

# INTERTESTAMENTAL APOCALYPTIC WRITINGS

## *Mark Roberts*

### **Introduction:**

- I. What is an apocalypse? What is apocalyptic literature?
  - A. At its beginning, Revelation claims to be an apocalypse (Rev. 1:1).
  - B. *Apokalupsis* means “an uncovering; a laying bare, making naked, a disclosure of truth, instruction, concerning divine things before unknown.”<sup>1</sup>
  - C. However, we realize this term in this book means more than just an ordinary revelation of God’s will. Revelation is like no other book in the New Testament.
  - D. What does it all mean? How are we to understand this apocalyptic book?
- II. The answer is found largely in understanding the type of literature the Revelation is.
  - A. If it is to be understood and taught properly we must have some appreciation for this style of writing.
  - B. We need to get into the mind of an author that would write this kind of material.
  - C. To first century readers the word “apocalypse” would have brought to mind a whole group of books or a genre of literature that the Jewish people had developed in the last few centuries before the birth of Christ.<sup>2</sup>
  - D. Christians were very familiar with apocalyptic: “It is clear that several Enochic texts were available for reading by the time of Jesus and the early church.”<sup>3</sup> The Epistle of Barnabas, an early Christian work, alludes to 1 Enoch, (without any apology) clearly expecting his audience to know the work.<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian also cite 1 Enoch.<sup>5</sup>
  - E. We need a better understanding of this kind of material!
- III. Today we will:
  - A. Define what apocalyptic literature is.
  - B. Discuss the apocalyptic mind set.
  - C. List some major intertestamental apocalyptic works.
  - D. Recognize the major characteristics of apocalyptic writing.
  - E. Emphasize significant teaching points.

### **Body:**

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1 Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Christian Copyrights, Inc., 1983) 62.

2 James L. Blevins, *Revelation*, Knox Preaching Guides, John H. Hayes, editor (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984) 4.

3 James C. VanderKam, “1 Enoch, Enochic Motifs, and Enoch in Early Christian Literature,” *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, edited by James C. VanderKam and William Adler, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1996, page 33.

4 VanderKam 36, 40.

5 See VanderKam 46ff.

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**I. DEFINITIONS:**

- A. Defining what exactly constitutes apocalyptic literature is difficult.
1. Want to expose you to this material so that you will be familiar with it when you do further research.
  2. Some early attempts to shape a definition involved a “listing approach” in which marked characteristics of apocalyptic literature were assembled (otherworldly journey, dualism, dividing time into periods, etc.) and material checked by that.<sup>6</sup>
  3. Didn’t work. Apocalyptic literature is far too varied for lists.
  4. The Society for Biblical Literature proposed the following in 1979, good as anything: “*Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.*”<sup>7</sup>
  5. An addition was later tacked on: “*intended to interpret present earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.*”<sup>8</sup> This means it has function, and how it is to function.
- B. Definition break down:
1. *Revelatory literature* - not my own ideas or observations (like wisdom literature) but purports to be a revelation from God.
  2. *Narrative framework* - there is some kind of story, not just fragments of ideas (Gospel of Thomas just has “and Jesus said... and Jesus said...”), or straight exhortation (like an epistle).
  3. *Discloses a reality on two levels, temporal and spatial* - this is perhaps the most important characteristic of apocalyptic.
    - a. It deals with more than is going on here on this earth, but what happens in heaven as well.
    - b. Paul says there are battles in “heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12).
  4. *Eschatological salvation* - eschatology is just the study of last things.
    - a. Prophetic eschatology has little focus on the end, just a hope that Israel would stop sinning because that caused blessings to happen immediately.
    - b. Apocalyptic eschatology doesn’t see it that way at all. In apocalyptic the readers are righteous, but have no hope unless God dramatically intervenes and decisively establishes His order.
- C. How about a working definition? “A story, written in a time of distress and crisis, that is given by otherworldly beings explaining how God will reverse everything so the righteous will triumph.”
- D. These definitions help us understand some of what we should look for in apocalyptic.

