



Research article

AN EVALUATION OF THE APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING THE NEW TESTAMENT APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT



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The Book of Revelation is generally difficult to comprehend. Over the ages, the church has provided several interpretations and hypotheses concerning the meaning and importance of this perplexing masterpiece. Even contemporary scholars approach Revelation in a variety of ways. Whether you find it terrifying or alluring, we need some guardrails to protect us from becoming lost in Revelation's prophecies, metaphors, and apocalyptic imagery. This paper analyses contemporary methods to understand the book and offer a new construct. Following a discussion of the available models for apocalyptic literature in this study, it was determined that the eclectic approach is still the preferred approach for interpreting apocalyptic literature. As a result, its steps must be taken as a whole in order to produce the desired results for a sound interpretation of apocalyptic literature in both the Old and New Testaments.

Keywords:

*Apocalyptic literature,
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Preterist Approach, Idealist
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Introduction

Apocalyptic literature, in the opinion of Ernst Käsemann, is "the mother of all Christian theology."¹ But over time, this literature has suffered because its content is difficult to understand, which has led overzealous and misinformed interpreters to use it to support their false viewpoints.² While some take the writings' content at face value, or literally, others approach it from different angles—neither of which provides a better interpretation of the book, leading to doctrinal conflict. Due to the nature of apocalyptic literature, which employs strange signs and symbols, some people pay less or no attention to the writings. This discourages people from pursuing apocalyptic studies.³ Some examples of apocalyptic writings are Daniel's writings in the Old Testament and Mark 13 with parallel writings in Matthew 24, Luke 17:22-37, and Luke 21 in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 2 Corinthians 5:1-3, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, and the book of Revelation are among the others. However, the author of Revelation says, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy..." (Revelation 1:3). The significance of reading, hearing, and comprehending the text of the book of Revelation—and, by extension, other apocalyptic writings—is emphasized by this. How is the book of Revelation to be read and understood by Christians? How can gospel preachers comprehend and apply the book's teachings in order to reap its benefits? In light of this, this article is provided to assist Bible readers in choosing how best to approach apocalyptic literature.

What is Apocalyptic Literature?

According to dictionary definitions or common usage, the word "apocalyptic" refers to writing that is menacing or ominous in nature. It is ominous, thwarting, and full of fear. According to the dictionary, it is warning people about impending doom or making inflated predictions or allusions to the end of the world. But neither in the original Greek nor Hebrew, nor at the time this term was coined, did it mean this. What did that imply? It literally and figuratively means "discourser of events," and for us today, that is also what it means. "Revelation" means "discourser of the apocalypse," and it also means an "uncovering" or "unveiling."⁴ Apocalyptic literature, according to Taylor, is "a type of writing that adopts the outlook of apocalypticism to a significant degree and portrays those themes through vivid use of symbolic language."⁵ Richard J. Krejcir asserts that the purpose of apocalyptic literature is to explain God, victory, hope, grace, God's plan, and the reality that He is in charge, not to frighten us or prevent us from understanding Scripture. Only those who despise and reject

¹ Käsemann, quoted in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* Third Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 1.

² Mitchell G. Reddish (ed.), *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 33-4.

³ Charles T. Fritsch, "The Message of Apocalypse for Today," *Theology Today* (10) (1953): 357-66.

⁴ "Apocalyptic." *Collins Dictionary*. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/apocalyptic> (Accessed 26th December, 2022).

⁵ Richard A. Taylor, "Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook" in *Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis*, Edited by David M. Howard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publication, 2016), 34.



