

Exploring Miller's Rules

What do they actually say? What does Inspiration say about them?

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In 1545 and 1563 the Council of Trent, a huge convocation was convened by the leaders of the Roman church to deal with the issues raised by the Protestant Reformation. For a long while it almost seemed that the concepts of the Protestants were going to win out. The best RCC Scholars wracked their brains in vain trying to find something solid they could use against the Protestant claim that the Bible and the Bible only was to be the one guide of faith and practice for the Christian. Finally one day a Jesuit scholar dashed in all excited; he had found the answer. The Protestants did not practice their own rule; they had continued to keep Sunday for which there was no biblical justification, and did not keep the seventh-day Sabbath clearly enjoined in the Bible. From this fact they concluded that the rulings of the Papacy superseded the authority of the Bible. Out of that assembly the cry went out throughout Christendom; "The Council of Trent! The Council of Trent! All must bow to the Council of Trent on pain of persecution and death!"

Among the Students of Prophecy recently there has been a cry raised; "Miller's Rules! Miller's rules! All must bow to Miller's Rules!" Actually though, it is not Miller's rules, or even what the Spirit of Prophecy says about them in the one place they are mentioned, that is being urged upon all, it is one person's interpretation of those items. It is easy to see something in one light as an able and influential speaker builds his case to prove his own point, while the items themselves may not actually be saying what is being claimed. We need to ask a few pertinent questions and find the answers in history and Inspiration: First let us look at the only place in the Spirit of Prophecy where these rules of interpretation are elucidated.

"Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel's message ***are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that Father Miller adopted.*** In the little book entitled "Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology," Father Miller gives the following simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible study and interpretation:--

"1. Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible; 2. All Scripture is necessary, and may be understood by diligent application and study; 3. Nothing revealed in Scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering; 4. To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in error; 5. Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule, and not the Bible."

"The above is a portion of these rules; and in our study of the Bible we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth." RH, November 25, 1884

Does the Spirit of Prophecy enforce these rules as the main thrust in all Bible Study; or simply as a useful tool to understanding Scripture? Certainly ***the principles*** are recommended as useful aid to Bible study; but notice she says, "principles set forth" so she is not holding these rules up as a creed of orthodoxy. Certainly if they were to be the basis of all faith and practice she would have referred to them as such more than once in all the Spirit of Prophecy writings we have access to today! It is interesting also that she speaks of the PLAN that Miller adopted, then the Rules that were published in the little book in 1842. The 'plan' came first; that ***plan*** was to use Cruden's concordance to allow the Bible to interpret

itself. It is most interesting that she included this fifth one in her partial list; perhaps we need to pay closer attention to it today?

"5. Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. *If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule, and not the Bible.*"

Notice 2 and 3 above; do they say that we have to rely on a teacher or popular presenter of prophecy to lay out what we are to believe and then we must follow that layout; we dare not study and lay it out for ourselves for fear we may find that the Bible shows us something different from what this one person is saying and come to another conclusion? No way! It is telling us that all of us can understand the Bible for ourselves and urging us to do so!

Did Miller have this set of rules when he began his quest to find out if the Bible is true and able to be understood? What does he tell us about what he used and how he found the truths he later carried to the world?

"I then resolved to study my Bible, believing I could find out what the Holy Spirit meant. But as soon as I had formed this resolution the thought came to me, "Suppose you find a passage that you cannot understand, what will you do?" This mode of studying the Bible then came to my mind.--"I will take the words of such passages and trace them through the Bible, and find out their meaning in this way. I had Cruden's Concordance, which I think is the best in the world, so I took that and my Bible, and set down to my desk, and read nothing else except the newspapers a little, for I was determined to know what my Bible meant. I began at Genesis and read on slowly; and when I came to a text that I could not understand, I searched through the Bible to find out what it meant." William Miller.

"He then devoted himself to a prayerful study of the word of God. Laying aside all commentaries, Mr. Miller determined to study the Bible itself, and with the help of a Bible dictionary and Cruden's Concordance, to explain obscure passages by other passages. In this way after a two-year intensive study of the Bible, he became fully satisfied that the Bible is its own interpreter." 1938 END, FOME 24.

When popular presenters lecture on prophecy today, do they always allow the Bible to interpret itself by carefully tracing every incident of a particular word or phrase through its pages until the meaning is made clear? Remember also that Miller did not rely on original language lexicons like Strong's either; just the words as they appeared in the KJV.