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6 D. S. Russell, *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 12.

7 John J. Collins, ed., “*Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*,” *Semeia* 14 (1979) 9.

8 J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 26.

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1. But we are helped further by knowing the conditions that lead to apocalyptic writing.
2. Then we are really benefited when we examine some common characteristics of apocalyptic literature.

## II. WHY APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE?

### A. The apocalyptic mind<sup>9</sup>

1. Urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions in the immediate future
2. The end as a cosmic catastrophe
3. Periodization and determinism
4. Activity of angels and demons
5. New salvation
6. Belief in the manifestation of the kingdom of God

### B. The times

1. The intertestamental period was a difficult time for orthodox Jews.
2. Alexander the Great was determined to bring Greek culture to every corner of his empire. He succeeded, even in Judea.
3. There was, thus, great anxiety as the religious syncretism and cultural changes going on during this time.
4. In Revelation it is apparent that there are prophets who advocate a more open view toward idolatry and the culture (see Rev. 2:6, 14-15, 20-24).<sup>10</sup>

### C. The loss of the prophetic voice.

1. Jews were keenly aware that the prophetic voice was silent.
2. 1 Maccabees. 4:1, 46; 9:27; 14:41
3. The prophets had spoken of a coming Golden Age, re-establishment of the king, and the Davidic throne of Israel. Such didn't seem to be happening.
4. Hope shifted from this world and this age to another world and another age.<sup>11</sup>

### D. A day of powerlessness.

1. Not only had the promises of God of a Messianic Age not come to pass, they realized their own inability to pull it off.
2. The persecution and oppression of Antiochus Epiphanes (he violated the Temple in 167 BC) made this even more obvious.

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<sup>9</sup> These by Koch, cited in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, second edition, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1998, page 12.

<sup>10</sup> David A. deSilva, "The Revelation to John: A Case Study in Apocalyptic Propaganda and the Maintenance of Sectarian Identity," *Sociological Analysis* 1992, 53:4, 377.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell G. Reddish, ed., *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990) 20.

3. They could find no solution to the problem, save one - God himself would intervene in judgment and establish his messianic rule once and for all, a Kingdom in which his enemies would be destroyed and Israel would receive the dominion and the power for ever.<sup>12</sup>
4. "It was written to people who understood themselves to be powerless, beyond the reach of human strategies for remedy and hope."<sup>13</sup>
5. One writer said, "If I were an oppressed minority, I would love the Book of Revelation...."<sup>14</sup>

E. Summary:

1. An apocalypse is a response of faith to a crisis of faith. It is the problem of suffering pressed to its fullest.
2. Man has always struggled with suffering (the problem of theodicy):
  - a. *Why is there evil?*
  - b. *Why is there evil for good people?*
  - c. *Why is there evil for being good?* Here is the question that drives apocalyptic.
3. "[A]pocalyptic functioned as a kind of pictorial narrative theodicy which acknowledge the legitimacy of the inevitable question found not only on the lips of scoffers, namely, 'If there is a good God who is in control of things, why doesn't he do something about present evil?' The apocalyptists' response: 'He *will*, for history is a unified story which is not over yet.'<sup>15</sup>
4. Note how apocalyptic we are today. Christians are an apocalyptic people. We feel the same way they did then.
5. We even share their pessimism/optimism mix: "Apocalyptic literature represents an alternative to the doctrine of progress. Progress assumes that, if one knew where to look, one could see forces already at work in the historical present that will grow and prosper, making the future brighter and better. Apocalyptic is a genre equipped for those times when one must honestly say no, there is absolutely nothing evident in the present historical moment that promises to create a better future; there is nothing in the human potential at hand to create hope."<sup>16</sup>

### III. CATALOG OF INTERTESTAMENTAL APOCALYPTIC

#### A. **The Book of the Watchers** 1 Enoch 1-36

1. Date: 3rd century BC.
2. A composite work with at least three different sections.
3. It is an elaboration on Genesis 6:14, describing how evil "Watcher" angels brought sin to this earth.

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12 Russell 16.

