

An Approach to
Apocalyptic Literature
A Primer for Preachers



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1. AVOIDING APOCALYPTIC

CALLING THE PREACHER OUT

Someone once asked my brother, “What is your favorite book?” Without batting an eye he replied, “Whichever one they are getting ready to make into a movie. I don’t read books.” I tend to think that there are a lot of people out there like my brother. If my hunch is right, then perhaps it’s time preachers begin learning to expound those parts of the Bible that appear as full-blown movies—like the literature of apocalypse. This genre has been largely ignored by evangelical preachers of late and we need to ask why.

Perhaps those of us who preach simply believe that this genre is hard for people. We don’t think they can get their minds around it—we convince ourselves that there are just too many strange things going on that don’t make sense. That said, thoughtful people in our churches have a way of cutting through this excuse. They remind us, “Don’t forget, Preacher, a picture is worth a thousand words.”

COMMON MISTAKES

Perhaps we stay away from apocalyptic literature for other reasons—after all, this genre does have a contentious history. For decades pulpits have littered the pews with unproductive ways of reading, understanding and teaching anything apocalyptic. Maybe we avoid it because so many preachers before us seem to have botched it so badly. Four common mistakes stand out in the preaching from the literature of apocalypse.

1. *An over-the-top emphasis on identification.* Some preachers become preoccupied with identifying every name, number and nemesis in apocalyptic literature with particular people, places and political entities. For example, a preacher tackling 2 Thessalonians 2 may take ten hours in his study trying to identify the man of lawlessness on today’s world stage—is he the Pope, Putin, or will he be Saddam Hussein come back from the dead? Or, which preacher among us hasn’t gotten derailed in the study trying to determine which people or political entities the ten horns and the ten diadems of Revelation 13 refer to? We may even go so far as to Google the European Union to see if it presently consists of ten countries!
2. *An inability to handle the use of image and imagery well.* While the church fathers may have stumbled in the pulpit at times over allegory, we seem to get all tripped up over the use

of *images* in apocalyptic literature.¹ For example, I have seen Bible studies derailed because preacher and people alike got fixated on trying to fathom how the flying scroll in Zechariah 5 (27 feet by 15 feet) could have gotten through the windows of the thief's home to "consume it, both timber and stones" (Zech 5:4).

3. *An illusion that historical settings are insignificant.* As preachers we often succumb (more readily than any of us want to admit) to approaching the biblical text for its immediate impact—we seek present-day relevance. As a consequence, we are capable of *never* wrestling with an apocalyptic book from the vantage point of the first readers. We get so caught up with where history is going that we neglect to consider what the history was, or where it went. Consider our handling of Zechariah's apocalyptic visions and oracles. We neglect the important fact that this literature rests within a post-exilic period—and that it was written to people who had been back in the land for 20 years. Their cultic worship was without leadership. Their temple was still unconstructed. We deceive ourselves into thinking that these are insignificant to our preaching.
4. *A decision to ignore it altogether.* This is perhaps the most common mistake of all. Many of us are more than willing to preach through Dan 1-6, or Rev 1-3—after all, they make up a nice preaching series on Christian character and church life. But after that, we stop expounding those books altogether. In all likelihood, those of us who have fallen into this mistake never even think of taking up Zechariah or Mark 13—we simply wouldn't know how to begin.

These are common mistakes preachers make when preaching the literature of apocalypse, and I suppose the list could go on. Knowing how these books have disquieted the church over time, we make the mistake of never putting this kind of literature into our own preaching program.

A LOSS OF CONFIDENCE

Let's be honest, most of us avoid preaching from an apocalypse because we suffer from a lack of confidence in knowing how to handle them well. Working in apocalyptic literature is a bit like being over water. Everything beneath is moving—even the words seem to possess properties of motion. As a result, many preachers set sail in other genres instead. Biblical apocalyptic drops all of us into waters of uncharted depth. Put a preacher in the middle of Revelation 13 and he immediately feels lost in the swirl of undertow and tide. To preach such literature well he must be able to navigate subtle shifts in wind. However, the spiritual rewards

¹ I don't mean to be excessively harsh toward the church fathers on this point. After all, like them, I intend to argue against a reading and exegesis of apocalyptic that renders everything in an overly wooden and literal way.

of charting these waters must be great—why else would God have included this genre in the Bible? Therefore, the unique challenges in reading and preaching from apocalyptic literature must be taken head-on. The preacher must commit himself to getting a good set of sea legs.

Such convincing is not necessary with other genres in Biblical literature.² For instance, when we decide to expound one of Paul's letters, our footing is firm. Our preparation resembles a walk down known paths. Our approach to the text is based upon well-established principles—we feel like we are on an archeological dig. Our confidence is high. We come with a proven skill set and tools that are guaranteed to uncover God's truth. If we just keep our eyes on the ground and put our small spade and sensitive broom to work, we feel as if we can get the job done.

Preaching from an apocalypse is anything but an archeological dig! It is entirely different, even unfamiliar. Preaching from an apocalypse is better compared to being a sailor on the open seas. We must acquire the ability to read signs placed in the heavens and be ready for changes in the wind that often arrive without notice. All the while, we must be strong enough to hoist heavy sails in wet conditions if we are to stay on course.

The aim of this primer, then, is to introduce the preacher (especially the young preacher in training) to some of the tools necessary for working in the biblical literature of apocalypse. My underlying goal is simple. I want to encourage you to decide to tackle the genre in your upcoming preaching program. After all, books like Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation are waiting—they resemble big ships in the harbor calling you aboard. Other vessels also await – like sleek sailboats with painted names and numbers on the side (Ezek 38-39; Isa 24-27, 33-35; Joel 3:9-17; Matt 24, Mark 13, Luke 21 and 2 Thess 2). All of this biblical literature is ready to take you out over the watery deep.

2. RECOGNIZING APOCALYPTIC

APOKALYPSIS

Recognizing and defining what is meant by a literary genre of apocalypse must be the starting point—and many a tack has been taken. Some pastors are content to define this literature merely along the straightforward meaning of the word 'apokalypsis'—literally rendered 'revelation' (see Rev 1:1). As such, this genre is an 'unveiling'—a 'pulling back of the curtain' on the unseen transcendent world and its role in bringing this present world to an end.

² Other major genres within biblical literature include OT narrative, prophecy, wisdom/poetry, gospels and epistles.

This definition is good, but it does not go far enough. After all, as Christian preachers we believe that the entire Bible is God's *revelation*, an unveiling of sorts, not only concerning who he is and what he requires of us, but also of the end to which all human history is heading. In light of this, we should not be content with such a simple definition. Other aspects must be considered.

COMMON FEATURES AND CHARACTERISTICS

It became vogue to recognize apocalyptic literature in terms of its identifying characteristics. Some have gone so far as to identify 13 common characteristics that can be found in the variety of apocalyptic literature written over a five-century span.³ To get you acquainted with some of these kinds of features I will mention seven here. This kind of literature

1. is known by its bold pronouncements that come in picture form
2. contains the presence of strange visions
3. contains ghastly figures
4. forcefully uses dramatized symbolic imagery
5. abounds in the use of metaphor
6. has an abundance of cataclysmic events that signal the end of the world
7. has action that leads to a final judgment and the ushering in of a new world.