Where did Miller get the Rules that he later promoted?

"The two major published sources enumerating Miller's hermeneutical principles are the introduction to his lectures and a letter he wrote regarding principles of biblical interpretation. The introduction to his lectures discussed especially the principles of interpreting apocalyptic-eschatology, which he considered as predictive prophecy. In 1840, however, one of Miller's letters summarizing his rules of hermeneutic was published. These rules came to be known as "Miller's Rules of Bible Interpretation." The major part of the following discussion is based on these rules as they were published by Apollos Hale. 1977 PGD, FSDA 16.

"In general Miller's hermeneutical principles were a part of the Protestant hermeneutical tradition which can be traced back to the primitive church. His hermeneutic was based on the presuppositions of the sola scriptura principle and the unity and self-authentication of Scripture. The first four hermeneutical rules dealt with general rules of interpretation. Miller indicated that

the Christian canon provided the context for interpretation and that Scripture can be understood (Rule I). He advocated the hermeneutical rule that Scripture is its own expositor, and based it on the concept of the Bible as an ultimate norm (Rule III). The principle of the analogy of Scripture and its application to a particular subject he frequently used as a means to understand Scripture (Rule IV). As to its application he stressed that the importance of "every word" had to be taken into consideration (Rules II, IV). Not only a word but also a sentence had its importance: "Let every word have its own scriptural meaning, every sentence its proper bearing, and have no contradiction, and your theory will and must of necessity be correct." He also suggested that when all scriptural passages related to a particular subject were brought together, each word and sentence should have "its proper bearing and force in the grand whole." 1977 PGD, FSDA 17.

"The remaining rules were predominantly concerned with principles of interpreting apocalyptic-eschatology. This, according to Miller, included visions, symbols, and parables, and had prophetic significance. He referred to existing prophetic parallels which were complements to each other requiring integration to achieve their full understanding (Rule V). This rule led to the important question: Do the words of Scripture have a literal or nonliteral sense? Miller's hermeneutic gave preference to a literal interpretation of a word as long as it contextually made "good sense." But, if its literal meaning violated "the simple laws of nature" the word had to be interpreted in a figurative sense (Rule VII). " 1977 PGD, FSDA 18.

What about the idea that the Angel Gabriel gave these rules to William Miller? Well as romantic as the thought may seem, we have nothing to justify this idea in his account of it or in the Spirit of Prophecy. Let's see what is actually said:

"I saw that God sent his angel to move upon the heart of a farmer who had not believed the Bible, and led him to search the prophecies. Angels of God repeatedly visited that chosen one, to guide his mind and open to his understanding prophecies which had ever been dark to God's people. The commencement of the chain of truth was given to him, and he was led on to search for link after link, until he looked with wonder and admiration upon the Word of God. He saw there a perfect chain of truth. That Word which he had regarded as uninspired now opened before his vision in its beauty and glory. He saw that one portion of Scripture explains another, and when one passage was closed to his understanding, he found in another part of the Word that which explained it. He regarded the sacred Word of God with joy and with the deepest respect and awe." 1SG 127

Is not at all important really, whether it was Gabriel or not; what is important is that heavenly angels did visit and guide him as he studied. But the angels did not give that set of Rules to him as some kind of inspirational vision; the Rules came much later some from his experience in doing what he was doing, and some at least were gleaned from other Protestant biblical commentators. We really need to focus rather on what Miller said came to his mind when he ***first set himself to understand***;

"This mode of studying the Bible then came to my mind.--"I will take the words of such passages [that he did not understand] and trace them through the Bible, and find out their meaning in this way. I had Cruden's Concordance, which I think is the best in the world, so I took that and my Bible, and set down to my desk, and read nothing else except the newspapers a little, for I was determined to know what my Bible meant."

Brothers and sisters if we were actually doing this carefully today, using both Bible and Spirit of Prophecy, and not putting our own gloss on it, many passages that there is disagreement on would be plain and clear! Try it! It really works!

Did William Miller himself use and teach these rules in his lectures as an essential orthodox creed? Or did he use and recommend them as a useful tool? His own words should suffice:

"In studying the Bible, I have found the following rules to be of great service to myself, and now give them to the public by special request. Every rule should be well studied, in connection with the scripture references, if the Bible student would be at all benefited by them."

Sounds like a useful tool doesn't it? He is certainly not presenting them as something to be used as an official creed. Miller's Rules were not published until 1840 in a letter then officially in a little book in 1842.