13 Thomas G. Long 375.

14 Cornish Rogers, "Images of Christian Victory: Notes for Preaching from the Book of Revelation," *Quarterly Review*, Fall 1990, 69.

15 M. Eugene Boring, "The Theology of Revelation" *Interpretation*, 260.

16 Thomas G. Long 377.

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4. Jude 14-15 quotes from The Book of the Watchers 1:9.
- B. The Similitudes of Enoch** 1 Enoch 37-71
1. Date: first half of the first century AD.
  2. Contains 3 parables told by Enoch.
  3. First parable contains a journey to heaven.
  4. Second parable has a Messiah like figure who executes judgment. Uses the term “Son of Man.”
  5. Third parable describes the end judgment and heavenly secrets.
- C. The Book of the Heavenly Luminaries** 1 Enoch 73-82
1. Date: 3rd century BC.
  2. Deals with astronomy, movement of the sun, etc.
- D. The Book of Dream Visions** 1 Enoch 83-90
1. Date: 2nd century BC, probably during the Maccabean revolt.
  2. Chs. 83-84 - Foretells the destruction of the world by flood due to wickedness.
  3. Chs. 85-90 - **The Animal Apocalypse**
    - a. Known as the Animal Apocalypse because it represents the history of the world up to the Maccabean revolt with animals.
    - b. Adam is a bull, Eve a heifer, Noah a white bull, Israel sheep, etc.
- E. The Apocalypse of Weeks** 1 Enoch 93:1-10; 91:11-17
1. Date: 2nd century BC
  2. Has been edited, rearranged, added to, etc.
  3. It is an overview of world history, dividing it into periods.
- F. The Testament of Abraham**
1. Date: 1st century BC - 2 century AD.
  2. Concerns the death of Abraham and seeing various heavenly secrets.
- G. Dead Sea Scrolls - The War Scroll**
1. Late 1st century BC
  2. Preserved as one manuscript known as 1QM.

3. "It describes the final eschatological battle between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness."<sup>17</sup>
4. Michael leads the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness, as an archangel (Column XIV).

#### H. **Apocalypse of Zephaniah**

1. Date: hard to date - 1st century BC to 1st century AD.<sup>18</sup>
2. Cosmic journey with angel guides, seeing the glories of heaven and the horrors of hell.

#### I. **2 Enoch**

1. Date: Late 1st century BC
2. Enoch makes a trip to heaven, sees heavenly secrets.

#### J. **2 Esdras 3-14 (4 Ezra)**

1. Date: AD 100
2. 4 Ezra is presented in its entirety in the composite work, 2 Esdras.
3. Claims to have been written by Ezra to discuss why God allowed the Temple to be destroyed in 586. Actually it was written thirty years after the Roman destruction of Herod's Temple.

#### K. **2 Baruch**

1. Date: late first century AD.
2. Concerned with the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.
3. "Thoroughly Jewish work that shows little, if any, sign of Christian interpolation."<sup>19</sup>

#### L. There are other apocalyptic works.

1. Particularly NT apocalyptic - **Testament of Levi, Apocalypse of Peter, Shepherd of Hermas** (nearly canonized as scripture), **Ascension of Isaiah**.

### IV. **CHARACTERISTICS OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE:**

#### A. **Dualism.**

1. Primary characteristic of apocalyptic is that it has a very dualistic, or two-world view of things.

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17 Reddish 229.

18 Russell 56.

19 Reddish 97.

2. What is happening here is not the whole story. There is much more going on in the heavens. Apocalyptic attempts to pierce the veil and explain events *here* in light of what is happening *there*.
3. Examples from intertestamental apocalyptic:
  - a. The Apocalypse of Weeks: *“And after this the roots of iniquity will be cut off, and the sinners will be destroyed by the sword; from the blasphemers they will be cut off in every place, and those who plan wrongdoing and those who commit blasphemy will be destroyed by the sword”* (1 Enoch 91:11).
  - b. 4 Ezra 4:21: *“For as the land is assigned to the forest and the sea to its waves, so also those who dwell upon earth can understand only what is on the earth, and he who is above the heavens can understand what is above the height of the heavens.”*
  - c. 2 Baruch 7:1-8:1: *“And after this I heard that angel saying to the angels that held the lamps, ‘Destroy and throw down the wall to its foundations, So that the enemy cannot boast and say, We have thorn down the wall of Zion, And we have burnt the place of the mighty God . . . then the angels did as he had commanded them; and when they had broken up the corners of the walls . . . .”*
4. Scriptural examples:
  - a. Daniel 10:13 - *“But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia.”*
  - b. Revelation 12:7-10 - *“And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, ‘Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.’”*