Christ should be frightened. This literature will be of great assistance to us once we understand how it functions because it reveals to us how historical events—past, present, and future—have developed with God's plan and purpose as the ultimate goal. Therefore, if we take the time and make the effort to comprehend this genre, it will help us understand things and will reveal rather than hide what God has in store for us.⁶ Realizing that all languages, including Greek and Hebrew and consequently the Bible, use symbols and metaphors is important. We will draw an incorrect conclusion that will keep us and others from adhering to the right precept if we assume a word is literal when it is not. Then, if we teach it, we err by not correctly interpreting Scripture or reading the Bible for all that it is worth, which causes us to mislead others from the true teaching. A parable, for instance, should not be treated as history, and poetry, which both contain numerous symbols, should not be treated as straightforward narrative. The same is true for apocalyptic literature.⁷

The majority of the apocalyptic literature in Daniel and Revelation was revealed to the author through visions that were guided by the Holy Spirit. These are visions that they claim to have received from God or an angel, with imagery that needs to be expressed in words of human origin but that lack the strength or substance to convey the meaning. Because a metaphor can convey much more information about the "secrets" of Heaven and the End Times than a few sentences, it is therefore used. The writer and audience are typically informed and familiar with these images, but we today aren't as familiar with them (Dan. 7-12; Rev. 4:9).

Major Interpretative Approaches for Apocalyptic Literature

Preterist Approach

The Latin word *praeter*, which means "past," is where the word "preterist" originates. This apocalyptic interpretation method assumes that the prophecies in the book have come true in the author's original historical context. It connects the apocalyptic material to the original author and his audience in this way. This approach figuratively depicts the conflict between the Kingdom of God, represented by the Church, and the World-power, represented by Rome, by setting all the events in the Roman Empire in the first century. It rejects the text's prophecy because it assumes that any eschatology it contains happened soon after the author recorded it. Many supporters believe that the author's allusions to seals, trumpets, and bowls have no bearing on the future.⁸ Instead, when the author warned of future judgment, he was venting his moral wrath over the injustices of his day.⁹ This interpretive approach derives from postmillennialism, a theological perspective that holds that Christ will return after the

⁶ Richard J. Krejcir. *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature*. <http://www.intotheword.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=31437> (Accesses on 26th December, 2022).

⁷ Ibid

⁸ M.C. Tenney. *New Testament Survey*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

⁹ Ibid.



Millennial and will be heralded by Christian rule and prosperity.¹⁰ Despite overwhelming evidence that the book was written during the reign of Emperor Domitian, Preterists maintain that these prophecies were mostly fulfilled before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.¹¹ According to this approach, revelation is a contemporary and impending historical document.¹² Supporters of this viewpoint acknowledge that chapters 4–22 of the book of Revelation describe events that took place during John's lifetime.

This approach has the benefit of assisting interpreters in giving the author's statements a literal interpretation. Once more, it is simple to show how the immediate significance for the original recipients—the seven churches of Asia Minor—is. Once more, this approach makes clear Jesus Christ's comparable prophesied statements from his Olivet discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13; and Luke 21), in which the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Jewish temple were predicted. Additionally, this approach appears to be consistent with other first-century historical accounts from non-Christian sources, including the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.¹³ It does not, however, account for any part of prophecy—the physical actuality of Christ's second coming and the horrific character of the tribulation—and it is also wholly dependent on Revelation being written before 70 AD. Although several external and internal pieces of dating evidence indicate a date earlier than that.¹⁴

Historicist Approach

As the name implies, this approach sees the book as a prophecy of the full sweep of church history and its continuation from John's day until the end of the age.¹⁵ In other words, this approach maintains that events mentioned in the book are closely tied to real events that can occur anywhere between the time of the writer and the end of the era. It foretells all of history from Jesus Christ's initial appearance on earth until the conclusion of the church age. However, according to Baker and Kohlenberger III, this method began with Joachim of Floris, who assigned a day-year value to the 1,260 days of the Apocalypse as a forecast of Western history from the period of the apostles (or, in other variants, from the Creation) until his own time.¹⁶

¹⁰ J. Jusu (ed.). *The Book of Revelation*. In *African Study Bible*. USA: Oasis International Limited, 2016.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² K.L. Baker and Kohlenberger III, J.R. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Abridged Edition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Zondervan Corporation, 1994.

¹³ J. Jusu (ed.). *The Book of Revelation*. In *African Study Bible*. USA: Oasis International Limited, 2016.