Was Miller an aggressive individual denouncing his opponents in his discourses?

"He [Miller] was courteous and sympathetic. When every seat in the house was full, and the platform and places about the pulpit seemed overcrowded, I have seen him leave the desk, and walk down the aisle, and take some feeble old man or woman by the hand and find a seat for them, then return and resume his discourse. He was indeed rightly called "Father Miller," for he had a watchful care over those who came under his ministrations, was affectionate in his manner, of a genial disposition and tender heart." {CET 23.1}

How did Miller understand the role of literal and figurative in his Rule #11? Please note, in the comment below Miller is actually quoting from another author, and in so doing you see that he fully agrees with the authors premise.

"His next, and third part: "Designations of time in the prophecies." On this point, his rule, which he has laid down on page 65, is perfectly right, and must, I think, stand the test in all cases. ***"Every passage of Scripture, or of any other book, is to be interpreted as bearing its plain, and primary, and literal sense, unless good reasons can be given why it should be tropically (figuratively) understood."*** 1842 WiM, MRSH 7.

"Designations of time in the prophecies. He first reminds the reader of one of the plainest and most cogent rules of Hermeneutics, viz: "That every passage of Scripture is to be interpreted as bearing its plain and primary sense, unless good reason can be given why it should be tropically understood." In this position we heartily concur, and should greatly rejoice had he at all times been governed by it." Joshua Himes 1842. Here he is commenting on the works of Prof. Stuart, and his "Hints on Prophecy".

"You enter upon the process of proof by which your main position is to-be established, by laying down the following as one of the plainest and most cogent of all the rules of hermeneutics, viz., that every passage of Scripture, and of every other book, is to be interpreted as bearing its plain, and primary, and literal sense, unless good reason can be given why it should be tropically understood. To the truth of this canon I cordially assent. I subscribe also with equal freedom and readiness to the connected remark, that "when we admit the tropical sense of a passage, we do it because, if literally understood, the subject and predicate would not harmonize, or because a literal sense would be frigid, unmeaning, or inappropriate." Joshua Himes 1844.

Below we have listed Miller's complete list of Rules for your edification; as you read them and the texts with them carefully and prayerfully; you may see areas where the popular views being pushed by some presenters are not necessarily supported. We encourage all, as did Miller in his day, to lay aside the things you have heard and watched and really explore these things yourself, looking up each reference given rather than just reading the rules alone. But first we want to include these comments that Miller gave concerning the Rules as they are very inspiring.

"These are some of the most important rules which I find the word of God warrants me to adopt and follow, in order for system and regularity. And if I am not greatly deceived, ***in so doing, I have found the Bible, as a whole, one of the most simple, plain, and intelligible books ever written, containing proof in itself of its divine origin, and full of all knowledge that our hearts could wish to know or enjoy.*** I have found it a treasure which the world cannot purchase. It gives a calm peace in believing, and a firm hope in the future. It sustains the mind in adversity, and teaches us to be humble in prosperity. It prepares us to love and do good to others, and to realize the value of the soul. It makes us bold and valiant for the truth, and nerves the arm to oppose error. It gives us a powerful weapon to break down Infidelity, and makes known the only antidote for sin. It instructs us how death will be conquered, and how the bonds of the tomb must be broken. It tells us of future events, and shows the preparation necessary to meet them. It gives us an opportunity to hold conversation with the King of kings, and reveals the best code of laws ever enacted.

"This is but a faint view of its value; yet how many perishing souls treat it with neglect, or, what is equally as bad, treat it as a hidden mystery which cannot be known. Oh, my dear reader, make it your chief study. Try it well, and you will find it to be all I have said. Yes, like the Queen of Sheba, you will say the half was not told you.

"The divinity taught in our schools is always founded on some sectarian creed. It may do to take a blank mind and impress it with this kind, ***but it will always end in bigotry. A free mind will never be satisfied with the views of others.*** Were I a teacher of youth in divinity, I would first learn their capacity and mind. If these were good, I would make them study the Bible for themselves, and send them out free to do the world good. But if they had no mind, I would stamp them with another's mind, write bigot on their forehead, and send them out as slaves!"
{1842 WiM, MWV 123, 124.

RULES OF INTERPRETATION: William Miller

IN studying the Bible, I have found the following rules to be of great service to myself, and now give them to the public by special request. Every rule should be well studied, in connection with the scripture references, if the Bible student would be at all benefited by them.

RULE I.

Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible.