Before you think that recognizing the literature of apocalypse is as simple as looking for a preconceived set of characteristics, you need to know that not every book resembling an apocalypse contains all the same features.⁴ Certain characteristics are inevitably absent from

³ See Beale's discussion on genre in Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 39-40. There he cites J.J. Collins, *Apocalypse: Towards the Morphology of a Genre* 14. Missoula, MT, 1979) 5-8.

⁴ Biblical research could be done on this 'dream' thesis. While some might view dreams as simply another characteristic of the genre, the general idea does have general support in this literature. By dream, I mean something vision-like, which connects this genre, not only to the prophetic, but to some of the noblest literature outside the Bible. Take Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* for example – written in the Bedford jail cell where he spent twelve years of his life. He wrapped his entire work around a 'dream'. The book opens, "As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold, I saw..." Likewise apocalyptic writers often clothe their work in the night dress of dreams and visions. John is in his own jail cell – isolated on the island of Patmos, and in the Spirit on the Lord's Day when he is lifted across the threshold of heaven where he has his own dream like vision of things to come (see Daniel also for a dream like quality in his writing). Other sections of John's *Apocalypse* capitalize on this same idea (see the quick hitting sequence of seven visions given to him in Rev 12-15:4. There he is telling us what "I saw", yet like dreams that you and I have the images are gone from view all too soon. Leland Ryken, that fabulous professor of English Literature has picked up on this idea already: "Dream, and not narrative, is the model that visionary literature in the Bible follows. Of what does a dream consist? Momentary pictures, fleeting impressions, characters and scenes that play their part and then drop out of sight, abrupt jumps from one action to another"(source goes

some works. Works of apocalyptic literature often contain a strange mixture of genres. For example, some include lists and instructions for things like making war.⁵ Thus—and this is the point we are trying to take in—recognizing and defining the genre of apocalypse simply by appealing to common features or characteristics will prove insufficient for the preacher’s needs.⁶ It would be like reducing a meal to the presence of all the food groups or cooking to a checklist of certain ingredients. And so, we build upon our knowledge and turn elsewhere for more insight.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

Preachers of the Bible know that every biblical genre, book or text they chose to expound comes with its own history of interpretation. For those considering preaching from the literature of apocalypse, things are no different. Technically speaking, I’m not sure that the first century would have recognized apocalypse as a distinct and coherent *genre*. Readers and writers of that time didn’t necessarily think in language and terms that we do today. That said, the presence of this type of literature cannot be denied. From the third century BCE right on through the second century CE, books began emerging with titles like *The Assumption of Moses*, *1 Enoch* and *The Life of Adam and Eve*. Before long, others like *Baruch*, *4 Ezra* and *The Sibylline Oracles* followed suit.⁷

here). As a caveat to Ryken, I think that by ‘narrative’ he must mean ‘historical’ since all apocalyptic literature comes in narrative).

⁵ More will be said later in this primer about the relationship this literature has to other genres like prophecy, wisdom, and epistles.

⁶ Paul Hanson, in his book *The Dawn of the Apocalyptic*, addresses the limitations of this approach, “How, by means of such a list, can one hope to come to an understanding of apocalyptic, or even to be able to identify a composition as apocalyptic?” Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of the Apocalyptic*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1979), 7. See also Jonathan Smith’s chapter “Wisdom and Apocalyptic,” in his book *Map Is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 67-68. There he writes, “I agree with Betz and von Rad that apocalypticism cannot be reduced to a mere catalogue of elements...as these motifs can be found within the archaic religions of the Near East and are typical of all modes of Hellenistic religiosity.”

⁷ These exciting new books were largely Jewish in origin, and went by the name ‘Apocalypse.’ According to one view, their rise in popularity arose, in part, to intermittent persecutions carried out against the Jewish people, who, in a geopolitical sense, found themselves at the mercy of increasingly hostile authorities. It is argued that the reading public needed ‘hope,’ hope for a better time and a better world. After all, didn’t Israel dream of a day when the tables would be turned—a day when ‘ungodly’ nations would be thrown down and Israel would be restored to a place of primacy?

Preachers looking to expound the Bible will be helped if they first think their way clear on the similarities and differences between biblical and Jewish apocalypse. Simply collapsing your understanding of biblical apocalypse into its counterparts found in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world of literature is problematic. After all, they differ in important respects. Biblical apocalypse identifies Jesus as the Anointed One. He is the Messiah, the book’s ultimate hero, the only one strong enough to usher in the day of the Lord—all the events surrounding it belong to him. For example, John’s Apocalypse opens with the words, ‘The revelation of Jesus Christ.’ I take that to mean that the revelation which follows *belongs to him*. Now, I realize that ‘The revelation of Jesus Christ’ could mean that what follows is simply *about* Jesus, or that it merely comes to us *from* Jesus. However, the context of the next phrase ‘that was given to him by God’ implies that the revelation belongs *to* Jesus. God has given it to him. By way of further contrast to other apocalyptic literature of John’s time, Jesus is not some longed for, futuristic Savior who will, at some

For centuries this literature has been the particular fascination and study of Jewish and Greco-Roman scholars.⁸

In our own country during the 1970s, biblical scholars became intensely interested in the study of apocalyptic literature as it was found both inside and outside of the Bible. In many respects, the definitions they hammered out at that time still shape the discussion on definitions today. Preachers should at least be aware of their contribution before setting out to produce a series of expositions from a biblical apocalypse.

Under the guidance of Old Testament scholar J.J. Collins, an enriching discussion among academics forged a strong definition for a genre of ‘apocalypsis.’ It reads,

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.⁹

Here (and in many respects for the first time) the genre of apocalypse was tightly defined. In fact, this definition is the one that functioned like a jib on a sailboat, powering those interested in the subject to sail in a constant direction for more than 40 years.

I will highlight four aspects of this definition and interact with them briefly.

later time, set the world aright, rather he is one to whom God has already given an eternal kingdom through his death and resurrection—as the text says, even in these last days. Jesus’ supremacy therefore, is not only over all things and all people for all time, but it is a supremacy that has already begun—and that is something you won’t find in extra-biblical apocalypses.

⁸ In contrast to Paul Hanson’s view that this literature arose from persecution and popular longings for a better day, Jonathan Smith, in his chapter titled “Wisdom and Apocalypse” in his book *Map Is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 86, writes that it was literature for the studied elites: “In the course of this investigation, several characteristics of apocalypticism emerged on which I would insist. Apocalypticism is Wisdom lacking a royal court and patron and therefore it surfaces during the period of Late Antiquity not as a response to religious persecution but as an expression of the trauma of the cessation of native kingship. Apocalypticism is a learned rather than a popular religious phenomenon.”

⁹ From J.J. Collins, *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, in *Semeia* 14. Missoula, MT, 1979). The best summary of the fruit of this collaboration can be found in the articles written for *The Yale Anchor Bible Dictionary*, published by Doubleday in 1992. In many respects, the articles in *Semeia*, as summarized in the Anchor Bible Dictionary, altered the landscape on apocalypse as a genre. And J.J. Collins, while critiquing Hanson’s work – especially the notion that apocalypse grew solely out of the prophetic tradition (he argues for wisdom as well), did us all a great service by delineating some important distinctions on terms. His definition, while perhaps too broad and general, and not intended to be limited to biblical apocalypse, does serve the purposes for the working pastor quite well.

