

An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature.

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It was visitation night for our little Baptist church. As the conversation with this "prospect" continued, it took what for me was a very strange turn. "I am here to tell you, sir, that the earth is *not* round, regardless of what you and your scientists say!"¹ As a member of the scientific community and well-grounded in the natural sciences, I was astounded at this earnest and sincere statement from a very committed Pentecostal-leaning Christian. Certainly, the images from direct observation of the earth came immediately to mind. I shared my viewpoint that the earth is not only a sphere, but also an incredibly small one when one considers how quickly we can circumnavigate around it. He told me, "No, the earth's not round, and I can prove it." Finding this individual to seem somewhat intelligent, my curiosity was long past the point of piqued and I was at the point of trying to figure out the riddle he was posing to me. He then shared his reason for his adamant position: "The Bible says, 'I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth.' Since the Bible is true, the earth is not round. It is a square." I quickly realized that this conversation had little potential of coming to closure. His quote was accurate, taken from the Revelation of John:

***Revelation 7:1. And after these things I saw
four angels standing on the four corners of
the earth, holding the four winds of the earth,***

¹ This event took place over twenty years ago. Quotes are estimates from vague recollection.

***that the wind should not blow on the earth,
nor on the sea, nor on any tree.***

What was the error in this man's thinking? Certainly, there was nothing wrong with the faith of this man. In fact, the innocent blindness of his faith in scriptural authority seemed superior to mine. His error was in his interpretation of the apocalyptic literature style utilized in the biblical text. Reading symbolic imagery as literal and historical, he came away only with an incorrect description of the physical earth and the location of four angels, substituting a literal and physical image for the deep theological message that the author intended on conveying.

The misunderstanding of the context and form of apocalyptic literature has led to much misinterpretation and doctrinal conflict over the years. "In modern times, apocalyptic studies have fared rather badly. This has been due, in the first place, to the distorted interpretation of books like Daniel and Revelation which is prevalent among certain extreme prophetic groups."² Some groups, by their rabid stance, have given the Bible an authority greater than God.³ "The investigation of apocalyptic literature seems to be governed by rival 'schools' more than most areas of NT interpretation. Revelation, in particular, has been besieged in a long hermeneutical war by armies whose battle lines are clearly drawn. Often one may not even approach the siege site unless one claims allegiance to one of these armies."⁴ Some groups have made the literal/historical interpretation of biblical apocalyptic a litmus test of faith, utilizing its literally-applied eschatology to provide answers for

2 Charles T. Fritsch. "The Message of Apocalypse for Today." *Theology Today*, 10. (October 1953): 59.

3 Ronald J. Allen. *Contemporary Biblical Interpretation for Preaching*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1984: 120.

4 David Arthur DeSilva. "The 'image of the beast' and the Christians in Asia Minor: escalation of sectarian tension in Revelation 13." *Trinity Journal*, 12(2), (Fall 1991): 185.

questions concerning the end of the age. Because of this, "In recent years, it has become tainted by its status as the darling of wild-eyed apocalyptics."⁵ Fringe apocalyptic groups have proved exceedingly radical and even dangerous. High-profile examples include *The People's Temple* under James Warren Jones who led 914 of its members to mass murder/suicide in 1978 and the *Branch Davidians* under David Koresh who led 74 of its members to their murder/suicide in 1993.

The Revelation of John has not always been embraced with the fervor of other books of the canon. For example, four centuries ago, Martin Luther "made comments about Revelation as pejorative as anything he said about the Epistle of James, considering Revelation "neither apostolic nor prophetic"⁶

Most Christians experience a more common response to apocalyptic literature, and that is to give it little attention. Pastors who are not confident with the genre may fail to teach or preach on apocalyptic passages. Christians, in their own study time, may prefer to simply pass over those pages and spend time on texts that do not require as much exegesis. However, apocalyptic literature is an integral part of scripture; hence, it is an integral part of the gospel message. To rule it out of consideration altogether is to distort the biblical message of hope by omitting in advance what is obviously a part, if not the whole, of the biblical perspective.⁷ The message of the text is not "hidden." Apocalyptic literature is a mystery only to those who approach the genre with an inappropriate and/or incomplete interpretation strategy.

People may tend to be less than comfortable when reading the Apocalypse, but there is no shortage of interest in the subject

5 Michael Lindvall. "Revelation 4:1-11." *Interpretation*, 53(2), (April 1999): 173.

6 W.G. Kümmel. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975): 471.

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

of eschatology. Recent best-seller sales of the "Left Behind"⁸ apocalyptic novel series highlight the intense curiosity people have in the subject. These novels are a loose, literal interpretation of biblical apocalyptic passages, most taken from the Revelation of John.⁹ The success of these novels has sparked other television and movie entries into this genre. "Whatever we may think of the 'pop-apocalypsis' of ones like LaHaye and Lindsay¹⁰ it is clearly impacting the faith of our church members"¹¹ and raising curiosity and interest among those who are not active in a Christian church fellowship. The time is ripe for Christians to become more capable of dealing with this very important genre of biblical text.

