

# APOCALYPTIC

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Of the genres in the Old Testament, apocalyptic is probably the most unusual if not the most misunderstood. Even its name may seem strange. Yet like cliffs for the climber or caviar for the connoisseur, apocalyptic can provide special delight for those who learn to appreciate it. Once properly understood, the apocalyptic portions of Scripture become uplifting and comforting.

Apocalyptic deserves notice as remarkably good literature. If a literary text makes something come alive through narrative, rather than stating it by proposition; and engages readers in something to be experienced and lived, rather than to be analyzed; and uses images to impact the brain's right hemisphere, rather than to transmit data into the left hemisphere; then apocalyptic is intensely literary. Like music, apocalyptic appeals to emotions. It is powerfully affective communication. Like the imaginary stories of children's literature, apocalyptic creates compelling images that shape values, which in turn impact behavior. Like poetry, apocalyptic is aesthetically crafted. Like visual media, apocalyptic graphically portrays scenes of high drama.

Figures of speech and special literary techniques abound in apocalyptic. Metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche,

hyperbole, apostrophe, allusion, personification, paradox, pun, irony, parallelism, repetition, rhythm, and rhetorical devices appear with a high level of frequency. Add to these literary features apocalyptic's special subject matter focusing on future events, and this genre offers readers a universe of literary artistry and fascinating reading.

### What Makes Apocalyptic Unique?

In simple terms apocalyptic is prophecy—but of a specialized kind. The Book of Revelation has been the most recognized example of the apocalyptic genre, even giving the genre its name (the first word of John's Revelation is *apokalypsis*). As with the Book of Revelation, apocalyptic is prophecy but with a special focus and in a striking format. While the lines that divide apocalyptic from prophecy are often blurred, the following characteristics are common—though not rigid—distinctions between prophecy and apocalyptic.<sup>1</sup>

Prophecy	Apocalyptic
Prophecy laments the sinfulness on the earth and urges people to repent.	Apocalyptic considers the ever-present wickedness beyond hope. The only solution is total destruction: The earth is going to melt with fervent heat.
Prophecy reveals God's displeasure with the irreverent attitudes and conduct of his chosen people.	Apocalyptic assumes that the readers are themselves displeased with the evil around them and are anxious for God to provide a solution.

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1. For more complete discussion of prophecy, see chapters 7 and 8 above, and Richard Patterson, "Old Testament Prophecy," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 296–309.

Prophecy	Apocalyptic
<p>Prophecy calls the people of God back to obedience to God.</p>	<p>Apocalyptic calls for the few remaining faithful to persevere until the end: In the face of difficult odds they are to keep their robes pure.</p>
<p>Prophecy announces that God is going to judge sin and offer salvation, usually to be accomplished through natural means or human agents.</p>	<p>Apocalyptic announces that God himself is going to intervene and judge the world through supernatural means: he will ride out of heaven on a white horse and rule the nations.</p>
<p>Prophecy presents its message as direct speech from God: "Thus says the LORD."</p>	<p>Apocalyptic presents its message in graphic images, visions, and symbols. The message of apocalyptic is sometimes shrouded in mystery: This title was written on her forehead: "Mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth" (Rev. 17:5).</p>
<p>Prophecy predicts both immediate and distant aspects of God's judgment and salvation.</p>	<p>Apocalyptic focuses primarily on final solutions. The situation is too serious for short-term answers. The only hope is for God to bring the history of man's sinfulness to conclusion and to establish a solution that will last for eternity: There will be no more night, and they will reign forever and ever.</p>

Though apocalyptic's basic message is not difficult to grasp, its striking format leaves many readers bewildered. In some senses an apocalyptic author is like a political cartoonist, sketching the course of world events and the prominent leaders of the world in figurative, graphic, and even bizarre ways. As a result, the reader is often left puzzled by what is encountered:

- jaw-dropping scenes of animals, rivers, mountains, and stars that jump off the page with movie-like special effects (see Dan. 8:2–14; Zech 6:1–7)
- natural catastrophes producing cosmic chaos throughout the universe, ushering in the dreadful day of judgment (see Ezek. 38:19–22; Isa. 24:18–20)
- harmful and disruptive evil contributing to constant crises and producing a seemingly hopeless pessimism with the course of current events (see Dan. 7:19–25; Isa. 57:3–13)
- an underlying determinism resting in the unquestioned conviction that somehow God is maintaining sovereign control (see Isa. 25:1; 26:1–4)
- ecstatic expectation that God will soon intervene and suppress all evil forces working against his predetermined plan (see Zech. 14:3–9; Mal 3:1–5)
- ethical teaching aimed at giving courage and comfort to the faithful and confirming them in righteous living (see Zech. 7:9–10; 8:16–17; Isa. 56:1–2)
- visions of celestial scenes and beings with an other-worldly perspective (see Dan. 10:4–19; Zech. 3:1–10)
- heavenly interpreters explaining the scenes in language that may also be figurative (see Ezek. 40:3–4, Dan. 8:15–17)
- a dualistic perspective that categorizes things into contrasting elements such as good and evil, this age and the age to come (see Zech. 1:14–15; Dan. 12:2)
- a very stylized structure of how the visions are presented, with events and time organized around numerical patterns and repetition of similar sets (see Dan. 9:24–27, Ezek. 38–39)
- and foundational to all the above, God's promise to act in the last days to restore his people and establish a new and glorious order (see Isa. 27:12–13; Zech. 8:1–8).<sup>2</sup>

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2. In this list of characteristics of apocalyptic, there is one notable omission. Most apocalypses in the ancient world were pseudonymous. However, in the Bible the only apocalyptic text seriously claimed to be pseudonymous is Daniel. For example, John J. Collins, *Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 56–58. For arguments in favor of Daniel as the author, see Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 13–59.