- Notice the definition situates the genre of apocalypse within something called ‘revelatory literature,’ and in doing so borrows from the simple definition outlined above: the genre is recognized as a ‘revelation,’ an ‘unveiling,’ a ‘pulling back of the curtain.’ Therefore, preachers today should know that while the entire Bible is rightly the *revelation of God*, we are nevertheless still capable of reserving a special place for a ‘revelatory literature’ within that broader understanding (and here we see the first signs of mutuality between the genres of apocalypse and prophetic).

- Second, the definition demands a ‘narrative framework.’ While this is clearly the case for every instance of it within the Bible, it is an aspect of the definition that falls short for our purposes. The phrase is simply too broad and more must be said. The preacher of apocalypse must also give himself to the study of the kinds of narrative framework in which this literature exists. For instance, we will need to be able to place our preaching of apocalypse within its particular *literary* context. One of the mistakes preachers of apocalypse have made is not giving enough attention to a book’s literary context. For example, take our reading of the book of Revelation—it claims to be an *apocalypse* from the outset (Rev 1:1), yet, it also works off of a *prophetic* narrative framework (Rev 1:3, 22:6-7, 22:18-19). In light of this it is best to view apocalyptic literature as a close cousin of the prophetic. In addition, it uses the conventions of an *epistolary* framework as well (see 1:4; the letters to the seven churches in chapter 2; etc.).

- Third, by definition this genre discloses a ‘transcendent reality that is both temporal and spatial.’ In other words, you will begin to recognize this genre by the fact that it takes you to another world—and to ‘the day’ of ultimate and eternal salvation. Scholars have recognized that the definition’s phrase doesn’t go far enough—it omits something important. In the effort to secure a transcendent reality, the definition fails to require an historical reality. It is nice to be taken to another world and to an ultimate day of eternal salvation, but we must not let that lead us to preach an apocalypse without knowledge of its *historical context* (perhaps this exclusive commitment to ‘transcendence’ is responsible, in part at least, for the common mistake mentioned earlier of the ‘illusion of historical insignificance.’)

- Finally, works within this genre are ‘mediated by an otherworldly being.’ Under this strict definition, the Bible contains only two works of uncontested apocalypse, Daniel 7 through 12 and the book of Revelation. In both the message comes to the writer by way of an ‘an otherworldly being’ (see Dan 7:15-16; 8:13-17; 9:20-23; 10:10; etc.; and Rev 1:1-2).

This last point in particular accounts for why the academy began distinguishing the terms used to speak of apocalypse as a genre from those used to describe similar aspects found in other literature in general. A brief word on this might be helpful. The work of the 1970s is rightly credited with bringing order to an invigorating but confusing discussion on apocalyptic literature, one in which terms were being thrown around without clear definitions. That era of history of interpretation also began distinguishing terms like ‘apokalypsis’ and ‘apocalypse’ from ‘apocalyptic.’ The first two were reserved for literature that conformed to a newfound definition, and as such constituted the genre. The term ‘apocalyptic’ however, rightly an adjective anyway, was limited for literature that resembled the genre but nevertheless failed to fully embody all four aspects of the definition.

Getting a grasp on how these different terms are now used in the academy is easily comprehended by way of an analogy: consider the difference between *poetry* as a genre of literature and literature that is merely *poetic*. Certainly we are all familiar with the genre of poetry, yet, it must be admitted that some literature, while resembling that genre, would be better spoken of as being poetic. Poetic works contain vital aspects found in the genre itself, but lay no claim to being poetry. For example, many of the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. possess *poetic* resonance yet could never properly be classified as *poems*.¹⁰ The same is true for *apocalypse* as a genre and that which is merely *apocalyptic*.¹¹

This distinction should be a help to the young preacher who is preparing to expound the Scriptures. Significant portions of the Bible can be readily classified as *apocalyptic* even if they are not technically situated in the genre of apocalypse (for example, Isaiah 13 through 24; Zechariah 6 through 14; Mark 13; Matthew 24 and 25; and Luke 21). In addition, parts of the epistles are apocalyptic as well (2 Peter 3 especially). Interestingly, the apostle Paul stated in no uncertain terms that the end times commenced with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (see 1 Cor 15 and 1 Thess 4:13-17 for examples). In fact, Paul appears to have communicated much of his understanding of the goal of human history in apocalyptic language (see 2 Thess 1-2). All of these portions of Scripture need to be expounded for the benefit of the church today.

LESSONS LEARNED BEFORE MOVING ON

We conclude this section on ‘recognizing apocalyptic’ with some takeaways for the preacher. First, we should throw off any unfounded fears in approaching this literature. After all, people, like my brother like pictures – and apocalyptic is full of them. Second, preachers should know the common mistakes made when handling this literature. We should be resolved to avoid

¹⁰ I am indebted to Dr. Clare Rothschild for this helpful analogy.

¹¹ As far as contemporary fiction writers are concerned, Flannery O’Conner may excel them all in ‘apocalyptic.’

them rather than the genre itself. Third, preachers should not be thrown off by the fact that this particular genre has a bit of elasticity to it. It hasn't always been easy to classify. In our preparations, we are no longer surprised—indeed, we expect to find a variance of opinion on what portions of the Bible constitute an apocalypse. Finally, we have a head start on some of the ways people have approached the subject and its terms in the past. That will help us when appealing to critical commentaries.

I hope that our confidence is buoyed to continue preparing ourselves to preach from this literature in the Bible. For if we are capable of recognizing the genre of apocalypse and distinguishing it from apocalyptic when we see it, we are then prepared to begin reading a major apocalyptic work in hopes of one day preaching it. That said, learning to read an apocalypse is not always easy.

3. READING APOCALYPTIC

THE DILEMMA OF OUR FORMER APPROACH

I was years nine years old when Hal Lindsay and Carole Carlson first published their landmark book *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970. The book was immensely popular—so much so that the great Orson Welles later lent his magnetic voice to narrating a movie based upon it. Clearly, the book and subsequent movie played a part in shaping the way my generation read biblical apocalypses. Nearly the same thing could be said today for the many young preachers who have been reared under the influence of the bestselling series, *Left Behind*.

Regardless of our present eschatological vantage point, we must all admit that it is difficult to come to any apocalyptic text in the Bible without preconceived notions. To put things bluntly, even before reading the text we have some idea about what it says, and therefore what it must mean. This dilemma of approaching biblical texts with a preconceived framework is not unique to this genre but is true for every text and genre in the Bible. Knowing our propensity to lean on our framework, preachers must be reminded continually that God's Word, not our ingrained framework, is sovereign. We must approach any text for preaching with this awareness in mind. We must commit ourselves to rereading God's Word with prayer and the requisite humility of a learner—at times even to learn God's intended meaning for the very first time.¹²

¹² It is not the intention in this brief primer to provide a full-blown treatment of biblical hermeneutics; there are many fine books written on the subject. As for reading John's Apocalypse in particular, I can recommend Richard Bauckham's *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Leon Morris's *Apocalyptic*, and Vern Poythress's *The Returning King*.