The Bible contains several important segments of apocalyptic literature that include Isaiah, chapters 56-66; Ezekiel, chapters 37-48 (both referred to as "proto apocalyptic"); Daniel, chapters 7-12;¹² and Revelation, chapters 4-22. Any attempt at a correct

8 Novel series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

9 "The view that millions of believers will suddenly vanish to meet the Lord in the air, prior to a seven-year period of hell on earth, has emerged as the pervasive conceptual framework in American eschatology.

Commonly referred to as "pretribulationism," this view has become increasingly mainstream and no longer occupies the fringe territory of theology." Jeff Scott Kennedy. "An ecclesiology of escapism: an examination of the rapture in the book of Revelation." *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, 10(50), (February 2009): 1.

10 Hal Lindsay and Carol E. Carson. *The Late, Great, Planet Earth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970.

11 Allen C. McSween, Jr. "When our myths are shattered: a constructive critique of apocalyptic theology." *Journal for Preachers* 24(4), (2001): 41.

12 "Daniel and John fall on opposite sides of this great divide: Daniel delights in historical review, presenting history in the guise of various animals as well as more explicit historical references. After a few stories of how heroes of the exile avoided compromise, Daniel consists entirely of a recitation of his dreams, followed by an angelic interpretation. There is no otherworldly journey. Revelation, on the other hand, is dominated by John's ascent to heaven (see 4:1) and lacks entirely any historical review." David L. Barr. "John is not Daniel: the ahistorical

understanding of these important passages necessitates an understanding of the literary nature of apocalyptic literature, and how it and how its use of imagery should be interpreted.¹³ In addition to these Old Testament sources, John draws from no less than 500 verses in the Old Testament, either in direct use, or in allusion, or in context,¹⁴ utilizing almost the entirety of the Hebrew Bible, drawing from the Law, the Poetry, and the Prophets. ¹⁵Arguably, the primary source of apocalyptic symbolism and eschatological theology come from the book of Daniel.¹⁶ An effort has been made in the following pages to illustrate many of these references, and these are also provided in the scriptural index at the end of the text. John uses many sources in his selection of symbols and metaphors in his presentation, including many well-understood mythological systems. "Any interpretation of the visions ... must take

apocalypticism of the Apocalypse." *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 40(1), (Spring 2013): 54.

- 13 "The inspired imagery of the Bible may surely be reckoned as one of the main sources of its spiritual power. The biblical images astonish our expectations, grip our attention, challenge our receptivity, haunt our memory, stir our affections, and transform our attitudes. While the Bible is not lacking in doctrine, its language suggests far more about God and His ways with man than it conveys by express concepts. From the crude anthropomorphisms of Genesis to the luxuriant visions of the Apocalypse, the Bible proves itself a treasure house of vivid and majestic symbolism." Avery Robert Dulles. "Symbol, myth, and the biblical revelation." *Theological Studies*, 27(1), (March 1966): 1-26
- 14 Arthur G. Fruchtenbaum. "The use of the Old Testament in the book of Revelation." *Proceedings*, The Pre-Trib Research Center, Ariel Ministries. (2013): 1.
- 15 Not all scholars are impressed with John's utilization of the Old Testament: "The Apocalypse of John stands apart from all other early Christian and Second Temple Jewish literature in its (mis)use of the Jewish scriptures." Robert M. Royalty, "Don't touch this book!: Revelation 22:18-19 and the rhetoric of reading (in) the Apocalypse of John." *Biblical Interpretation*, 12(3), (2004): 282.
- 16 Gregory K. Beale. "The influence of Daniel upon the structure and theology of John's Apocalypse." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27(4), (December 1984): 413-423.

account of the broader context of apocalyptic genre, and that the mythological imagery characteristic of that genre must be recognized as an integral factor in the message of the book, not mere embellishment."¹⁷

Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic literature "is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a Revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world."¹⁸

More study has taken place in the subject of apocalyptic literature in the past forty years than has taken place in the last three hundred.¹⁹ This is particularly true as applied to biblical prophecy and apocalyptic genre. "Prophecy was written to people in need of repentance. Apocalyptic literature was written to people in need of reassurance"²⁰ and hope.²¹ Apocalyptic

17 John Joseph Collins. "Apocalyptic genre and mythic allusions in Daniel." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 21, (October 1981): 94.