#### **B. Angels and other intermediaries**

1. Where do you get this knowledge of what is going on behind the scenes?
2. Simple. An angel, or God, or some other-worldly creature conveys it to you.
3. The Apocalypse of Weeks: *“I Enoch, according to that which appeared to me in the heavenly vision, and which I know from the words of the holy angels and understand from the tablets of heaven”* (1 Enoch 90:2).
4. 4 Ezra 14:41-46: *“And my mouth was opened, and was no longer closed. And the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, in characters which they did not know. They sat forty days . . . So during the forty day ninety-four books were written. And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying ‘Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people.’”*

#### **C. Other-worldly journeys**

1. Often the lead character is taken to heaven to see and understand mysteries that are simply not available here.
2. The wise man goes to heaven, gets wisdom, knowledge, etc. and then comes back here to share it with those wise enough to understand.
3. 1 Enoch 14:8: “*And behold, I saw the clouds: and they were calling me in a vision, and the fogs were calling me; and the course of the stars and the lightnings were rushing me and . . . the winds were causing me to fly and rushing me high up into heaven.*”<sup>20</sup>
4. Testament of Abraham: “*And the archangel Michael wet down and took Abraham (and set him) on the cherubim chariot and lifted him up to the heights of heaven and acted as high guide on the cloud together with sixty angels . . . Take Abraham up to the first gate of heaven, so that he may view the judgements and the retributions there?*” (Test. of Abraham 10:1, 19).

#### D. Visions and signs

1. No straightforward revealing of anything.
2. Note: some think signs and symbols are there to function as a “code” so authorities wouldn’t understand it. There is no evidence for this.
  - a. “The older idea that apocalyptic was written in a code so that the persecutors could not understand and thus further intimidate the persecuted people simply does not hold up under close examination. If the persecutors could read the symbolic vision, they could certainly read the explanation!”<sup>21</sup>
3. In fact, apocalyptic is not written to be kept secret but to reveal secrets!<sup>22</sup> But those secrets are kept (sort of) from anyone but the enlightened few. The revelation from above was only available to a “select few.”<sup>23</sup>
4. “Esotericism functioned in part to heighten the prestige of those in possession of this secret learning.”<sup>24</sup> *This intensifies its impact.*
5. Further, it is written this way because it is more exciting, interesting, holds attention.
6. The Animal Apocalypse: “*And after this I saw another dream, and I will it all to you, my son*” (1 Enoch 85:1). “*And likewise in the vision I saw that one who wrote, how every day he wrote down each one which was destroyed by those shepherds, and how he brought up and presented and showed the whole book to the Lord of the sheep, everything that they had done, and all that each one of them had made away with, and all that they had handed over to destruction. And the book was read out before the Lord of the sheep, and he took the book in his hand, and read it, and sealed it, and put it down.*” (1 Enoch 89:70-71).
7. 2 Baruch 70:8: “*And whoever escapes in the war will die by earthquake, and whoever escapes the earthquake will be burned by fire, and whoever escapes the fire will be destroyed by famine.*”

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20 Russell 76.

21 Efir 24.

22 John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 39.

23 William Adler, “Introduction,” *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, edited by James C. VanderKam and William Adler, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1996, page 13.