In this section, I don't plan on trying to convince you of my reconsidered views on *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Rather, I want to share with you—by means of three reading strategies—how my own reading in this genre would have been helped if someone had told me what to be looking for at the outset. To put it in the language of our opening: Before we set sail in this genre, we must first become adept at navigating by the lights set overhead in the night sky. There, three constellations guide us in our reading of apocalyptic literature: its use of *symbolism*, its *vantage point on history* and its literary structure of *recapitulation*.

USE OF SYMBOLISM

The first strategy I would advance for preachers learning to read apocalyptic deals with symbolism. John Barton wrote the following humorous line, “We instinctively know that a sentence that begins “the stars will fall from heaven, the sun will cease from its shining and the moon will drip blood” will not end “and the rest of the country will be partly cloudy with scattered showers.”¹³ I love that – and the truth behind it would have helped me in my early years of reading this genre. Apocalyptic literature places us under the highly charged constellation of *symbolism*. For example, from my youth I was conditioned to read every *number* in apocalypse from the perspective of its literal, common sense meaning. In fact, there was a period of time in the United States when to do otherwise would have been viewed as making a dangerous compromise on the Bible's authority (a consequence of the modernist – fundamentalist controversy in the 1920s was that preachers who took numbers in Revelation to possess symbolic meaning were viewed as *spiritualizing* the text and undermining God's intended meaning).

To this day I retain a deep appreciation for preachers and scholars who fought against those who would indeed twist a biblical text to mean whatever they wanted it to convey. In the last 80 years, however, many conservative biblical scholars have provided us a good basis for reading apocalypses as containing symbolic referents—all the while without sacrificing a belief in the inerrancy and authority of God's Word. In essence, this genre requires a different set of tools to unlock meaning. We read Daniel or Revelation differently than we might read the book of Acts. When Luke writes, “but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in *five* days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for *seven* days” (Acts 20:6) he means that very thing. After all, he is writing within the genre of historical narrative. When John writes, “Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him *144,000* who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads” (Rev 14:1), he may have something else in mind.

¹³ John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 17, as quoted in Iain Duguid, *Daniel*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 106-107.

Symbols in literature refer, not only to the thing itself—but something deeper as well. Symbols appear all dressed up and look as if they are to be taken ‘literally’ when in fact they are meant to be taken ‘figuratively’. Preachers of apocalyptic will need to learn how to process them in a ‘literary’ rather than a ‘literal’ way.¹⁴

One key hint on this first reading strategy: symbols in Revelation are often understood by tracing their appearance back to Old Testament¹⁵ literature. My colleague, Arthur Jackson, put this helpful hint this way, “All of the prophets rendezvous in Revelation”. For an example of what I mean consider the perfect cube like dimensions of New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. If we take the 12,000 stadia literally the new city will be roughly 1,380 miles long and wide – and the same amount in height. But, if the preacher looks to the Old Testament for help with this symbol he finds the tabernacle to be a perfect cube. The Holy of Holies was the designated place for God to meet with his people. The heavenly city is this very thing. The place where God dwells with us—the tabernacle even becomes a designation for us.

Make no mistake: the constellation of *symbolism*, hanging as it does over the skies of apocalyptic literature, will test every preacher’s mettle. To put it in concrete form, you will need to determine whether the number of the beast in Revelation is something that will literally be affixed to the foreheads of those who reject the gospel, or if it merely represents a contrast to those who possess the hidden and internal seal ‘of the Holy Spirit’ upon their foreheads. This same complexity arises when trying to understand the 70 weeks mentioned in Daniel. The preacher will need to decide what relationship, if any, those weeks have to the 42 months, 3 ½ weeks, or time, times, and half a time that we find in the books of Daniel and Revelation.¹⁶ Other examples abound. For example, in Revelation 11 we find two witnesses. Are they two individuals that will arrive on the world’s stage just before the end of time, or are they symbolic and representational images that relate to the witnessing church under persecution with its

¹⁴ Naturally, there is a certain elusive quality to symbols. *The Years*, the last of Virginia Woolf’s books published in her lifetime, traces five decades of the Pargiter family. “The years” does not, as one might expect, refer to a literal chronology of any sort. Rather it represents ‘generations.’ And so, the eldest son of the Pargiter family has this great line: “Is there a gigantic pattern which is momentarily perceptible?” This is what I think is happening with symbols in apocalyptic literature. The symbol is used with a sense in which a gigantic pattern is momentarily perceptible.

¹⁵ In like manner, the trumpets of Revelation 8 derive their emphasis as instruments suited for announcing judgment in the seven trumpets found in Joshua 6.

¹⁶ The great John Calvin, when confronting the meaning of ‘time, times, and half a time’ in Daniel 7:25 wrote “Interpreters differ widely about these words, and I will not bring forward all their opinions, otherwise it would be necessary to refute them. I should have no little trouble in refuting all their views, but I will follow my own custom of shortly expressing the genuine sense of the Prophet, and thus all difficulty will be removed.” As an aside, I don’t recommend preachers attempt to mirror Calvin’s audacious and confident stance when reading through apocalyptic for the first time! After all, he was a world class exegete (and for those wondering, Calvin did advocate for a figurative interpretation of the phrase, not a literal one).

steadfast commitment to gospel fidelity? Dozens more examples could be mentioned, but these are enough for you to get the point. Let the preacher who wants to begin preaching from an apocalypse know this before setting out: options exist, and you should begin reading widely early on.¹⁷

VANTAGE POINT ON HISTORY

As we begin reading in this genre we quickly become aware that apocalyptic writers also have a particular vantage point on history. When I first began reading biblical apocalypses with an eye toward preaching them, a host of things were observed. I will mention three; with the third observation I hope to keep you from shipwreck on the shallow reefs that have claimed many a preacher before you.

First, the most elementary observation is that all writers of apocalypse share a perspective ‘from above.’ By that I mean that they write from God’s vantage point. Human history is orchestrated from God’s heavenly throne room. Whether you are reading the great visions of Zechariah, Daniel, or even John, this divine perspective remains unchanged. Readers are given a behind-the-scenes look or, better yet, an elevated glance across heaven’s threshold at the end of human history.

This perspective on history is a refreshing change from the way we normally view it, or perhaps were even taught it in school. Too often, our own take on the events of human history suffers from a myopic disorder. Our view is largely horizontal in orientation—the affairs of the world appear to go on without a vertical dimension or divine impetus. Thankfully, the vantage point of writers of apocalypse should be refreshing for preacher and people alike.

When we begin reading this genre with an eye toward preaching it, we find fresh images of God on the throne to comfort us. All of God’s great acts of salvation and judgment are here, carried forth with eternal purpose and under his initiation. Certainly Revelation 4 and 5 provide the most well-known example of this truth. Each of the subsequent judgments poured out on

¹⁷ The opportunity to misuse symbols reminds me of a story from the Arthurian legends, the story of the Battle in the field of Camlann. Arthur rides out to meet Mordred, his relative and enemy, in hopes of staving off war as he and his forces are vastly outnumbered. Arthur is going to negotiate with Mordred and hopes to gain time for his forces to regroup. He tells Sir Gawaine to stay hidden in the forest with a simple directive: ‘If his sword remains sheathed, I will have succeeded. If you see his sword unsheathed, you will know I have failed.’ Arthur succeeds in negotiating a peace. But a snake slithers up and an opposing soldier draws his sword. Gawaine sees the reflection of the unsheathed sword and mistakenly plunges himself and the depleted army of Arthur headlong into a bloody battle in which, eventually, Arthur himself dies. In apocalyptic literature, there are also great signs and symbols. But if we misread them, we also can create destructive havoc. A preacher must understand the symbols and how they are being used, not merely recognize that they are symbols. If you misread what the symbol signifies, because of predetermined approach to what it would mean, you also are running your people headlong into disaster.

the earth in Revelation 6 and following have their origin in the heavens. There, the Lamb of God sits exalted upon the throne. Only Jesus was found worthy of opening those scrolls and executing God's plans. When one turns to the books of Zechariah or Daniel, this same thing can be observed.

