded in the Bible.

Though knowing the background of events, or certain statements in Scripture, may be helpful, there are some things that we should be concerned about.

This appendix relates to two basic principles which we talked about earlier in this book; principles that the Bible sets down for us as we seek to properly understand the Scripture. We will restate what we have previously said:

Principle 1: We Are Not To Go Beyond That Which Is Written

There are two important things that we must always remember in interpreting the Bible, which, of course, includes predictions about the future. First, we are not to go “beyond that which is written.” Paul wrote:

Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying: “Nothing beyond what is written” (1 Corinthians 4:6 CSB).

In the Scriptures, God has revealed everything that is necessary for us to know about Himself and His plan for time and eternity. Jude wrote:

But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to defend the faith that God has entrusted once for all time to his holy people (Jude 3 NLT)

The faith has been once and for all delivered. Therefore, we derive our information from the Bible and from it alone. We do not go anywhere else to discover what will happen in the future.

There is also a second important principle.

Principle 2: We Do Not Need To Read Between The Lines Of What The Lord Has Revealed

We are to read the Bible at face-value. In other words we do not have to read between the lines to find hidden messages. Paul wrote:

Our letters have been straightforward, and there is nothing written between the lines and nothing you can't understand. I hope someday you will fully understand us (2 Corinthians 1:13 NLT).

The Amplified Bible puts it this way:

For we write you nothing other than what you read and understand [there is no double meaning in what we say]. And I hope you will [accurately] understand [divine things] until the end (2 Corinthians 1:13 Amplified Bible).

It is essential that we go to the Bible alone for our information about the future and, in doing so, we read the Scriptures in a straightforward manner. There are no hidden messages or any double meanings in the text.

With these two principles in mind, let us make some observations about using customs and practices in biblical times to supplement our interpretation of end time events.

Observation 1: Our Knowledge About Customs And Practices In Biblical Times Is Limited

At the outset, there is something that we must appreciate about our understanding of the customs and practices that are recorded in Scripture—namely, that our knowledge of them is fragmentary.

Limited Knowledge

Indeed, in our book, *Ancient Mysteries of the Bible Solved*, we made these statements about the current status of biblical archaeology and our access to the past:

Archaeology is a relatively new science, only operating in the last 150-200 years . . .

Only a small fraction of the ancient world has survived. Perhaps 1/10

Only a small fraction of what has survived has been surveyed. Perhaps 6/10

Only a small fraction of what has been surveyed has been excavated. Less than 2%

Finally, only a small fraction of what has been excavated has been published.

In fact, it has been estimated that only .006%, six one thousandths of one percent, of what took place in the ancient world is now available to us to study! (Don Stewart, *Ancient Mysteries of the Bible Solved*, pp. 20-21).

This shortage of information has led scholars to make admissions about our lack of knowledge of the times. We will illustrate this by looking specifically at wedding practices in the Holy Land at the time of Jesus.

The Parable Of The Ten Maidens

We read the following comments on Matthew 25:1-13 (the parable of the ten maidens).

Though not much is known about first-century Jewish wedding customs, it may be that these young, unmarried women leave the groom's home to welcome and accompany the couple back to the groom's household (see Davies and Allison, Matthew, 3:395).

Notice the admission that "not much is known about first-century Jewish wedding customs." This citation is from the three volume commentary series of Davies and Allison, one of the standard works on Matthew. Here it is cited by *Baker's Illustrated Commentary on the Bible*.

The point they make is that we do not have a lot of information about first-century wedding practices.

Writing specifically on the subject of the background of the New Testament, scholar Craig Keener acknowledges:

Because not all the details of ancient Palestinian weddings are known, it is not clear whether the parable envisions the lamps as burning while the bridesmaids slept (to avoid the delay of having to rekindle them) or as being lit only after the first announcement of the bridegroom's coming (as many scholars think) (Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament*, Second Edition, 2014).

Note Keener, like Davies and Allison, also admits that “not all the details of ancient Palestinian weddings are known.” Indeed, as he states, it is unclear whether or not the lamps would burn while the bridesmaids slept. We simply do not have enough information to make a determination.

One more citation is necessary. In the most comprehensive work on the subject of Jesus’ parables, Klyne R. Snodgrass makes the following comment about the parable of the ten virgins:

To the frustration of all interpreters of this parable, information about wedding customs in the ancient world is relatively sparse, and practices may have differed from place to place (Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent, A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2018, p. 510).

We have just cited three standard works: a three-book series on Matthew one on the subject of New Testament background, and the most comprehensive book on Jesus’ parables.

While we could provide further examples, the point is clear: scholars recognize our lack of specific knowledge of this subject of first century weddings in the ancient Near East.

However, what we do know, with the sparse information that is available, does fit the general background of the times.

