

APOCALYPTICISM

By Andy Woods

Dispensational interpreters often categorize various prophetic books of the Bible, such as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation, as “apocalyptic literature.” By using this category, these interpreters simply mean that these books unveil or disclose God’s future prophetic program. Defining apocalyptic literature as biblical material that unveils is in harmony with the meaning of the Greek word from which “apocalyptic” is derived. This word is *apokalypsis* and it simply means to unveil or disclose.

However, recent evangelical interpreters have begun to vest this term with a new meaning. When they use the term “apocalyptic literature” they are equating the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation with a host of non-canonical, extra biblical writings that flourished from the intertestamental period and into the second century A.D. Examples include *Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Baruch*, *Jubilees*, *Assumption of Moses*, *Psalms of Solomon*, *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and *Sibylline Oracles*. These writings possess a common cluster of attributes. Such attributes include the following: extensive use of symbolism, vision as the major means of revelation, angelic guides, activity of angels and demons, focus on the end of the current age and the inauguration of the age to come, urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions in the immediate future, the end as a cosmic catastrophe, new salvation that is paradisaical in character, manifestation of the kingdom of God, a mediator with royal functions, dualism with God and Satan as the leaders, spiritual order determining the flow of history, pessimism about man’s ability to change the course of events, periodization and determinism of human history, otherworldly journeys, the catchword glory, and a final showdown between good and evil (Gregg 10-12; Murphy 130-33).

It is argued that Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation share many of these characteristics. On this basis, these canonical books are also categorized as apocalyptic literature. The Book of Revelation in particular is categorized with the apocalyptic writings. Not only does the Revelation share many features with these extra biblical books, but it also was composed during the same general time period when the apocalyptic writings were composed. There is no doubt that Revelation is similar to the apocalyptic writings in several respects. However, categorizing Revelation with the apocalyptic writings significantly challenges the traditional, dispensational interpretation of Revelation. The decision to classify Revelation with the apocalyptic genre alters the hermeneutical principles that one uses in interpreting the book. Consequently, numerous hermeneutical doors seem to open to the extent that Revelation's character is viewed as apocalyptic.

For example, it becomes difficult to approach the text with the same literal approach that one uses when interpreting other sections of Scripture. Gregg contends that although taking the text literally, unless it yields an absurd result, is good rule of thumb to follow when dealing with other types of biblical material, this approach does not work in the case of apocalyptic literature where literalism is the exception and symbolism is the norm (Gregg 11). Apocalyptic writings cannot be interpreted literally because such writings represent crisis literature (Collins 38). In order to highlight the severity of the crisis, the apocalyptist spoke in exaggerated terms. Take by way of analogy the statement, "my world has come to an end because my girlfriend has broken up with me." This statement obviously does not communicate a literal end of the world. Rather, it is using heightened language in order to communicate the significance of a personal event. If John used the same methodology in Revelation, then statements such as half of the world's population being destroyed (Rev 6:8; 9:15) and the greatest earthquake in human history (Rev

16:18) cannot be construed literally. Rather, they similarly represent heightened language communicating a past event that the people of God experienced. Perhaps such an event was oppression by Jerusalem or Rome. Understanding Revelation in such hyperbolic terms opens the possibility that the global language may in actuality be descriptive of a localized historical phenomenon that John has invested with global language. This mindset opens the door to historicism and preterism.

Moreover, the notion that John used secret codes to disguise the enemies of God's people mentioned in the book also becomes viable if Revelation is apocalyptic. At times, the apocalyptists disguised through symbolic language the entity that was oppressing them. The apocalyptic writer sought to give hope to the oppressed people of God by predicting the cataclysmic destruction of the enemy that was persecuting them. However, because of fear of retaliation, the apocalypticist was not free to identify the oppressor. Thus, the message had to be disguised in symbolic dress (Kallas 70). For example, apocalyptic writings sometimes used Babylon as a code for Rome (*Sibylline Oracles* V. 143, 159-60, 434). If John was following this pattern, he also does not mean Babylon when he says Babylon. Instead, he is using the word Babylon as a symbolic disguise to identify an oppressor. Thus, when John mentioned Babylon, he might have had in mind Jerusalem or Rome.