24 Adler 15.



8. 1 Enoch 18:13: “*And a terrible thing I saw there — seven stars like great burning mountains. And like a spirit questioning me the angel said, This is the place of the end of heaven and earth; this is the prison for the stars of heaven and the host of heaven. And the stars which roll over the fire, these are hones which transgressed the command of the Lord from the beginning of their rising because they did not come out at their proper times.*”
9. The Book of the Watchers: “*And from underneath the high throne there flowed out rivers of burning fire so that it was impossible to look at it. And he who is great in glory sat on it, and his raiment was brighter than the sun, and whiter than any snow. And no angel could enter, and at the appearance of the face of him who is honored and praised no creature of flesh could look. A sea of fire burnt around him, and great fire stood before him, and none of those around him came near to him. Ten thousand times then thousand stood before him, but needed no holy counsel*” (1 Enoch 14:19-22).
10. 4 Ezra 11:1: “*On the second night I had a dream, and behold, there came up from the sea an eagle that had twelve feathered wings and three heads.*”

#### E. Crisis literature

1. Apocalyptic is not written when all is well but to work with problems and questions that arise in hard times.
2. Usually there is a solution to the crisis proposed:<sup>25</sup>
  - a. Confrontation of evil
  - b. Change in human hearts
  - c. Giant act of God is necessary
  - d. Withdrawal from the world (Qumran)
  - e. New way of seeing the world
  - f. Reform the world
  - g. Revolutionary overthrow of current order
3. 4 Ezra: “*How long and when will these things be? Why are our years few and evil? . . . Did not the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask about these matters, saying, ‘How long are we to remain here? And when will come the harvest of our reward?’*” (4 Ezra 4:33, 35).
4. 2 Baruch: “*And I said, O Lord, my lord, have I come into the world for no other purpose than to see the evils of my mother? . . . But one thing I will ask of thee, O Lord. What is to happen to us? For if thou destroyest thy city and dost deliver up thy land to those that hate us, how will the name of Israel again be remembered? . . . Is the universe to return to its original state and the world to revert to primeval silence? Is the human race to be destroyed and mankind to be blotted out?*” (2 Baruch 3:1-8).

#### F. Pseudonymous

1. Usually the writer of the book is presented as some famous hero of the past (Abraham, Enoch, Daniel, Ezra, Adam, Elijah).<sup>26</sup>
2. This was a fairly common practice in intertestamental times.

<sup>25</sup> John E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (Waco: Word Inc., 1989) 157.

<sup>26</sup> Reddish 21.

3. The Apocalypse of Weeks: “*And after this Enoch began to speak from the books. And Enoch said....*” (1 Enoch 93:1-2).
4. 4 Ezra: “*In the thirtieth year after the destruction of our city, I Salathiel, who am also called Ezra, was in Babylon*” (4 Ezra 3:1).
5. 2 Baruch: “*And it came to pass in the twenty-fifth year of Jeconiah, king of Judah that the word of the Lord came to Baruch, the son of Neriah, and said to him*” (2 Baruch 1:1).

#### G. Systemization of History

1. Apocalyptic literature breaks history into periods or epochs so the work of God in each time period can be easily identified.
2. Most importantly, by breaking history into periods we can then see how many periods till the end, and which period we are in.
3. Dividing history into periods gives the reader great hope. It shows that all of history is under God’s control.
4. Daniel 11 is a famous example of this - the 70 weeks.
5. 1 Enoch 1-36 gives 70 “generations” from the Flood to the Final Judgment.
6. Apocalypse of Weeks divides history into ten “weeks,” seven of which have passed. “*I was born the seventh in the first week, while justice and righteousness still lasted....*” (1 Enoch 90:3).
7. 2 Baruch: “*And when I said this I fell asleep there, and I saw a vision; and lo, a very great cloud was coming up out of the sea. And I kept looking at it. And lo, it was full of waters, white and black . . . this happened twelve times*” (2 Baruch 53:1, 6).