18 John Joseph Collins, ed. "Apocalyptic: the morphology of a genre." *Semeia*, 14, (1979): 9.

19 Arnold Jacob Wolf. "Apocalyptic for the millennium." *Judaism* 48(1), (Winter 1999): 102.

20 Kevin Hall. "Apocalyptic literature." *Biblical Illustrator*, 31(4). (Summer, 2005): 7.

21 "Apocalyptic literature played a crucial role in the life of the early Church. It gave hope to those in the midst of trial. It gave strength to those weighed down by discouragement and fatigue. It provided security when it seemed as though the world was about to end. The careful symbolism that depicted the rise and fall of nations and kings pointed to the power of a provident God who controlled the course of history. Of course, deciphering these symbols has given commentators difficulty for centuries. The visions of Daniel and John still divide Biblical scholars worldwide. The debates rage as modern-day prophets attempt to read the signs of the times and predict the end of the world." Gale Heide. "What is new about the New Heaven and the New Earth?: a theology of

literature is a style, or genre, of writing that was common from about 400 B.C. through 200 A.D.²² It was a form usually utilized to communicate the content of a prophetic vision or dream. "In form, an apocalypse is an autobiographical prose narrative reporting revelatory visions experienced by the author and structured to emphasize the central revelatory message."²³ Derived from the Greek word *apokalupsis*,²⁴ meaning to "reveal" or "uncover" something that has been hidden, *apocalypse* has come to refer to prophesies of the end times, whether biblical, apocryphal, or secular. The genre seems to have grown out of a culture of religious desperation, seeking to bring assurance and comfort to those who were experiencing chronic doubts or persecution. George Eldon Ladd notes three cultural factors that promoted the form. First, the text would come from a "religious remnant" that considered themselves to be a righteous minority immersed in an unrighteous world. Second, the genre usually addresses issues of good and evil, assuring the remnant of their righteous status as the text describes the doom of evil. Third, the remnant experienced a "cessation of

creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 40(1), (March 1997): 37

22 "Revelation was the first book to be called an "apocalypse," being so labeled on the basis of the first word in its Greek text (Rev 1:1). Since 1822 the term has become widely used to describe a distinctive literary genre of works that resemble the Apocalypse of John in both form and content. Since John's Apocalypse is the source of the terminology, one might be inclined to call it apocalyptic rather than prophecy. This is not accurate, however. This work differs from the usual apocalyptic pattern in a number of important respects, such as its lack of pseudonymity. This and other differences bolster the book's claim that it is a prophecy (1:3; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), and it must be accepted as such even though it has a number of features in common with apocalyptic." Robert L. Thomas. "The spiritual gift of prophecy in Revelation 22:18." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 32(2), (June 1989): 206.

23 David E. Aune, "Revelation 1-5." In: *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 52A*. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997: 65.

24 Revelation 1:1.

prophecy," a period when the people are longing to hear from God.²⁵

Though some argue that John utilized a "code" in order to throw off the attention of Romans who would consider his writing to be sedition against the emperor,²⁶ quite the opposite is true. John used this form simply because it was an appropriate way to present prophesy, and the Gentiles were very familiar with apocalyptic literature. John was hiding nothing from the Romans.

"When Israel accepted the belief that prophetic oracles had ceased after the tier of Ezra,²⁷ apocalyptic visions of the future, typically written in the name of a famous figure of the past, met a need for the people's continued communication with their God."²⁸ Overwhelmed by the destruction of their kingdoms and their domination by foreign nations (Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and then Rome), the Jews were searching for an end to the conflict.

"Apocalyptic thought flourished during a time of intense suffering, the historical climax of which came during the reign of the half-mad Seleucid ruler, self-styled as "The Splendid," Antiochus Epiphanes. With his insane zeal for furthering

25 George Eldon Ladd. "Apocalyptic." In: *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. E. F. Harrison, Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co, 1960.

26 "He knows that he cannot write in a straight forward manner. The government will not allow a pamphlet to be released that calls for sedition or disobedience. Hence, John writes in an apocalyptic mode that he hopes will instruct the Christians while confusing the Romans. The apocalyptic genre is often used for a double purpose—political instruction and spiritual advice. In some ways, John adopts a kind of code language to speak to the believers." Keith A. Russell. "A call to sanctified resistance: Revelation 21:1-6." *Review & Expositor*, 109(3), (Summer 2012): 459.

27 Circa 400 B.C.

28 Stephen L. Harris. *Understanding the Bible: a Reader's Introduction*, 2ed. Mountainview, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1985: 179.