PROOF: Matt.v.18.

RULE II.

All scripture is necessary, and may be understood by a diligent application and study.

PROOF: 2 Tim.iii.15, 16, 17.

RULE III.

Nothing revealed in the scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering.

PROOF: Deut.xxix.29. Matt.x.26,27. 1Cor.ii.10. Phil.iii.15. Isa.xiv.11. Matt.xxi.22. John xiv.13,14. xv.7. James i.5,6. 1John v.13,14,15.

RULE IV.

To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know; then let every word have its proper influence, and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in an error.

PROOF: Isa.xxviii.7-29. xxxv.8. Prov.xix.27. Luke xxiv.27,44,45. Rom.xvi.26. James v.19. 2Pet.i.19,29.

RULE V.

Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound it to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed or wisdom is my rule, not the Bible.

PROOFS: Ps.xix.7,8,9,10,11. cxix.97,98,99,100,101,102,103,104,105. Matt.xxiii.8,9, 10. 1Cor. ii. 12,13,14,15,16. Eze.xxxiv.18,19. Luke xi.52. Mal.ii.7,8.

RULE VI.

God has revealed things to come, by visions, in figures and parables, and in this way the same things are oftentime revealed again and again, by different visions, or in different figures, and parables. If you wish to understand them, you must combine them all in one.

PROOFS: Ps.lxxxix.19. Hos.xii.10. Hab.ii.2. Acts ii.17. 1Cor.x.6. Heb.ix.9,24. Ps.lxxviii.2. Matt.xiii.13,34. Gen.xli.1-32. Dan.ii. vii. and viii. Acts x.9-16.

RULE VII.

Visions are always mentioned as such.

PROOFS: 2Cor.xii.1.

RULE VIII.

Figures always have a figurative meaning, and are used much in prophecy, to represent future things, times and events; such as mountains, meaning governments; beasts, meaning kingdoms.

Waters, meaning people.

Lamp, meaning Word of God.

Day, meaning year.

PROOFS: Dan.ii.35,44. vii.8,17. Rev.xvii.1,15. Ps.cxix.105. Ezek.iv.6.

RULE IX.

Parables are used as comparisons to illustrate subjects, and must be explained in the same way as figures by the subject and Bible. Mark iv.13.

RULE X.

Figures sometimes have two or more different significations, as day is used in a figurative sense to represent three different periods of time.

PROOFS: Ecc.vii.14.

1. Indefinite.

2. Definite, a day for a year.

3. Day for a thousand years.

If you put on the right construction it will harmonize with the Bible and make good sense, otherwise it will not.

PROOFS: Ezek.iv.6. 2Pet.iii.8.

RULE XI.

How to know when a word is used figuratively. If it makes good sense as it stands, **and does no violence to the simple laws of nature, then it must be understood literally, if not, figuratively.**

PROOFS: Rev. xii.1, 2. xvii.3-7.

RULE XII.

To learn the true meaning of figures, trace your figurative word through your Bible, and where you find it explained, put it on your figure, and if it makes good sense you need look no further, if not, look again.

RULE XIII.

To know whether we have the true historical event for the fulfilment of a prophecy. If you find every word of the prophecy (after the figures are understood) is literally fulfilled, then you may know that your history is the true event. But if one word lacks a fulfilment, then you must look for another event, or wait its future development. For God takes care that history and prophecy doth agree, so that the true believing children of God may never be ashamed.

PROOFS: Ps.xxii.5. Isa.xlv.17,18,19. 1Pet.ii.6. Rev.xvii.17. Acts iii.18.

RULE XIV.

The most important rule of all is, that you must have faith. It must be a faith that requires a sacrifice, and, if tried, would give up the dearest object on earth, the world and all its desires, character, living, occupation, friends, home, comforts, and worldly honors. If any of these should hinder our believing any part of God's word, it would show our faith to be vain. Nor can we ever believe so long as one of these motives lies lurking in our hearts. We must believe that God will never forfeit his word. And we can have confidence that he that takes notice of the sparrow, and numbers the hairs of our head, will guard the translation of his own word, and throw a barrier around it, and prevent those who sincerely trust in God, and put implicit confidence in his word, from erring far from the truth, though they may not understand Hebrew or Greek.

"About the time of the end, a body of men will be raised up who will turn their attention to the prophecies, and insist upon their literal interpretation, in the midst of much clamor and opposition."

Quotation by Isaac Newton (1643 - 1727)