Multivalence is another hermeneutical door that opens when Revelation is classified as belonging to the apocalyptic category. Because the Babylonian crisis furnished the paradigm for perceiving later crises, Jewish apocalypses emphasized repetitious patterns rather than individual historical circumstances (Collins 51). If John employs apocalyptic multivalence in Revelation, it is possible that the events of the book cannot be anchored to one event but rather can recur repeatedly throughout history. For example, some maintain that Babylon not only refers to a

future empire but to historical Jerusalem as well. It is also argued that the beast of Revelation 13 refers simultaneously to both Nero as well as a future antichrist (Pate and Haines 42-44).

Categorizing Revelation as apocalyptic also influences how one interprets Revelation's numbers. Other apocalypses typically used numbers to convey concepts rather than count units (Gregg 11-12). Thus, categorizing Revelation as apocalyptic literature moves the interpreter away from a literal understanding of Revelation's numbers and more toward a symbolic interpretation. Many conclude that the number 1000 mentioned six times in Revelation 20 refers to an extended period of time rather than a literal 1000-year time period. Others show a similar reluctance of taking the number 144,000 (Rev 7) literally. Still others have questioned a literal interpretation of the numerical measurements of the eternal city described in Rev 21–22.

However, opening these hermeneutical doors on the basis of categorizing Revelation with the apocalyptic books is unjustified. A closer scrutiny demonstrates that the differences between Revelation and the apocalyptic works outweigh any similarities between the two (Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 323-38). For example, although apocalyptic literature was typically pseudonymous, Revelation bears the name of its author (Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Moreover, Revelation fails to share the pessimism of the apocalyptists who despaired of all human history. Rather, Revelation reflects the optimism of God working redemptively through the lamb presently as well as in the future. Furthermore, apocalyptic literature contains no epistolary material. By contrast, seven ecclesiastical epistles are found in Revelation 2–3.

In addition, non-canonical apocalyptic literature did not emphasize moral imperatives. Although there are occasional exceptions to this rule (1 Enoch 91:19), the apocalyptists are not generally motivated by a strong sense of moral urgency. The reason for this is the apocalyptists' conviction that they were part of the righteous remnant. They saw their role as one of

encouraging the remnant to endure, remain faithful, and have hope rather than persuade people to turn from known sin (Ehrman 227). By contrast, Revelation utilizes moral imperatives.

Humanity’s need for repentance is not only found in Christ’s exhortations to the seven churches (Rev 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19), but the exhortation to repent is found throughout the book as a whole (Rev 9:20-21; 16:9, 11). Moreover, the coming of messiah in apocalyptic literature is something that takes place exclusively in the future. By contrast Revelation portrays Christ as having already come and laid the groundwork for His future coming through His redemptive death. Finally, Revelation makes numerous self-claims to be prophecy (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). In fact, Revelation employs the term *proph_t_s* or its cognates eighteen times. These differences between Revelation and apocalyptic literature are summarized in the following chart (Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 338).

<u>Apocalyptic Genre</u>	<u>Revelation</u>
Pseudonymous	Not pseudonymous
Pessimistic about the present	Not pessimistic about the present
No epistolary framework	Epistolary frame work
Limited admonitions for moral compliance	Repeated admonitions for moral compliance
Messiah’s coming exclusively future	Basis for Messiah’s future coming is past
Does not call itself a prophecy	Calls itself a prophecy

Additional dissimilarities can be observed. For example, apocalyptic literature has a different view of suffering than that portrayed in Revelation. In apocalyptic writings, suffering is something that emanates from God opposing forces rather than from God Himself. The apocalyptists did not see suffering as something good that is to be submitted to. By contrast, in Revelation, suffering comes from the hand of God (Rev 5:5). Therefore, at times, suffering is something good and must be submitted to (Kallas 69-80). Moreover, apocalyptic literature is

pseudo-prophecy or *vaticinia ex eventu*, which means “prophecies after the fact.” In other words, apocalyptists typically portray a historical event as future prophecy. However, this is not so in Revelation where John looks from his own day into the future (Morris 94). In addition, Revelation is dominated by an already not yet tension as John looked to the needs of his own day as well as the distant future. Yet, this same tension is not evident in other apocalypses (Morris 94).