Hellenism, he dedicated himself to the total extinction of Judaism. He butchered pigs on Solomon's altar. He proscribed the reading of the Law. If a Jewish male infant was circumcised, the entire family and the officiating priest were slaughtered. It was in this atmosphere of persecution that apocalyptic was born."²⁹

Consequently, the conflict theme is common to the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the inter-testamental period. Conflict appears as "rebellion against God or warfare between the forces loyal to God and opposing forces led by a fallen angel, evil spirit, or wicked emperor."³⁰

Some of the characteristics that are common in apocalyptic literature include:

- The writer tends to choose some great man of the past (i.e. Enoch or Moses) and make him the hero of the book.
- The hero often takes a journey, accompanied by a celestial guide who shows him interesting sights and comments on them.
- Information is often communicated through visions.
- The visions often make use of strange, even enigmatic, symbolism.
- The visions often are pessimistic with regard to the possibility that human intervention will ameliorate the present situation.
- The visions usually end with God's bringing the present state of affairs to a cataclysmic end and establishing a better situation.

29 James Callis. "The Apocalypse: an apocalyptic book?" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 86, (March 1967): 69.

30 Adela Yarbro Collins. "Apocalyptic themes in biblical literature." *Interpretation* 53(2), (April 1999): 123.

- The apocalyptic writer often uses a pseudonym, claiming to write in the name of his chosen hero.
- The writer often takes past history and rewrites it as if it were prophecy.
- The focus of apocalyptic is on comforting and sustaining the "righteous remnant."³¹

Methods of Interpretation

"Methods of interpretation tend to reflect the presuppositions and questions of the interpreters. That principle partly explains the variety of approaches used by students of the book of Revelation over the centuries."³² Consequently, with the multitude of presuppositions and deterministic agenda, "the interpretation of Revelation has been a dividing line between the "fringes" of the church and the "mainstream" throughout Christian history—though the positions themselves have changed over time. Today we must continue to read Revelation in biblical and historical context to avoid the dangers of apocalyptic rhetoric."³³

Apocalyptic literature has been studied and interpreted for centuries, and many of those who utilize a systematic method of interpretation fall into one or more of several dominant groups:

Preterist method. This method presupposes that all of the events that are recorded in the text took place within the period of time that is contemporary to the writer. The preterist method

31 Leon Morris. Quoted in Virkler, Henry A. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co, 1981: 192.

32 Adela Yarbro Collins. "Dating the Apocalypse of John." *Biblical Research*, 26, (1981): 33.

33 Robert M. Royalty. "The dangers of the Apocalypse." *Word & World*, 25(3), (Summer 2005): 283

of interpreting the Revelation of John places all of the events in the first century as it symbolically chronicles the conflict between the church and Rome. Preterists deny any content of prophecy in the text, assuming that any eschatology it contains has already been realized.

Futurist method. This method presupposes that all of the recorded events in the text have yet to take place. The symbolism and imagery that is used may be interpreted as literal or symbolic, or a combination of both. Futurists may also argue that the symbolism is an attempt by the author to describe images and events that cannot be described in his contemporary vocabulary since the objects have yet to be seen and named.

Historicist method. Historicists hold that the events described in the text are directly related to world events that can range from the time of the writer to the end of the age. Those who hold to the historicist method must work to equate the images and symbols in apocalyptic literature to specific world events.

Idealist method. The idealist does not tie the events of apocalyptic literature to either historical or future events, but rather to spiritual truths. The text is not about swords and dragons, but about God's Word and Satan, it is not about rainbows and green fields, but about God's promises and His mercy. The idealist searches for the spiritual and/or theological meaning that the author intends upon conveying in the symbolism he uses.

Perspective method. This system is a mixture of futurism and preterism, holding that John was writing strictly to his contemporary church as the last generation before the second coming of Christ. As generations continue, each present generation is the last generation, and the message should be considered relevant to their preparation for the second coming. The struggle between first-century Christianity is simply an archetype of the continued struggle between the contemporary

church and the systems of evil within which it finds itself immersed.

Genre apocalypse. This method seeks to determine the literal meaning of the images in apocalyptic literature through the comparison of a text with all other texts of the Genre. Such a method ignores the historical, futurist, and idealist methodologies, and becomes bogged down in the determination of what literature to include in the comparison.³⁴

The Rapture. Some of the more significant conflicts arise between those who hold firmly to their beliefs concerning the literal application and sequence of the events that are depicted in the revelation. The following are some of these conflicting views:

- Israel will enjoy restoration during the Tribulation and the Millennium (dispensationalism.)
- The church will stay on earth throughout the Tribulation (posttribulationism).
- The church will be evacuated from the earth by a preliminary coming of Christ before the Tribulation (pretribulationism).
- The church will be evacuated from the earth sometime during the Great Tribulation (midtribulationism).
- Only the godly part of the church will be evacuated from the earth by a preliminary coming of Christ before the Tribulation (partial rapturism).³⁵

Most students of the Bible would probably agree that correct

34 Adela Yarbro Collins. "Reading the book of Revelation in the 20th century." *Interpretation*, 40(3), (July 1986): 235.