Second, preachers of this genre must also get used to the writers' use of language that consistently collapses one epoch in time upon another. Some commentators have identified this as being *transtemporal*.¹⁸ Images within their work can at times apply to more than one period in history. For an example of this kind of thing consider the four kingdoms of Daniel 2. Those kingdoms become the four beasts of Daniel 7 which correspond to ancient Babylon, Persia, and Greece and Rome before the time of Christ. Yet, those same beasts possess trans-historical qualities. In Revelation 13:1-2 we find a composite of the beasts, but in this later work the image is used in reference to Rome and all world dominions that arise unto the end of the age. Observing this at the outset should assist young preachers especially from becoming overly rigid in interpretive scheme. Simply put, when it comes to history, this genre possesses an elasticity of vantage point that we are simply not accustomed to seeing in other genres.¹⁹

Third, preachers must be prepared to distinguish between the historical vantage point of the biblical writers and those of mythological lore.²⁰ The inability to do this well has pulled the

¹⁸ See Beale's discussion of Rev 13 in Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹⁹ To see a similar kind of thing at work in a NT epistle, see my explanation of Jude 5-10 in *1 & 2 Peter and Jude* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 303-310.

²⁰ For the sake of brevity I have chosen to only make a cursory comment here on mythology, leaving out altogether other extra-biblical literature that must be read and re-read alongside the biblical text. For instance, although the overlap between biblical apocalypse and Jewish apocalyptic literature is fascinating, time and space simply don't allow it in a primer of this size. When working through the 'seven trumpets' of Rev 8:6 -11:19 I had the pleasure of rereading the contents of one of the first scrolls taken from the Dead Sea Scrolls which also referenced apocalyptic trumpets. For readers who may not be aware of this monumental discovery, 61 years ago, and only two years from the end of World War II, three Middle Eastern Bedouins made their way along the NW shore of the Dead Sea near to the place called Qumran. As the story is commonly told, one of these nomadic and desert dwelling goat herders threw a rock into a cave attempting to drive out an animal of his that had gone missing. The sound it made surprised him—it was the sound of pottery shattering, not that of a rock upon cold hard stone. His curiosity piqued, Mohammed Ahmedel-Hamed, made his way into the cave. Once inside, he waited for his eyes to adjust; and then, along a wall of the cave, he made out several ancient jars, some with lids, and inside one, ancient scrolls wrapped in linen. This simple sheep herder could not possibly have known then that as he reemerged from that perfectly dry and protected cave, with new-found scrolls in his arms, that he was, in that very moment, bringing to light things that had remained hidden for the better part of 2,000 years! Over the next 32 years, from 1947 to 1979, nearly 1,000 manuscripts would be recovered from 11 different caves near the settlement at Qumran. One of the original seven scrolls found in Cave One by the Bedouin on that famous day is named The War Scroll, 1QM. It has also been called "The War Rule" and "The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness." In literary form or genre 1QM is a mixture of sorts but with definite markings of apocalyptic. It records seven end time battles in which the sons of light defeat Belial and the forces of evil. Seven priests with trumpets continually blow the sounds of the final battle cry.

preaching of some onto the reefs of unbelief. There is simply no good reason for hiding this from you—every preacher learning to read an apocalypse must bone up on his outside reading before setting sail in this genre. For example, while John’s Apocalypse tells the story of a dragon, a pregnant woman and the Christ child (chapter 12), other stories strikingly similar to it can be found in ancient mythology. Lore has it that the Greek goddess Leto became pregnant with Apollo, son of Zeus. In that mythological retelling, the dragon by the name of Python attacks her upon hearing the news that her offspring will seek to destroy him. Python’s preemptive attack fails, for Leto is carried to an island by the winds of the gods. From there she was protected and provided for until Apollo’s birth. Once born, it takes Apollo all of four days to hunt down the dragon and kill it. The story is remarkably like the one in Revelation.

Unfortunately, this kind of overlap between what we read in the Bible and what we find in mythology has led some preachers to mistakenly conclude that the Bible is nothing more than one among many myths circulating the ancient world. In the last century, theologian Rudolf Bultmann went so far as to say that Christianity should be classified, in its story form, as mythological truth in the guise of story form (Bultmann’s conclusion stemmed, in part, due to his interest in analyzing the Bible under the discipline of form criticism).

What is the preacher to make of this? It raises a significant set of questions. Can we classify biblical apocalypses as myth (as the prolific Karen Armstrong would have us)?²¹ Is the biblical

In John’s Apocalypse we also have ‘the heavenly trumpet’ so powerfully played in these verses that we might almost think ourselves face to face with the author. The language is of a similar kind and of similar genre as that of the War Scroll. Here we also find seven battles, each wrapped in the metal of seven trumpets—the blowing of which brings on the end of the world and the final victory of the Son of God over the Dragon of Darkness. So, what can we say about this common imagery of trumpets in apocalyptic literature? Where does it come from? What the War Scrolls and Revelation 8 have in common is a dependence on the book of Joshua. Do you remember the story of Joshua and the battle at Jericho? In Joshua 6 the trumpets are blown by seven priests—in Revelation, seven angels. In Joshua 6 the battle was staged in seven days—in Revelation, seven distinct acts. In Joshua 6 the seventh day is carried out in a manner unlike all the others—in Revelation, we find the same thing, a great interlude before the final trumpet is blown. Knowing this relationship to Joshua helps us understand what trumpets signify in Revelation. Trumpets were used in the Bible for a variety of occasions: to signal the entrance of a king, to warn a people of an enemy, to declare victory and to gather a people together (and the trumpet shall sound...and the dead shall be raised). In Joshua trumpets signify God’s impending judgment. If we turn to the preceding context of Revelation 8:1-5 we see that we stand once again at a point in history when God is decidedly acting in judgment. Trumpets first appear as objects in Revelation 8:2. (In chapter 1 we heard a ‘loud voice like a trumpet’ (1:10) but now we are given seven actual trumpets as objects to behold). Two further observations: First, we are introduced to trumpets in a moment of literary transition. With the beginning of chapter 8 the seven scrolls that have carried the reader since chapter 5 are drawing to a close. No sooner is the seventh scroll announced but we are ushered into a period of silence in which the trumpets make their entrance (read Rev 8:1-5). Second, the transition helps us in our understanding of how to read Revelation. The seven churches gave way to the seven scrolls, and those are then overrun by seven trumpets. Looking ahead, in the place of seven trumpets will be seven bowls.