Furthermore, other apocalypses typically use numbers to convey concepts rather than count units. By contrast, Revelation appears to use many numbers to indicate specific count units. For example, many futurist scholars believe that various numbers found in Revelation, such as 1260 days (Rev 12:6) or 42 months (Rev 11:2; 13:5), are direct references to the unfulfilled aspects of Daniel’s seventy weeks prophecy (Dan 9:24-27). Hoehner’s calculations indicate that the fulfilled aspects of this prophecy had the potential of being accurate to the exact day (Hoehner 115-39). Therefore, it stands to reason that the prophecy’s unfulfilled aspects will also be fulfilled to the minutest detail. Thus, the numbers 1260 days and 42 months should not be taken as merely communicating concepts but rather should be interpreted as specific count units. According to Thomas, Revelation contains no verifiably symbolic numbers. Rather, non-symbolic utilization of numbers is the norm (Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22*, 408).

Moreover, Revelation’s heavy dependence upon on Ezekiel and Daniel also raises questions as to whether the book should be categorized as apocalyptic. Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied 400 years before apocalyptic literature became dominant in the intertestamental period. Also, Revelation 12:1 borrows imagery from Genesis 37:9-10, which took place in the patriarchal era nearly 1800 years before apocalypticism began to flourish. Finally, some apocalyptic writings fail to present a precise eschatological scheme (Collins 56). Yet, many have

argued that Revelation 6-19, with its telescoping and fixed seven-year duration, does communicate a fixed eschatological scheme. A chronology of events also seems to be employed in Revelation 20-22.

In sum, although Revelation has many affinities with apocalyptic literature, it is difficult to classify the book as apocalyptic because these similarities seem outweighed by the differences between the two. A better classification for the book is prophecy rather than apocalyptic. This classification best takes into account Revelation's numerous self claims to be prophecy. It also takes into account Revelation's similarity to the pattern exhibited by the Old Testament prophets who not only called God's people to repentance but also comforted them through visions of victory to take place in the distant future (Isa 40–66; Ezek 36–48; Amos 9:11–15). Revelation fits this identical pattern by not only repeatedly calling the seven churches to repentance but also providing these oppressed churches with a prophecy to be fulfilled in the distant future regarding the believer's ultimate triumph (Rev 4–22). Categorizing Revelation as prophetic is also substantiated upon observing that Revelation alludes to the Book of Daniel more than any other Old Testament book. Yet, Jesus specifically referred to Daniel as a prophet (Matt 24:15). Because Revelation's content relies so heavily upon Daniel, it stands to reason that the material found in Revelation should also be categorized as prophetic. The existence of the Greek word *apokalypsis* that appears in the opening verse of the book does not disqualify Revelation from being categorized as prophecy. This word simply means unveiling and does not have the meaning that modern scholars attach to the term "apocalyptic."

The decision to categorize Revelation as of the prophetic genre rather than the apocalyptic genre significantly changes the hermeneutical landscape. If Revelation is prophecy, then one interprets Revelation just as he would interpret any other section of prophetic material.

The same literal, grammatical, historical method that is used to understand other sections of prophetic material is also what is needed in order to understand Revelation. Therefore, a new set of hermeneutical principles is not needed to properly interpret Revelation (Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 38). The previously described hermeneutical doors associated with apocalypticism close to the extent that the genre of the book is prophetic rather than apocalyptic. Instead, the interpreter is confined to literalism, which can be defined as attaching to every word the same meaning that it would have in normal usage.