35 Robert H. Gundry. *A Survey of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994: 461.

biblical interpretation is attainable when one is able to ascertain the content of the message intended by the authors. When we look at the above methods of interpretation, we find their theses to be somewhat mutually exclusive. Each process will come to a set of conclusions that is dramatically different from the others, and may not be even close to the author's original intent. Seeking the true meaning of the scripture may require that one draw from the advantages of each interpretation methodology, depending upon the context of the text for process selection. Ladd states, "The easiest approach to the Revelation is to follow one's own particular tradition as the true view and ignore all others; but intelligent interpreters must familiarize themselves with the various methods of interpretation that they may criticize and purify their own views."³⁶

Interpretation guidelines.

As an example of interpretation methodology, let us examine some passages from the Revelation of John. While reading John's Apocalypse we should keep in mind that,

- it was written to Christians who had been undergoing long-term persecution (at least two-generations) with no hope for change;
- it was written to give the author's readers encouragement and purpose during this difficult time;³⁷
- it uses images and symbolism (containing a lot of common idioms and metaphors) to describe the attributes of the person/place/thing being described rather than simply naming the

36 George Eldon Ladd. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974: 670.

37 David L. Barr. "The Apocalypse as a symbolic transformation of the world: a literary analysis." *Interpretation* 38(1), (January 1984): 39

person/place/thing.

This latter point becomes important as we look at the text. As one encounters images, think about what the symbolism might mean as applied to attributes of that which is being described. "The force of symbolic language lies in its ability to supersede human categories. No Biblical writer exceeds the imagination and compelling imagery of the author of the NT Apocalypse. The theology of John is visual theology; seeing is understanding. The audience will experience earthquakes, storms, fire, pain, joy, worship, agony and delirium, all of which serve to mediate the tension between contemporary powers that be and Christian faith, thereby affirming the might and sovereign reign of Almighty God. It is within John's view, using graphic symbolism, to encourage Christians to an active, not passive, participation in history."³⁸

As John presents his prophecy he uses symbolism in the same manner that an artist uses a paintbrush to illustrate his message. "The reason that John uses symbols for the faithful is so that we should actually see and perceive spiritual reality and not merely listen to abstractions about it, and, accordingly, be shocked concerning those sins about which we have become anesthetized."³⁹ "The power of symbols in the development of the human consciousness is undeniable. No matter what the cultural milieu or religious tradition, the visual and verbal symbols of the spiritual have entered at the most fundamental levels into human experience."⁴⁰ The symbols, derived from the world of sense experience, are used to communicate that which

38 J. Daryl Charles. "An apocalyptic tribute to the Lamb (Rev 5:1-14)." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 34(4), (December 1991): 461.

39 Gregory K. Beale. "The purpose of symbolism in the book of Revelation." *Calvin Theological Journal*, 41(1), (April 2006): 65.

40 Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. "Dreams and visions : religious symbols and contemporary culture." *Religion and Intellectual Life*, 1(3), (Spring 1984):

transcends the world in order that the transcendent might be experienced.⁴¹ Try to avoid attaching the symbols directly to the description. This is what makes the Revelation more of a challenge to read. We are not that familiar with how ancient Christians understood many of these images and symbols, though many are obvious. We are often left with the context of symbolic usage to formulate an explanation.

However, not all symbolism is lost to us. For example, the symbolic interpretation of numbers is used extensively in the Revelation to describe the attributes of the noun or pronoun it is describing. This practice, referred to as Jewish Gematria took many forms which include:

- The transliteration of Hebrew letters into numbers, using the sum of those figures to reach a conclusion.
- The attribution of symbolic significance to certain numbers.⁴²

John makes extensive use of this second application of Gematria, so when we approach the text, we should take care to study the context in order to choose whether John is referring to a literal or a symbolic value. When numbers are encountered in the text, try to ascertain the symbolism that was used for these numbers in the contemporary culture of the writer. We should also be reminded that scripture never contradicts scripture. When we see what appears to be a contradiction we are not applying the message of the scripture accurately. For example, Revelation 21:22 reveals that there is no temple in

41 John Painter. "Johannine symbols : a case study in epistemology." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. 27, (June, 1979): 49.

42 Glenn McCoy. "Jewish gematria and Revelation." *Biblical Illustrator*, (Summer 2000): 12.

heaven, yet there are numerous references to the temple throughout the book.⁴³

Finally, we may be reminded that John was given an opportunity to look into an environment that no words in his language could fully describe. If someone from the future brought us an object that nobody had ever seen before, we would have to describe it based upon our current words that are not sufficient to describe it accurately. We would tend to refer to its attributes when we cannot refer to it by its name. Consequently, we are pushed back into the necessity of using symbols and metaphors to describe the attributes of these heretofore-unseen things.