²¹ I find the title to one of Armstrong’s bestsellers especially pointed in this discussion—her book is called *The History of God*. Notice she is not advocating for a ‘God of History,’ rather, in her mind, all religious texts express humanity’s attempts to speak about ‘the history of God’.

story nothing more than one version among many that are all trying to tell the same story? If so, what does that do to the notion of biblical authority? And if not, why not? Preachers of apocalyptic literature will need to begin reading widely if they are to tackle these questions adeptly. While it is not the purpose of this primer to treat this important issue it must be said that our reading should take us into ancient texts as well as apologetic ones. Further, our outside reading program should include works on the authority of Scripture and the formation of the canon.²²

RECAPITULATION OF THEMES

A second constellation in the skies of apocalyptic reveals a *recapitulation of themes*. Big ideas within a biblical apocalypse often come in a series of waves. Knowing this ahead of time will help us in our reading of apocalyptic literature—especially on the important fronts of *structure* and *sequence*. Often a term or theme is used as a convention to hold the *structure* of an apocalyptic work. For instance, the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation (chapters 2 and 3) are followed by the unfolding of seven seals of the scroll (Rev 5:1-8:5). The seven seals, in turn, give way to the crashing sounds of the seven trumpets (Rev 8:1-11:19). After these judgments come to shore, we behold seven visions (Rev 12:1-15:4), and beyond them, the seven bowls of God's judgment (Rev 15:5-18:21).

²² My own rereading of biblical texts does not allow me to think that the biblical writers would be pleased that their writings are now being reduced to the category of myth. In fact, they give every indication that their writings arise from the very real soil of human history—that is, they claim to be reporting the activity of God both *in and through* history. Further, there is little weight to the notion (outside of the academy in the Western world anyway) that the Bible would ever be content to be viewed as simply one story among the many stories that are in the end all trying to tell the same story. No, the differences between Leto, the birth of Apollo and the slaying of the great dragon, and that of the red dragon, the pregnant woman and the Christ child as found in Revelation 12 are as great as the differences between things that actually happened in our world verses those that are fixed, from beginning to end, in the human mind. To put it as simple as I can, Apollo never enters into time and space! By nature, mythology is a product of human imagination, whereas biblical literature claims its origins in the mind of God, with these things all being brought to pass in the very real world of men. After all, in Jesus of Nazareth we have a very real person. He walked upon the earth. People saw him and even non-biblical writers attest to his humanness. These things can't be said about the gods and goddesses mentioned in myth. They stay clear of direct incarnational contact with this polluted world. So, be assured, what you read in Revelation 12 is unique and without equal in the world of words that are authored by men. C.S. Lewis, in a letter written in 1931, attempted to describe the difference between Christianity and mythology this way: Christianity has this tremendous difference: that *it really happened*. "The Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things.'" C.S. Lewis in *C.S. Lewis: Life Works and Legacy*, vol. 4., *Scholar, Teacher and Public Intellectual*, ed. Bruce L. Edwards, (Westport: Praeger Publisher, 2007), 247. In another place, Lewis simply put it on edge this way, "Myth became Fact." As these complex questions confronted me early on in my preparation to preach from the genre of biblical apocalypse, I often meditated on the words of the Apostles' Creed. There we profess what God has accomplished in history. There we affirm that Jesus Christ, God's only Son, was in time and space conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried and rose again on the third day. May this 'God of history' be proclaimed by all preachers of apocalyptic—no matter how much reading and rereading we must do.

Beyond structure, this recapitulation of themes relates more importantly to the issue of *sequence*. For an example of how important this is, we need only to consider that some preachers approach Revelation under the interpretive principle that has everything in Revelation 4 through 22 unfolding, not only in the future, but in *chronological sequence* also. Others among us read the text differently—that the author of Revelation has chosen to employ a recapitulation of themes in Revelation 4 through 22, and with this literary technique he desires his readers to *return* to similar themes. This important difference is something every preacher must be aware of before setting sail. After all, how you come to view the recurring patterns within this literature will shape your understanding and preaching of the text. In light of this, I suggest that every preacher approaching apocalypse for the first time purchase the best commentaries available from differing vantage points of interpretation. Such study will help in two ways: first, it assists preachers in their desire to suspend judgment on what the text says and therefore must mean, and second, it enables preachers time to think their way clear before arriving at a conclusion.

Finally, we must turn our attention to the third and final section of the primer. Having given ourselves to the *reasons we avoid apocalyptic*, and having followed that up with sections about how to *recognize and read apocalyptic*, we are ready to tackle the most important section of all—*preaching from an apocalypse*. This too will require some retraining, for many preachers, having not properly understood the reasons God gave us this genre, have shipwrecked their preaching of it on the rocks of controversy and strife.

4. PREACHING APOCALYPTIC

THE NEED FOR A FRESH APPROACH

Mention to someone that you're considering preaching through the book of Revelation and you will inevitably hear something like, "Oh my, you are brave." It won't be long before the conversation turns to end-time schematics, your views on the millennium, the tribulation and the rapture, and how you intend to deal with the differences of opinion that will inevitably arise among members of the congregation. For years now, preaching from an apocalypse has led to negative consequences: one, an undue fascination with charts, graphs and endless speculation, and two, an overabundance of divisiveness between Christian brothers and sisters. This should not surprise us. For if the genre of apocalypse is merely about the *future* (clearly the dominant interpretive viewpoint of late in the United States), then our preaching of it cannot help but

center on timelines. Wherein we disagree (as thinking Christians most certainly will), arguments ensue, accusations are made and no one is spiritually edified.²³

We need to find a better way. After all, wouldn't it be nice if common ground could be established in an effort to allow competing views to share some common points of emphasis? Imagine a day when preachers were equipped to expound Zechariah or Daniel in ways that would be mutually beneficial—edifying even those who don't share your eschatological interpretive principles!

In this section I hope to purpose that very thing. To do so, I will need to redirect our minds for a moment, away from our preoccupation with the future. Only when that is done can we advance points of emphasis that every evangelical preacher of apocalypses can, and should, hold in common. I want you to rethink two things with me: the *past* and the *present*.

- The past: a return to the cross of Christ as the gravitational center for all preaching of apocalypses
- The present: an emphasis on the 'now-ness' of apocalyptic literature for Christian life

In a nutshell, I have come to see the *cross of Christ* and the *Christian life* as the commonsense tools we need to preach this genre well—no matter what your particular interpretive vantage point might be.

THE PAST: THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

Could it be that our sole preoccupation with future aspects of biblical apocalyptic has sold the literature of apocalypse short—not only for its *present*-day usefulness (as we will discuss shortly), but also for its *past* center of gravity? I think so. And so to the past we go—to a consideration of the death and resurrection of Christ in apocalypse.

Unfortunately, many of us continue to approach a book like Daniel without its primary interpretive force fixed firmly in our mind—namely, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In both the apocalyptic-like vision of chapter 2 and the full-blown apocalypse of chapters 7

²³ There are different schools of thought regarding how one should handle the book of Revelation. At least five different views are taken (the historicist school, futurism, preterism, idealism and a host of combinations of the four). See the ESV Study Bible notes on Revelation for a brief but well-done introduction of each position. What I would like to see happen as a result of this primer is for preachers of various schools to find common ground in our preaching of this genre that is not dependent on one interpretive method alone.

through 12 we dismiss the centrality of the cross as the center of gravity. We opt to preach these texts in ways that skip over that major event. We jump over our own time as well and land our sermons in some futuristic years to come. The preacher of Daniel will be greatly helped if we remember the words of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection:

O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that he prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

And again,

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations...."(Luke 24:44-47) ²⁴

According to Jesus, all Scripture—the genre of apocalypse included—finds its center of gravity in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Keeping this simple truth in mind could be transformative for our preaching of Daniel.