A consistent application of a literal approach to Revelation logically leads the interpreter away from viewing the book's contents as being fulfilled in the past and instead leads to the futurist interpretation (Tenney 139, 142). A relationship exists between literalism and futurism because the ordinary import of Revelation's words and phrases makes it impossible to argue that Revelation's contents have already been fulfilled. The destruction of half of the world's population (Rev 6:8; 9:15), and the greatest earthquake in human history (Rev 16:18) obviously has never taken place.

By using the literal approach, the interpreter takes Revelation's content in its ordinary sense until he encounters some obvious clue in the text alerting him to the fact that figurative or symbolic language is being employed. How does the interpreter recognize when figurative or symbolic language is being used? One clue involves looking for overt textual indicators alerting the interpreter to the use of figurative language. One such situation is found in Rev 11:8, which notes that Jerusalem "is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt." Here, the use of the adverb "spiritually" is designed to alert the reader to the fact that an allegorical or spiritually application is being made. Another clue involves the use of the word sign (*s_meion*). When John uses this word, it alerts the interpreter to the fact that he is speaking figuratively or symbolically rather

than literally. For example, because John uses *s_meion* to describe the woman in Revelation 12:1, it is obvious that the woman is symbolic or representative of something. Another clue involves the words “like” (*homoios*) or “as” (*h_s*). When John employs such language, he is indicating a correspondence between what he saw in the vision and what he was trying to describe. For example, Revelation 8:8 says, “...And something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea...” The word “like” alerts the interpreter to the fact that John is simply using comparative language to describe what he saw and the mountain is not to be interpreted literally.

Another clue involves an identical correspondence in the Old Testament. Because the leopard, lion, and bear in Revelation 13:2 are also used in Daniel 7 to depict nations, the interpreter is alerted to the fact that John is employing symbolic language. Thus, the leopard, lion, and bear also represent nations in Revelation 13 just as they did in Daniel 7. Yet another clue involves an interpretation in the immediate context. If something is interpreted for the reader, then the thing interpreted is obviously a symbol. The woman in Revelation 17 is obviously a symbol because the immediate context interprets her to be a city (17:18). A final clue involves looking for absurdity. For example, if the woman in Revelation 12:1 were literally clothed with the sun the heat would destroy her. Because a literal interpretation yields an absurd result, symbolic language must be in use.

After identifying figurative or symbolic language, how is such language to be understood? Sometimes the immediate context interprets the symbol. For example, the dragon of Revelation 12:3 is interpreted as Satan in 12:9. Walvoord identifies twenty-six instances in which a symbol is interpreted in the immediate context (Walvoord 29-30). Another method is to see if the same symbol is employed elsewhere in the Old Testament. For example, the same

symbol of the woman used in Revelation 12:1 is also used in Genesis 37:9-11 to depict Israel. Thus, the woman of Revelation 12 is symbolic of Israel. This strategy is useful because 278 of Revelation's 404 verses allude to the Old Testament. A final method for understanding Revelation's symbolic language is to note that John through his use of "like" or "as" is attempting to describe futuristic events that are beyond his linguistic ability. Thus, he communicates through language of correspondence. In other words, in order to communicate the contents of his vision, he uses similes or language of comparison by equating things from his own world to the futuristic events that he sees in his vision.

In conclusion, probably the most significant decision that the interpreter can make regarding what hermeneutic he will use in interpreting the Book of Revelation is determining if Revelation's character has more in common with the prophetic or apocalyptic genre. Viewing Revelation as apocalyptic opens numerous hermeneutical doors such as code theories, multivalence, symbolic numbers, and viewing Revelation's global language as local language. Conversely, those who see Revelation as belonging to the prophetic genre are bound by the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation, which takes Revelation's words or phrases in their ordinary sense unless a convincing textual clue informs the reader to do otherwise. While Revelation has some affinities with apocalypticism, these similarities are overshadowed by vast differences between the two. The book has far more in common with prophecy. Thus, the similarities between Revelation and apocalypticism are not sufficient to cause the interpreter to dispense with a consistent application of literalism when deciphering the book.

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FOR FURTHER READING

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