"There exists a consensus among scholars that one of the interpretive keys to understand the Apocalypse lies in giving an adequate rationale for the pervasive use of the Old Testament in this book."⁴⁴ Though John makes no direct quotes from the Old Testament, it The Apocalypse contains well over 500

43 "Two aspects of John's interpretation of his symbols strike me as noteworthy. First is the rather pedestrian nature of the prosaic reality to which they refer. We are not talking about stars but about churches (1:20). We are not really eating books; we are prophesying (10:9-11). It would never have occurred to me to picture a prayer meeting as an angel with a golden censer before the throne of God suddenly throwing it on the earth with thunder, lightning, and earthquake ensuing (8:3-5); but perhaps John's prayer meetings were more lively than those I have seen. There is something maliciously appropriate in symbolizing the grandeur of Rome as a gaudy prostitute riding on a scarlet beast, at least from the provincial perspective of John (17:3-14). But it is late first century Roman culture that is being discussed, not gaudy prostitutes. The first point, then, is to keep our heads in the midst of all this exotic symbolism and remember we are hearing about quite common, everyday realities." David L. Barr. "The Apocalypse as a symbolic transformation of the world: a literary analysis." *Interpretation* 38(1), (January 1984): 40

44 David Matthewson. "Assessing Old Testament allusions in the book of Revelation." *The Evangelical Quarterly*. 75:4. (2003): 311.

references to it,⁴⁵ coming largely from the Books of Moses, and the prophecies of Daniel and Ezekiel. We find allusions to the Old Testament in, virtually, every passage. "While many of them are merely faint echoes, we nevertheless gain the overwhelming impression that the whole of the OT, not only its symbols and predictions, receives life and meaning from the events surrounding the Revelation of Jesus Christ."⁴⁶ Entire Old Testament passages lay the framework for much of John's presentation. Any study of the Revelation would not be complete without an effort to understand John's use of the Old Testament material that is used in a range of allusion from direct use, including the intent and context of the material, to what may be referred to simply as "echoes" that may have no intent of conveying the original meaning. To this end, an effort will be made to illustrate many of the applications that John makes of Old Testament scripture in his presentation.

Interpretation example.

Revelation 4:2. *And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.*

Though there are apocalyptic overtones in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation, John introduces us to the genre gently, and does not fully embrace the literary form until Chapter 4. It is here that John lays the foundation upon which the remainder of the book stands, and he does so with the imagery of a throne that is set in heaven. Visions of God and His throne are not new. "Of the sixty-two times the word "throne" appears in the New Testament, forty-seven are in the

45 Arthur G. Fruchtenbaum. "The use of the Old Testament in the book of Revelation." *Proceedings*, The Pre-Trib Research Center, Ariel Ministries. (2013).

46 Thomas E. McComiskey. "Alteration of OT imagery in the book of Revelation : its hermeneutical and theological significance." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 36(3), (Summer 1993): 308.

New Testament."⁴⁷ We find common references to the throne in Jewish tradition;⁴⁸ and most important to this study are those found in Isaiah 6:1-13; Ezekiel 1:1-28;10:1-22; and Daniel 7:9-10. Note that it was the act of usurping the authority of God's throne by transferring their allegiance to human kings that precipitated the demise of Israel as a nation. The Jews were very familiar with the throne motif, and consequently the first-century Christian community shared that familiarity.

A throne is a position of authority. John looked into heaven, and he first saw the authority that was there. This may be contrasted with the authorities of this world that are listed in Ephesians 6:12. Worldly men exercise the authority of this world. We are immersed in a world that is saturated with evil, requiring faith in God for any semblance of purity or truth. That is God's purpose for allowing sin in the world. Without sin, there is no need for faith. Without the impact of sin in our lives, we will never see a need for God. It is God's purpose that we learn who He is and respond to Him by faith. So, when John looked into heaven, rather than a place where sin was the authority, he saw a place where Jesus was the authority (verses 5, 8, and 11 identify Jesus as sitting on the throne.) It is easy to understand how a Christian, particularly one going through a conflict with this evil world, would find these words comforting. This throne motif is a central theme that continues through the remainder of the Revelation .⁴⁹

Revelation 4:3. *And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.*

47 David J. MacLeod. "The adoration of God the creator: an exposition of Revelation 4." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 164(654), (April 2007): 213.

48 Exodus 24:9-18; 1 Kings 22:19-22; Jeremiah 23:16-22, e.g.

49 M. Eugene Boring. "The theology of Revelation : the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns." *Interpretation*, 40(3), (July 1986): 259.