To illustrate the point, I want to look at the great apocalyptic vision King Nebuchadnezzar had in Daniel 2. Technically, this chapter is not a full-blown apocalypse (that is reserved for Daniel 7-12). Nevertheless, key textual indicators show clear markings of being apocalyptic.

- First, take a look at the apocalyptic phrase of 2:45: "A great God has made known to the king *what shall be after this*." This phrase is very close to what we find in Revelation 1:1 concerning "*things that must soon take place*." The language is apocalyptic—we are reading something concerning the future of the world.
- Second, notice the word 'revelation' in Daniel 2. God has given Daniel a 'revealing,' an 'unveiling,' a 'pulling back of the curtain.' In the LXX, the very word 'apokalypsis' is used no fewer than five times (Dan 2:19, 28, 29, 30 and 47). With each occurrence, the 'apokalypsis' is in conjunction with a *mystery* being made known.

²⁴ For Jesus' death and resurrection being the center of gravity for all of the Old Testament see also John 5:46-47; Acts 8:35; 10:42,43; 1 Pet 1:10-12.

- Third, the argument that the text before us is apocalyptic is strengthened when one looks at the content of the king's dream. Strong metaphorical and visionary elements are embedded in the composite image of a mighty figure that appeared to him.
- Finally, if we keep reading Dan 2 we discover that this great statue has something to do with the end of human history as we know it—complete with the setting up of an eternal kingdom. Indeed, this chapter is truly apocalyptic.

Now, consider with me for a minute what the preacher normally does with this passage. Common preaching on this text will emphasize the *future* (i.e., that God has shown Nebuchadnezzar what will transpire at the 'end of time'). In fact, entire sermons are sometimes given to explaining *a day yet to come* when the kingdoms of this world will give way to the kingdom of God. According to verses 35 and 45 this is the day that God's truth will 'fill the whole earth' and 'stand forever.' Further, a portion of the sermon will likely be reserved for reminding the congregation that God's sovereignty is intact. The text is here to show us that he reigns supreme over all the affairs and rulers of the world.

However, notice also what isn't preached from this text! While God's sovereignty has been reaffirmed, and some time in the distant future has been set before us, the preacher has said little to nothing of God's *past* saving act. We have heard nothing about how the kingdom in Daniel 2 equated with the stone that struck the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream was accomplished, in history, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps if preachers today could see how this text was preached by Jesus in his own day, we would uncover a pattern for preaching sermons more firmly grounded in his death and resurrection. But first, we need to see that the 'stone' in King Nebuchadnezzar's dream represents God's kingdom (see Dan 2:44-45), and second, we need to be reminded of exactly what Daniel said to the king:

"As you looked, *a stone* was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and *broke them in pieces*. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and become like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth." (Dan 2:34-35)

Now, we need to turn to Luke 20 to see how Jesus makes use of this apocalyptic scene. You will recall that in this chapter Jesus' authority is being questioned by the religious leaders. In response, he chose to tell them a parable (20:9-18). The content of the parable had to do with a

man who planted a vineyard whose owner had gone away for a time. Periodically, the owner sent servants to check on its progress and each time the unruly tenants persecuted and even killed the servants. The story went on: the owner sent his own beloved son in hopes of being heard, but the wicked tenants did not receive his authority either, and they killed him.

When Jesus finished the story the religious leaders were outraged, for they knew that he was referring to their rejection of him. At which point Luke writes,

But he [Jesus] looked directly at them and said, “What then is this that is written: ‘The *stone* that the builders rejected had become the cornerstone.’” Everyone who falls on that stone will *be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.*” (Luke 20:17-18)

Interestingly, Jesus appealed to two texts, Psa 118:22 and Dan 2, when defending his parable about his impending death. The context of the first citation referenced by Jesus has to do with the psalmist’s belief that although hard pressed, “I shall not die, but I shall live... he has not given me over to death” (Psa 118:17-18). So, when Jesus told the parable predicting his own death he did so with a psalm about life and death—and a stone. Similarly, in alluding to Dan 2 Jesus connects his own death as the fulfillment of the apocalyptic dream of the stone that “broke them in pieces” (see the similar words in Luke 20:19).

My point is that when Jesus decided to expound Dan 2 he did so in connection with his death. His own use of the apocalyptic dream of Dan 2 found its center of gravity in his own death and resurrection. Now, this insight should open up great vistas for gospel preaching, regardless of our eschatological interpretative principles. Our preaching of Dan 2 should highlight the cross of Christ as the time in human history when God broke in upon the world order and began his kingly reign. This commitment to grounding all of the Scriptures, including the literature of apocalypse, in the cross of Christ is what makes us gospel preachers. We are not to be merely speculative prognosticators when it comes to our handling of this genre.²⁵ Remembering this will save and strengthen preacher and people alike in the gospel—and edification, rather than division, will become the happy consequence within our congregations.

²⁵ Many other texts, normally restricted in meaning to events still to transpire in the distant future, have fresh wind when we keep the cross of Christ central in our preaching. See Dan 7:13 -14 and its connection to the ascension of Christ rather than his second coming; or the great vision of Revelation 1 and its appeal to the past activity of Christ (Rev 1:17ff). See also Rev 4 and 5, 12, etc. In Zechariah the theme of the divine warrior is prominent (especially Zech 9:1-17). Connecting that theme to Christ’s death is critical to preaching his apocalypse well. In addition, see Zech 6:9-15 for the expectation that God’s king will likewise hold the role of high priest (Joshua bringing mediation to God’s people). Even Zech 11:4-17 depicts the good shepherd – with the bit about thirty pieces of silver tying into Christ’s death via the betrayal of Judas Iscariot.

THE PRESENT: APPLICABILITY TO CHRISTIAN LIFE

Recently a young man approached me after the Sunday service and said, “You know, Pastor, I have studied Revelation quite a few times before, but never quite like this. I had no idea how profitable this book was for my everyday Christian walk.” Stories like that are encouraging for any of us who preach, and in my view, they should be all the more common when tackling the likes of apocalyptic. After all, the literature of apocalypse is more applicable than we give it credit for. If we are going to preach this genre effectively, it will require us to rethink our approach along the lines of *present-day usefulness*. Simply put, we have lived too long with impoverished expectations for this genre.

It is the nature of apocalyptic to reveal the present life-and-death struggle with evil for what it really is. Yet, to see this present day applicability a connection must first be made in the mind of the preacher between the literature of ‘apokalypsis’ and that of the ‘prophetic’.²⁶ Earlier in this primer we made mention of the relationship between these genres. We pointed out then that while Revelation should be squarely positioned within the genre of apocalypse, it also asks us to view it as being prophetic (see Rev 1:3; 22:6, 7, 18 and 19).