To the point, Kenneth E. Bailey was a master biblical scholar who lived in the Middle East for 60 years. He is known for his unique understanding of Middle Eastern culture.

He wrote the following comments on the work of Davies and Allison for this parable, Matthew 25:1-13, as well as a similar one found in Luke 12:35-38, “the parable of the serving master:”

W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison present a detailed discussion of the various options regarding the history of the composition of this parable...I note the above list of comparisons to make the point that both of these parables have similar traditional Middle Eastern culture behind them (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2008, p. 271).

We learn that the parable of the wise and foolish young women has a setting that was similar to the Middle Eastern culture at that time.

In other words, there was seemingly nothing that sets the wedding illustration by Jesus, given in Matthew 25:1-13, apart as a unique practice, or something special.

There are some other things that we do know about traditional weddings in the ancient Middle East that are problematic to coordinate with last days events.

For example, according to Bailey, in traditional village life in the Middle East, weddings occurred “during the seven months of the hot and cloudless summer.”

Does this mean the Lord cannot come during the five months where weddings are not taking place?

John Chapter 2 tells us that the wedding in Cana of Galilee took place on “the third day.” As Keener points out, the “third day does not refer to the third day of the week, because virgins were married on the fourth day (Wednesday) and widows on the fifth (Thursday).”

Does this indicate that we should look for two comings of Christ? One for the virgins and one for the widows?

Finally, when the bride was ready, she would be placed on the back of a riding animal, and the groom, with his friends, would form a disorganized, exuberant parade (Bailey)

How does this work with the timing of the return of the Lord?

In sum, we discover that our knowledge of weddings at the time of Christ is limited. What we do know, moreover, conflicts with the scenario that some people are promoting. Yet these are not the only two problems of trying to claim that they are a “divine pattern” for understanding the end times.

Indeed, there is nothing in Scripture that commands weddings are to be conducted in a certain way. In other words, all that we have to look at are traditional ways in which the people at that time conducted wedding ceremonies, from beginning to end.

So here is the question we ask. Are we to assume that the secular, traditional ways in which the weddings were conducted somehow become a divine pattern for us to understand “last days” Bible prophecy?

How To Evaluate The Specific Claims Of “New Evidence”

Therefore, if someone claims that new information has come to light that demonstrates the uniqueness of this event in the area of the Galilee, or claims that we have all, or most, of the details of what these weddings were like, then they must present precise documentation from authoritative sources that substantiates their claim.

Any claims, or documents presented, should be reviewed by qualified scholars before any claims or conclusions can be reached or made public.

Observation 2: We Must Apply Our Two Principles To Any Conclusion About Coming Events

This leads us to our second observation. As we have previously noted, the Bible tells us that the faith has been once and for all delivered to the

believers, that, in our interpretation of Scripture, we are not to go beyond that which is written, and we are not to look for some hidden meanings in the text.

Hence, God's revelation to us is understandable and sufficient. We do not need anything else to illustrate what He has already revealed unless the Scriptures specifically encourages us to do such a thing.

With this in mind, we must go to the Scripture, and to it alone, to determine exactly what we should expect to happen in the future. In sum, our starting point should always be the Scripture!

What We Should Not Do!

What we should not do is to promote some possible scenario that would add to the specific details that are already recorded in Scripture. This is true regardless of whether we have evidence that certain customs, occurred, or did not occur, in biblical times. We should not begin with our understanding of certain customs, explain them in detail, and then go to the Scripture to try to make our case for some type of end-time scenario.

If the case cannot be made from the Bible alone, then there is NO case to be made! In other words, there has to be something clearly spelled out in Scripture that would cause us to consider anything beyond that which is written.

If there is nothing found in Scripture, then the idea of going to a custom or cultural belief should never be considered in the first place.

Unfortunately, this is what too often happens.

So, what are we to make of those who do promote something like this, using customs or practices of biblical times to claim it fits a certain prophetic scenario? Are they "false prophets?"

Not at all!

All of us, at one time or another, the author included, have believed or promoted something with the best of intentions that eventually turned out to be invalid. When confronted with our mistakes, we should learn from them.

On the other hand, those who have some type of platform, where they can reach the masses, should be very careful about publicly making the specific claims about some revolutionary discovery, especially one that would settle a point of contention among believers concerning "last days" Bible prophecy!

James wrote:

Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1 NLT).

There is one final point we should make. Even if a discovery were made, that provided a list of everything that would take place in a wedding ceremony at the time of Jesus, what difference would it make?

If the Scripture itself does not encourage us, which it does not, to look at this specific wedding event so that we can have a clear answer as to the timing of end times events, then such a claim about what it reveals is completely worthless.

May we take to heart the commandments of the Lord to “not go beyond that which is written,” and only proclaim the “faith that has been once and for all delivered, and not to seek to add to, or read into the Scripture, more than is actually there.