¹⁴ M.C.Tenney. *New Testament Survey*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

¹⁵ D. C. Stamps and Adams, J.W. *Life in the Spirit Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003.

¹⁶ K.L. Baker and Kohlenberger III, J.R. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Abridged Edition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Zondervan Corporation, 1994



One benefit of this approach is the obvious proof of its authenticity since history appears to reflect some of the descriptions of events seen in John's vision.¹⁷ However, seeing the book as pertaining to future events implies that the book had no, or very little, relevance to its initial recipients—the seven churches of Asia Minor. Furthermore, the absence of agreement on the historical identity it involves makes it difficult, and hence less popular in today's society.

Idealist Approach

This interpretation approach considers the book's symbolism to embody certain timeless spiritual ideals regarding good and evil, without reference to real historical events; hence, it has also been referred to as "Spiritualist" or "Symbolic."¹⁸ As a result, it emphasizes spiritual truths in apocalyptic texts rather than historical or future occurrences. In basic terms, the approach regards Revelation as symbolic and spiritual in origin, rather than predictive of historical events or foretelling of future events. It sees the book of Revelation as a series of dramatic battles between good and evil, with the former eventually triumphing. As a result, it has been seen as a symbol of the ongoing conflict between good and evil, as well as between Christianity and paganism.¹⁹ The symbols are interpreted as ideas, trends, or notions. Proponents of this viewpoint, according to Carter, interpret the concept of swords and dragons in Revelation to signify God's message and Satan. Similarly, the language about rainbows and green fields is meant to signify God's promises and kindness, rather than being as literal as described.²⁰ This approach is founded on the idea of "Amillennialism," or the notion that there will not be a literal one-thousand-year rule of Christ on Earth.²¹

This approach has the advantage of diverting readers' attention away from problematic parts of its symbolism and toward the ethical and spiritual truths of Revelation.²² It once again makes the book's message applicable to Christians throughout history, as well as making the book of Revelation relevant to its users at all times. This method also highlights the eternal truths about the ongoing conflict between good and evil throughout the church era.²³

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ M.C.Tenney. *New Testament Survey*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

¹⁹ M.C.Tenney. *New Testament Survey*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

²⁰ J. W. Carter. *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature*. Accessed on 26th December, 2022 from http://www.biblicaltheology.com/rev/rev_09_12.html

²¹ C. M. Pate. *Interpreting Revelation and Other Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook* Edited by John D. Harvey. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications., 2016.

²² M.C.Tenney. *New Testament Survey*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

²³ K.L. Baker and Kohlenberger III, J.R. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Abridged Edition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Zondervan Corporation, 1994.



One drawback of this interpretive approach is the persistent failure to associate any of the symbols with particular future events, whether historical or eschatological, as well as specific historical events that would soon occur (Rev. 1:1; 22:6). It inhibits readers from understanding the contextual and historical links with the original audience in the first century that are addressed, as well as from attaching significance to imagery with future occurrences.

Futurist Approach

The futurist approach to the study of Revelation considers all of the events recorded to have yet to occur.²⁴ This might be due to what the author is instructed to do early in the book: Write down what you [John, the author] have seen—both the things that are currently happening [as in John's generation] and the things that will happen (Rev. 1:19). The method splits the book into two major sections: those that occurred during John's time (chapters 1-3) and those that will occur at the end of time (chapters 4-22), with a heavy emphasis on the latter. According to Tenny, the first section that refers to the seven churches in Asia Minor represents seven historical eras of the church that aim to close the gap between the apostolic age and the second coming of Christ.²⁵

According to Stamps and Adams, chapters 4 through 22 serve as a prophecy of historical events that will only take place at the end of this century.²⁶ This approach has its roots in "Premillennialism," the idea that the seven-year period of extreme suffering known as the "Great Tribulation" would come before Christ's second return and the subsequent installation of the one-thousand reign on earth.²⁷ God's anger will thereafter be directed against humans. Adherents of this approach believe that the symbols and images employed by the author to communicate his views can be interpreted literally, metaphorically, or a mix of both.²⁸

The approach defends the author's use of symbols to describe images and happenings that are indescribable in the recognized lexicon.²⁹ The creatures mentioned in Chapters 13 and 17 are connected with the future Antichrist, who is expected to appear at the end of history and be vanquished by Jesus Christ in His second coming to establish his judgment reign and begin his earthly millennial kingdom. Some early church fathers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, as well as expositors such as J. A. Seiss, C. I. Scofield, A.