The writer's description of God's throne is very similar to descriptions of it in Jewish apocalyptic literature, except for the anthropomorphic imagery.⁵⁰ Biblical apocalyptic literature is unique in that its "eschatology is marked off by all other eschatological thought precisely by its Christocentric emphasis."⁵¹ The biblical texts all agree that it is Jesus who sits on the throne. Here we find Jesus described with the appearance of jasper. We do not typically use the word *jasper* to describe the gem that many American engaged or married women wear on the ring finger of their left hand. We refer to this stone as a diamond. When you think of a diamond, even with all of the other materials that have been discovered or made in the last 2000 years, what do you think of? Purity? Clarity? Permanence? Immutability? The natural diamond is still considered one of the most amazing materials in all of creation, and thanks to strict market controls, it is also considered one of the most valuable.

Carnelian (note its similarity to the word, carnal) was a stone that was plentiful of the region around Sardis. This stone was blood-red in color, and would quickly inspire the thought of blood to one who found it. Again, the use of symbolism is obvious, since something cannot be crystal clear and blood-red at the same time. The color red, or crimson, represents the atoning blood of Christ in Christian apocalyptic literature. We may then find in the diamond and carnelian both the purity, permanence and atoning purpose of Christ, a character that is quite alien to the worldly authority that John's readers find themselves subjugated. "It should also be noted that the *sardius* was the first of the stones on the high priest's

50 Larry W. Hurtado. "Revelation 4-5 in the light of Jewish apocalyptic analogies." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 25, October 1985: 111.

51 George R. Beasley-Murray. "New Testament apocalyptic: a christological eschatology." *Review and Expositor*, 72, (Summer 1975): 317.

breastplate, and the jasper was the last in the Greek rendering of Exodus 28:17-18."⁵²

John also saw a rainbow surrounding the throne, an allusion to the throne vision in Ezekiel 1:27-28. If the throne is the authority that rules heaven, what is the significance of a rainbow surrounding it? The rainbow is a symbol of God's covenant with man,⁵³ literally presented by Him following the ancient flood.⁵⁴ The basis for the God's authority in heaven is His covenant with man and God has not forgotten his promises. Usually we think of a rainbow as a spectrum of all colors, but the rainbow in John's tapestry resembles the green of an emerald. Green symbolizes God's mercy and His purpose of hope. Consider the green of the spring season. The color Green reminds one of the renewing of life, empowered by God's mercy, and serves as an indicator of hope of better days to come. This covenant is one that is a product of God's mercy and brings hope to all who will receive Him. This is a very encouraging message to the persecuted saints, whether they are ancient or modern.

According to these three verses, a better place awaits those who are under the authority of the throne. They will be taken to a place where sin will no longer have any power, authority, or dominion over them. Instead of being subjected to the evil authorities of this world, this will be a place where all recognized authority will be that of Jesus Christ. This authority was given to Him by virtue of the price that He paid on the cross to atone for our sins, and in response to the covenant that God made with man, a covenant that God will be faithful to fulfill, one that is product of His mercy, one that brings us hope. Evil

52 David J. MacLeod. "The adoration of God the creator: an exposition of Revelation 4." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 164(654), (April 2007): 204.

53 David E. Aune. "Revelation 1-5." In: *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 52A*. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997: 286.

54 Genesis 9:13-24.

may reign now in the dark recesses of this pagan, secular, and apostate world, but it will not last forever.

Note that this interpretation example does not fit into any of the five methods listed above, but draws from some of the best features of several. From the preterist model, we recognize the plight of first-century Christians and how their circumstances provide the context for the passage. Israel has not been self-governing since the nation was overrun by Babylon, and no hope for independence exists. Christians suffer the additional indignity of rejection by both the Jews and many Gentiles. John's readers perceive the authority in the world as resting fully in the hands of the Romans. John's message of Jesus' authority is encouraging.

From the futurist viewpoint, we note that the throne is in heaven. The authority of Jesus Christ is in complete power in the kingdom of God. Many will interpret heaven to be a future place, assuring the reader that the authorities of this evil world will not last forever. From the idealist method, we observe that John is speaking about Jesus and His authority, realized in the surety of God's promises because of His mercy and grace.

We must keep John's purpose in mind as we determine the context and intent of his words. The "Revelation both gives advice and presents models of behavior. That is, it pursues both deliberative goals (seeking to shape the ongoing behavior of the hearers in specific ways in regard to specific circumstances or settings) and epideictic goals (seeking to praise and censure particular figures, whether historical or fictive, with the aim of reinforcing or shaping the values of the Christian groups John addresses)."55

When we approach the interpretation of apocalyptic literature in this manner, we come away with an entirely different image

55 David Arthur DeSilva. "Out of our minds?: appeals to reason (logos) in the seven oracles of Revelation 2-3." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 31(2), (December 2008): 125

than the historical literalist will have. The literalist simply sees a throne that holds someone looking like gemstones, surrounded by a green rainbow. This may make for a pretty painting, but holds no message for the reader. However, when one applies appropriate processes employed in the interpretation of apocalyptic style, one comes away with a profound spiritual truth that is both instructive and encouraging. This tremendous message of hope came from only two apocalyptic-style verses that are a small part of the bulk of the Revelation of John. It takes a little bit of time to research the context of the imagery used in apocalyptic passages, but the time is worth it.