#### H. Complete confidence in God’s eventual triumph.

1. In apocalyptic God always win. Always. You know the end from the beginning.
2. “Apocalypses such as Revelation, Daniel, and Second Esdras (as well as several lesser known Palestinian Jewish apocalypses) share in common the theme of ‘restoration and reversal.’”<sup>27</sup>
3. The Animal Apocalypse: “*And they took all the sealed books and opened those books before the Lord of the sheep. And the Lord called those men . . . And he said to that man who wrote before him, who was on of the seven white ones—he said to him, Take those seventy shepherds to whom I handed over the sheep . . . And behold I saw them all bound, and they all stood before him. And the judgment was held first on the stars, and they were judged and found guilty; and they went to place of damnation, and were thrown into a deep place, full of fire, burning and full of pillars of fire. And those seventy shepherds were judged and found guilty, and they also were thrown into that abyss of fire.*” (1 Enoch 90:20-25).
4. From 1 Enoch’s Book of the Watchers: “*And behold! He comes with ten thousand holy ones to execute judgment upon them, and to destroy the impious and to contend with all flesh concerning everything which the sinners and the impious have done and wrought against him*” (1 En. 1:9).

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<sup>27</sup> David A. deSilva 375.

5. From the War Scroll: *“For the Master. The rule of War on the unleashing of the attack of the sons of light against the company of the sons of darkness, the army of Satan: against the band of Edom, Moab, and the sons of Ammon, and against the army of the son of the East and the Philistines, and against the bands of the Kittim of Assyria and their allies the ungodly of the Covenant. The sons of Levi, Judah, and Benjamin, the exiles in the desert, shall battle against them in . . . all their bands when the exiled sons of light return from the Desert of the Peoples to camp in the Desert of Jerusalem; and after the battle they shall go up from there (to Jerusalem?). The king of the Kittim shall enter into Egypt, and in his time he shall set out in great wrath to wage war against the kings of the north, that his fury may destroy and cut off the horn of Israel. This shall be a time of salvation for the people of God, an age of dominion for all the members of His company, and of everlasting destruction for all the company of Satan. The confusion of the sons of Japheth shall be great and Assyria shall fall unsuccoured. The dominion of the Kittim shall come to an end and iniquity shall be vanquished, leaving no remnant; for the sons of darkness there shall be no escape. The sons of righteousness shall shine over all the ends of the earth; they shall go on shining until all the seasons of darkness are consumed and, at the season appointed by God, His exalted greatness shall shine eternally to the peace, blessing, glory, joy, and long life of all the sons of light”* (1:1-9).

I. Summary:

1. Apocalyptic literature is material that is heavily interested in what God is doing, how He is working to bring things to a conclusion, rescue His people from oppression.
2. Reading and understanding the genre of apocalyptic literature makes it obvious that Revelation would not be novel or unique to NT readers.
3. They would be prepared to handle it properly. Are we?

V. INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING AND PREACHING APOCALYPTIC

A. Why is it so hard to teach and preach from these books?

1. Because we have power and are not abused or persecuted.
2. Because so much wrong has been made of it, and we feel obligated to clear the air — and sometimes never get to teaching the truth.<sup>28</sup>
3. Because the material *is* difficult, different, hard to understand.
  - a. Yet “Revelation is not really all that difficult to understand if the interpreter will view it *consistently* as an apocalyptic work.”<sup>29</sup>

B. What use can we make of it in preaching?

1. It serves as a warning - what appears to be true is often false
2. It helps us see worship freshly

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<sup>28</sup> Hal Lindsey was the largest-selling American nonfiction book of the 1970s, outselling every other work except the Bible. By 1991 *The Late Great Planet Earth* had sold more than 28 million copies. See Daniel Wojcik’s, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*, New York University Press: New York, 1997, page 37.

<sup>29</sup> James M. Eford, *Revelation for Today: An Apocalyptic Approach*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1989, page 12.

- a. “We may want to observe ‘Boy Scout Sunday’ but worship is about something far more radical than that. When we worship, we affirm our citizenship in another realm . . . we do not leave the sanctuary to enter the ‘real world.’ To the contrary, it is in the sanctuary that we participate in the real world, and we discover there the illusory nature of much that claims to be the ‘real world.’”<sup>30</sup>
3. It provides real hope.
- C. Still, apocalyptic is difficult to teach, and can be intimidating and confusing. Want to use the metaphor of a movie to better work with this material.