²⁴ J. W. Carter. An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature. Accessed on 26th December, 2022 from http://www.biblicaltheology.com/rev/rev_09_12.html

²⁵ M.C. Tenney. New Testament Survey. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

²⁶ D. C. Stamps and Adams, J.W. Life in the Spirit Study Bible. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003.

²⁷ C. M. Pate. *Interpreting Revelation and Other Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook* Edited by John D. Harvey. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications., 2016.

²⁸ J. W. Carter. An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature. Accessed on 26th December, 2022 from http://www.biblicaltheology.com/rev/rev_09_12.html

²⁹ Ibid.



C. Gaebelein, and H. A. Ironside, shared this viewpoint.³⁰ This technique appears acceptable to interpreters since it takes the material literally. It appears appropriate in some ways, given that the book labels itself as "prophecy" (Rev. 1:3). Giving a future interpretation to the book of Revelation, on the other hand, renders the entire book irrelevant to any Christian at any time. This is an affront to God's word, which speaks to all eras and generations.

A Recommended Approach

The Eclectic Approach

This method of interpretation combines the preterist, idealist, and futurist approaches, with certain occurrences pointing to past, current, and future fulfilment. It builds on the strengths of the preterist, idealist, and futurist interpretation frameworks. While acknowledging that the book of Revelation and its prophecies were fulfilled in the writer's original historical setting, this approach also maintains that the symbolism of the book embodies certain everlasting spiritual ideals regarding good and evil, and has relevance to the believer's current life.

The approach interprets the book of Revelation by taking into account the historical context of the text, which deals with past events, drawing lessons from these past events to give current Christians strength and encouragement in their struggles, and providing the futuristic happenings of these past events at the end of time. Some occurrences that serve as a reminder of events from the first century are said to have a past, present, and future resolution. The reader is prevented from understanding the context and historical links with the original audience in the first century by this approach, which makes no provision for any aspect of prophetic prophesy and consistently declines to associate any of the imagery with particular future events. Additionally, it does not render the entire book irrelevant for any Christian at any time since it enables readers of the Bible to take the symbols and images literally, figuratively, or both. This is the opinion of many academics, including Marvin Pate.³¹

Due to the character of the book of Revelation and, by extension, all apocalyptic literature, the eclectic style of interpretation is superior. While accepting that part of the Revelation is fulfilled in the first century, particularly the early church's battle with Caesar's worship, the idealist part enables the Bible student to know the struggle between the good (themselves) and bad (the devil and his allied forces) throughout history, and the victory assured them, which will be followed by God's wrath on the wicked. The preterist portion of it considers prior events and interprets them in the author's time because all of the events are

³⁰ K.L. Baker and Kohlenberger III, J.R. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Abridged Edition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Zondervan Corporation, 1994.

³¹ C. M. Pate. *Interpreting Revelation and Other Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook* Edited by John D. Harvey. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications., 2016



perceived to have occurred within the author's age. This approach makes it easy for the book to speak into the current issues of the believer who is struggling with evil.

This construct allows each portion of the book to be read in three ways: preterist, idealist, and futuristic, relating to the past, present, and future. This helps the believer to understand the early church's fight with authorities in their period, its significance for modern Christians, and the future hope for Christians at the end of time. It has few, if any, drawbacks because it employs all ways to interpret a specific text. It emphasizes its relevance to the present and provides future hope for how evil will be dealt with at the end of time.

Conclusion

In light of the strengths and shortcomings of these five approaches, one solution stands out. While all of these approaches may aid in determining the meaning of the book of Revelation, none of them absolves modern readers of the difficult burden of reading the book in an exegetically responsible manner.

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