It might be interesting to note that John gradually moves into the apocalyptic imagery in this book. In fact, he makes use of some initial images that would have not been in the "vocabulary" of the ancients. For example in 1:20, John explains the interpretation of the images of the stars and candlesticks. If one combines what we know about ancient imagery with John's explanation of some of those original images he utilizes, we can come away from the apocalyptic text finding that there is little mystery.⁵⁶ The mystery of the

⁵⁶ "Semiotics, the scientific study of signs as systematized by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) shows that signs in a sign-system, like a biblical text or book, can be interpreted in three very different ways, depending on the relationship to the object they represent.

First, the exegete can assume that a sign has no physical relationship to the object it signifies, like for example, a national flag symbolizes a country. These signs, called symbols can only be understood by associating their meaning. So can, for example, the woman clothed with the sun in Rev 12 obtain the symbolic meaning of the people of Israel, the Christian Church, or the entire People of God.

Second, the exegete can treat a sign as an index. An index is in some way physically connected to the object it represents. For example, smoke calls attention to the existence of fire. John himself makes use of indexical references as he describes Satan as great dragon and old serpent (Rev 12:3. 7ff), thus correlating Satan with the ferocious and evil nature of these creatures.

Third, the interpreter can believe that a sign is the icon of the object it describes. An icon almost fully represents the physical nature of the object it signifies. For example, the merchants in Rev 18:3. 11. 15. 23 are icons of real tradesman in the Roman Empire during the time of John, and as early as the 4th century, the woman clothed with the sun

apocalyptic genre is solved in the same way that the content of any biblical text is determined: through a comprehensive exegesis of the text. "It should be clear that the images of Revelation are symbols with evocative power inviting imaginative participation in the book's symbolic world. But they do not work merely by painting verbal pictures. Their precise literary composition is always essential to their meaning."⁵⁷

Biblical apocalyptic literature is not something to be avoided.⁵⁸ In fact, the Revelation⁵⁹ was written to be read⁶⁰ and those who read it are blessed. "The Apocalypse is the product of the NT gift of prophecy, administered by the Holy Spirit, referred to frequently in the NT as a gift,⁶¹ as a product of the gift,⁶² as a

and the moon under her feet was identified with Mary the mother of God." Marcus Locker. "A Semiotic Analysis of the 'New Jerusalem' in the Book of Revelation." *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, 4(23), (July 2003): 2.

57 Richard Bauckham. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 18.

58 The avoidance of apocalyptic literature is not a new response to the genre. "From about the end of the first century A.D. these apocalyptic and martyrological texts were banished from mainstream, post-war Judaism and—as far as we know—were no longer preserved in Jewish circles. It is arguable that the Jewish apocalypses and martyrological texts were regarded as dangerous by the Jewish Rabbis in view of the role which they played in strengthening Jewish resistance against Hellenism and Roman Imperialism. After the disastrous ending to the First Jewish War, such texts appear to have been written out of the Jewish Canon as a consequence of the need to dampen down the fierce flames of nationalism which had burst out spasmodically since the time of the Maccabees." Peter Staples. "Revelation 16:4-6 and its vindication formula." *Novum Testamentum*, 14(4), (October 1972): 282.

59 e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:28,29; Ephesians 4:11.

60 Revelation 1:3.

61 e.g. Romans 12:6.

62 e.g. 1 Timothy 1:18.

person possessing the gift, or as an exercise⁶³ of the gift."⁶⁴ The central element in apocalyptic literature, common to all biblical prose, is the glorious second coming of Jesus Christ, who will raise the dead, judge persons and usher in the glories of the Age to Come.⁶⁵ We find this theme whether we read from Isaiah 11 (a king from the line of Jesse), or in Daniel 7 (the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man.) Apocalyptic literature was not written for some great-learned scholar to analyze, but for everyday people who were experiencing extreme persecution. "Each book, at the time of its writing, helped those who were hungry for truth to catch a glimpse of the ultimate victory of God. These apocalyptic books have provided that same glimpse of victory for readers through the centuries – and continue to do so even today."⁶⁶

63 e.g. 1 Corinthians 14:31.

64 Robert L. Thomas. "Literary genre and hermeneutics of the Apocalypse." *Master's Seminary Journal*, 2(1), (Spring 1991): 82.

65 George Eldon Ladd. "New Testament apocalyptic." *Review and Expositor*, 78(2), (1981): 205.

66 Kevin Hall. "Apocalyptic literature." *Biblical Illustrator*, 31(4). Summer, 2005: 11.