## VI. THE WORST MISTAKES YOU CAN MAKE TEACHING APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

### A. Misusing the movie.

1. Everyone has known someone who thinks it is really educated or cultured to dissect movies down to the *nth* degree.
2. When it comes to apocalyptic this kind of thing is done all the time.
3. People forget that “the language of apocalypses is not descriptive, referential, newspaper language, but the *expressive* language of poetry, which uses symbols and imagery to articulate a sense or feeling about the world.”<sup>31</sup>
4. Instead of saying, “This was for those people in that time and helped them” people feel obliged to somehow force it to be a prophecy of something happening in our day: “The task of the interpreter is to decode the figurative speech and to determine at what point on the historical timetable the world is at present.”<sup>32</sup>
5. Numerous people have made this mistake.
  - a. Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth-century (medieval revivalist of premillennial thought<sup>33</sup>) to William Miller in the nineteenth century to Hal Lindsey.
  - b. Herbert W. Armstrong actually says that Revelation 13 is a message given to John “for you and me of this day.”<sup>34</sup>
6. Problem here is “this approach ignores the historical and social matrix out of which apocalyptic literature arose. Apocalyptic writers addressed the situation of their own time, attempting to offer hope and encouragement to their readers who were in distress.”<sup>35</sup>
7. Reddish also notes that this is a very egotistical approach because “All writings, according to this view, must have been specifically written for the modern reader.”<sup>36</sup>

### B. Autopsy the movie.

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30 Thomas G. Long 380.

31 John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 282.

32 Adela Yarbro Collins, “Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century,” *Interpretation*, Volume 40, 1986, 232.

33 A. Y. Collins 230.

34 Herbert W. Armstrong, “Who or What is the Prophetic Beast?” *The Good News of the World Tomorrow*, Oct-Nov 1985, pages 3-6, 21-22 and December 1985, pages 3-6, 29 as cited by A. Y. Collins 232.

35 Reddish 35.

36 Reddish 35.

1. By that I refer to our practice of breaking down every part of the vision and assigning a meaning to it. End result is no life left after every part examined!
2. “Some interpreters want to find meaning in every detail of the vision, but this seems to be going much too far, making the visionary scene into some sort of tightly knit allegory . . . [some of apocalyptic] is ‘window dressing’ to enhance the overall impact of the message.”<sup>37</sup>
3. “Caird rightly warns us that ‘to compile such a catalogue is to unweave the rainbow. John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power.’”<sup>38</sup>
4. Apocalyptic compares well to movies in this point because apocalyptic writers work very much with stock images, as in our movies. One doesn’t question the stock image, one just gets the point.
5. Here is where we must be so careful and work to educate the audience. Our refusal to discuss “every claw on every paw” isn’t because we are ignorant or “not very deep!” That is simply not how apocalyptic works.

**C. Assuming the parts of different movies are interchangeable.**

1. Differing movies can use standard figures and characters in a new plot and story line. Apocalyptic can as well.
2. This is a classic premillennial mistake with apocalyptic. “‘Compare Scripture with Scripture’ (Ryrie) . . . means that one passage in Scripture may be used to interpret another passage, even when the two passages were written by different authors at different times . . . Responsible interpretation of a text from another time and place requires that the text be interpreted in terms of its original historical context.”<sup>39</sup>
3. It is vital that we understand that apocalyptic is not interested in coherence and consistency in a way that our Western minds may appreciate. Apocalyptic “may well allow loose ends and even contradictions to stand in their work . . . it is not govern by the principles of Aristotelian logic but was closer to the poetic nature of myth.”<sup>40</sup>
4. Good biblical illustration is Daniel 7:19-20. Some automatically assume this is the same beast as in Revelation 13 because they share some similarity. Not necessarily so.