Now, one of the chief characteristics of the biblical genre known as ‘prophetic’ is something I call *ought-ness*.²⁷ Simply put, the prophets were concerned with ethics. For instance, when reading Amos, one is struck, not only with the impending day of the Lord (a very apocalyptic idea), but also with the need for God’s people to repent and begin living rightly again under God’s Word. So too with the book of Revelation. It is filled with prophetic-like ought-ness. It demands ethical change—it won’t allow Christians through the ages to compromise their life commitments to appease a morally challenged age. In fact, John uses the word ‘keep’ no fewer than 10 times—meaning for his readers to ‘heed,’ or to ‘obey.’ Throughout, readers are exhorted to ‘remember,’ to ‘do,’ and to ‘remain unstained’ from the world. He is bold in his intention to secure for God a people defined by the term ‘overcomers’—men and women who never compromise their Christian convictions in this hostile world.

²⁶ In his commentary on Revelation, Beale agrees with Carson and Moo in classifying John’s Apocalypse as “a prophecy cast in an apocalyptic mold and written down in a letter form” Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 39.

²⁷ Leon Morris makes this very point in his immensely helpful little book. Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 58-61. Interestingly, the Jewish and Greco-Roman counterparts in the genre of apocalypse were not all that concerned with present-day applicability in their use of this genre. They were not so much concerned with ought-ness, but *otherness*. They were content to write in terms only of the future—an eschatology of distant horizons. The kind of apocalypse one finds in the biblical record is very different. Biblical apocalypse is intimately concerned with ought-ness and the ethics of the here and now.

Preachers would do well to remember this. For too long we have been led to believe that this genre is only good for peering into the distant future. We thought that it had little to offer us in the here and now—only meager application for the present day. That is simply not the case. We had better rethink whether we want to see the day when evangelical preachers with varying eschatological viewpoints are capable of standing side by side in their emphasis of the text. This genre is filled with present-day application for Christian living, and as such we ought to be excited about preaching it.

Unlike many of us, the apostles managed to employ apocalyptic without the attending arguments and controversies that mark our preaching of it today.²⁸ Their use of this genre unified and comforted believers in this disquieting world, and we would do well to model our preaching after them. Consider Peter who wrote “the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” (2 Pet 3:10). Then, consider what he was promoting through this in his preaching:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness.... Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace (2 Pet 3:11-14).

Peter wasn’t concerned with *when* Christ would return, he was contending for *what* Christians should live like until Christ returned. When he spoke in the language of apocalyptic he did so with the aim of helping believers pursue godly lives— he wanted them to be without spot or blemish and at peace. Christian communities were to be holy, alert, expectant, faithful and busy in the work of gospel proclamation. And take note, Peter advanced nothing by way of charts and graphs, the stuff of which dominates our interest today.

There are many other great examples of the ways in which the apostles contended for the faith in the words of apocalyptic, and if we had time we could walk through them. For now, we only make mention of two. First, in his letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul used an apocalyptic ‘trumpet’ with the goal being “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess 2:13-18). Second, even Jesus, while never writing an apocalypse himself, nevertheless spoke powerfully in the language of apocalyptic. Mark 13 is his most famous example, and we often get caught up in the details of verses 5-31. Yet, in our own preaching we must not neglect his conclusion on the matter. In verses 32 and following Jesus make his objective for apocalypse

²⁸ Evidently, when preachers did begin to divide the church over one’s understanding of the ‘eschaton,’ the apostles did not think very highly of them (see 2 Tim 2:16-19).

clear: 'be on guard' and 'keep awake.' In fact, he reiterates this idea no fewer than three times (see also Mark 5:32, 35, 37). In a parallel text found in Matthew 24 and 25 (a passage filled with apocalyptic), the point Jesus makes is one of 'alertness' (see Matt 25:1-13) and 'faithfulness' (Matt 25:14-30).

In summary, every preacher of apocalyptic, if he gives himself to the things outlined here, can preach this genre in ways that edify the church—the whole church. A good test for us is this: if our preaching of this genre causes rifts and divisions based on timelines and schematics, we have gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick—we need to rethink some things fast! Remember, this literature has a center of gravity that is grounded in the past: the centrality of the cross. Further, it commends itself to application in the present, something the apostles modeled for us. Their contention was that it was given to us for the purposes of encouragement, godliness and comfort. The argument of this section has been that these ideas are strong enough to hold all preachers of apocalypses, regardless of one's own eschatological hermeneutic. As a preacher, every effort should be made to make these emphases your own.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes people wonder "Why did God choose to give us apocalyptic literature? Wouldn't other genres have been more accessible to the church throughout the ages? Couldn't He have gotten his point across to us in a more simple and straightforward way?" Questions like these are natural – and they reflect our sense of confusion and disease with the genre. Yet, good reasons can be given.

First, *this genre keeps us pressing on in Christ* in ways that straight forward genres might not have accentuated. When Jesus was about to leave this world he spoke in ways that his disciples found hard to understand. In John 16 they continually asked: "What does he mean?" To which Jesus replied, "I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father" (John 16:26). Now, if I understand that passage correctly, there are simply things the disciples could not possibly have gotten their minds around until after the departure of Jesus – in essence, his language was difficult, not because he was being opaque, but they needed to first experience his death and resurrection before things would appear 'plain'. So too, there are many things that you and I simply will not be able to understand about the full consummation of God's plans in Christ until after he returns. Joseph Bayly captures this idea well in his short story called *Heaven*. In it, God says, "I was limited in what I could reveal to them, limited to what their eyes

had seen and their language could express. Can you imagine the difficulty of describing a pineapple to an Eskimo on the Arctic tundra? Sweet and juicy blubber is about as close as you could come.”²⁹ I like that – and trust me, every Eskimo’s expectation for pineapple would be forever heightened! So too with biblical apocalyptic, intriguing speech, not because God intends to hide things from us but rather, he hopes to keep us peering intently ahead in hopes of tasting the real thing. Simply put, there is nothing like this particular genre that keeps us on the edge of our seats in obedience and fidelity to the gospel.

Second, *this genre magnifies our praise of God* for the particularity of his plan for our salvation. Let me explain. Our personal praise of God is magnified when we see that our glorious future in Christ is linked to his saving activity in Israel’s past history. When John’s Apocalypse presents us with a perfect cube coming down out of heaven our minds are taken back to God’s saving acts in Israel’s ancient history with the construction of the tabernacle. And we see there, even way back there, that God was already fashioning his plan in ways that this literature would be able to take advantage of in unique ways. When studying this genre I often stand in awe of God – the meticulous details surrounding our salvation are rooted in history – something this genre savors.

In this brief primer I have tried to put before the preacher some things to know before setting out on a maiden voyage into biblical apocalypses. First, be aware not only of the reasons why preachers avoid biblical apocalypse, but be determined not to make the same common mistakes. Second, equip yourself to recognize this genre when you see it. Third, and for inexperienced preachers especially—may the constellations of symbolism, its vantage point on history and its recapitulation of themes inform your reading habits early on. Fourth, I hope that every gospel preacher, regardless of age or eschatological viewpoint, might share the conviction on those things that must unite our preaching (the past: the centrality of the cross, and, the present: its applicability to Christian life).

The subject of preaching from an apocalypse is as deep and wide as the seven seas. As a result, much more could (and perhaps should) have been written, even here. But, my prayer is that this brief primer on this genre will help you set sail in it with great gospel effectiveness—for the glory of God, the good of His church, and the welfare of your own soul.

²⁹ Joseph Bayly, *Heaven*, (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishers, 1987), 24.