**VII. TEACHING APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE EFFECTIVELY**

**A. Ask what the “movie director” originally intended for his audience.**

1. The question is “what is the director doing here, what does he want us to feel, see and think?”
2. That question needs to be applied to apocalyptic literature ruthlessly. What is God, the Director, doing here?
3. “All interpretation thus must begin with questions such as, Who is being addressed? By whom? In what setting? And for what reason?”<sup>41</sup>

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37 Efirid 26.

38 G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 2 volumes, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920) 25 cited by J. Ramsey Michael 112.

39 A. Y. Collins 233.

40 John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 17.

**B. Use your imagination.**

1. Open your mind's eye and try to envision these beasts
2. How dare us turn some of the most exciting images in scripture into dull, dry matters that do not move our listeners or stir their hearts!
3. "The depiction of the Roman Empire as a beast does not have a primarily informational purpose. It does not serve mainly to announce that there will be such a political power, how long it will last, and so forth. Rather such a portrayal has an expressive character; it expresses a particular interpretation and evaluation of the Roman Empire."<sup>42</sup>
4. We need to use our imagination to feel the fury of the beast, re-experience the fear of the early church, to see the vision again.

**C. Watch the whole movie at once.**

1. What movie would be coherent if we saw it in ten minute chunks?
2. To get the powerful images and pictures we must see all of them in one dramatic, vivid setting.
3. Once we are liberated from trying to make everything mean something we can teach much faster *and we should*.

**D. Deal with big pictures.**

1. Apocalyptic is not factual reporting. "It is more closely akin to poetry than to prose, more like an abstract painting than a photograph . . . These works need to be taken seriously, but not literally."<sup>43</sup>
2. Characters and events are very large in the apocalyptic "movie."
3. Don't look for shades of gray or detailed development. This is good vs. evil stuff, and nothing more.
4. If we can communicate the overall theme we have done the job.

**Conclusion:****I. Does apocalyptic have value today?**

- A. Some say no.
- B. John J. Carey argues extensively in his article *Apocalypticism as a Bridge Between the Old and New Testaments* that apocalyptic promotes a pessimism in the present age, judgment ideas, and a keen "us" versus "them" mentality that is now outmoded.
- C. He says "few persons anymore defend notion of pure truth, pure dogma, or infallible claims" so "the very foundations of this way of thinking (apocalyptic —MDR) fail us where we all need help today — that is, how we as Christians can relate to other faiths, traditions, peoples and cultures."<sup>44</sup>

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41 Paul D. Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, Interpreting Biblical Texts series, Lloyd R. Bailey and Victor P. Furnish, eds (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987) 59.

42 A. Y. Collins 234.

43 Reddish 35.

44 John J. Carey, "Apocalypticism as a Bridge between the Testaments," in *Old and New Testaments: Their Relationship and the 'Intertestamental' Literature*, edited by J.H. Charlesworth, Trinity Press, 1994, page 98, 100.

- II. Is he correct? We must say “No.”
  - A. God has much to say in the apocalyptic literature of scripture.
  - B. The essence of that message is that there is more here than meets the eye, and we must live for the unseen, not the seen.
  - C. Is there any message more needed in our day?
  - D. Let us mount the pulpit ready to use the Revelation to encourage our people to stand fast against the forces of darkness that war against us.

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### Selected Bibliography

- Collins, Adela Yarbro. *Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century*, Interpretation 40, 1986. Mrs. Collins takes an outrageously liberal viewpoint on some matters in Revelation, but this article does a good job of discussing how to interpret this difficult book in a way that is true to the author's original intent. She is one of the foremost scholars in the field of apocalyptic and has written much in this area.
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- Reddish, Mitchell G. *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Abingdon Press, 1990). An outstanding anthology of Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic literature. The introduction to apocalyptic is very valuable, and each selection is introduced with good discussion of date, purpose, and meaning. A must have for students of apocalyptic.
- Russell, D. S. *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic* (Fortress Press, 1992). Russell is one of the leading apocalyptic authorities in the world. This book examines at great depth the apocalyptic mindset, what apocalyptic is, and how the major themes of apocalyptic function. This is an excellent, in-depth introduction to Jewish apocalyptic. Russell's commentary on Daniel is also very helpful.