These characteristics of apocalyptic take readers on a fascinating journey that invites “us to enter a whole world of imagination and to live in that world before we move beyond it.”<sup>3</sup> Unless interpreters understand the unique characteristics of apocalyptic, they are likely to make major mistakes in their study of this genre in Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

## Where Apocalyptic Is Found

### Extra-Biblical Writings

Apocalyptic appears in many forms and in many places, both within the canon of Scripture and in extra-biblical writings. In some cases, however, it is difficult to decide what qualifies as apocalyptic, because there is uncertainty about how many characteristics of apocalyptic are required to consider a text apocalyptic.<sup>5</sup> While a partial consensus is forming among scholars of how apocalyptic should be defined, it must be remembered that genres as literary classifications are largely modern concepts. A genre is not a fixed collection of texts with clear boundaries dividing it from another collection of texts, for some pieces of literature inevitably fall somewhere between the commonly accepted categories. The apocalyptic genre can have as many as twenty-eight distinguishing characteristics, but no single text contains all of those characteristics, and some texts not considered formally a part of the apocalyptic genre have some of those characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

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3. Leland Ryken, *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 23. Though Ryken’s statement is referring to biblical literature in general, it is especially fitting for apocalyptic.

4. There are many discussions of the characteristics of apocalyptic. For example: see M. E. Stone, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, CRINT, ed M. E. Stone (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 392–94; and Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity 1991), 221–27.

5. Much has been written on the definition of the apocalyptic genre. For a helpful review, see Dave Mathewson, “Revelation in Recent Genre Criticism: Some Implications for Interpretation,” *TJ*, n.s. 13, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 193–204.

6. John J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, *Semeia* 14 (1979): 5–8.

Apocalyptic apparently grew out of a diverse matrix of Hebrew prophecy, Israelite wisdom, and Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic materials. During the Babylonian exile and after, the crises faced by the Jews brought them to their knees in despair under the weight of the seeming hopelessness of the world's condition. It became increasingly clear to some that the only hope was for a radical divine intervention. Describing that intervention in vivid visionary forms and motifs was natural, given the apocalypticism that was common in the ancient Near East.<sup>7</sup>

Though fully developed apocalyptic is not extant until the Persian period, there are striking predictions of the future preserved in Akkadian literature, dated as early as 1000 B.C. Among the Babylonians, mysterious signs and symbols and overtones of determinism are apparent in the mantic wisdom. Dream visions are also attested. The Persian material, though plagued with uncertain dating, has the clearest evidence of apocalyptic thought in the ancient Near East, including a historical apocalypse that describes a divine being who interprets a revelation, and an apocalypse involving a heavenly journey.<sup>8</sup>

While some evidence of apocalyptic expression is found in the ancient Near East, apocalyptic as a genre was a Jewish phenomenon, though subsequently adopted by Christians. The most commonly recognized extra-biblical apocalypses are 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Abraham, 2 and 3 Apocalypse of Baruch, and Apocalypse of Peter. Most of these are a part of the corpus of Jewish literature now known as the Pseudepigrapha written after the time of the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>9</sup>

Of these extra-biblical examples of apocalyptic literature, 1 Enoch has the clearest parallels to Old Testament apocalyptic, especially Daniel.<sup>10</sup> The biblical character of Enoch, whose signifi-

7. "The roots of the apocalypse should be sought in biblical literature, first and foremost in prophecy" (Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," 384).

8. John J. Collins, "Persian Apocalypses," in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia 14 (1979): 207-17.

9. For English translations of apocalyptic texts in the pseudepigrapha related to the OT, see James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983).

10. Collins, *Daniel*, 59-60.

cance was heightened by his most singular disappearance (see Gen. 5:24), had become associated with special divine knowledge centuries before Christ. The book which bears his name is actually a collection of five books, each with its own title and purpose. The first part, the *Book of the Watchers*, explains the origin of sin on the basis of Genesis 6 rather than Genesis 3. The second, the *Similitudes*, echoes Daniel 7 in its expectation of a savior, the Son of Man or Elect One. The third part, the *Book of the Luminaries*, discusses the moral implications of a perfect 364-day solar calendar. Part four, the *Dream Visions*, is made up of a "prophetic account" of the coming flood and then "foretells" history down to the second century B.C. Finally, book five, the *Epistle of Enoch*, contains ethical teaching with an emphasis on righteous living in the last days.

Though examples of apocalyptic written by the early Christians include the *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of James*, *Apocalypse of Paul*, *Apocalypse of Thomas*, and the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the *Apocalypse of Peter* is probably the earliest and most influential of extra-biblical Christian apocalyptic.<sup>11</sup> Written within fifty years after the Revelation of John, the *Apocalypse of Peter* records an expanded and embellished version of Jesus' transfiguration and Olivet Discourse on the end times. Peter is shown a vision reflecting in particular the wrath of God against all evildoers and the rewards for the righteous, and Jesus describes a beautiful garden, which is the eternal abode for the saints.

Examples of apocalyptic literature also exist among the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the caves at Qumran.<sup>12</sup> This collection, most likely the library of a group of sectarian Jews who were in many ways more closely related to early Christianity than the more well-known Pharisees and Sadducees, includes only the book of 1 Enoch from the list of previously known extra-biblical apocalypses. Portions of four of the five 'books' of 1 Enoch were found at Qumran. Missing is the *Similitudes* with its important messianic

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11. For English translations of early Christian apocalyptic, see J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford, 1993).

12. For English translations of the Scrolls, see Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 2d ed. (New York: Penguin, 1975).

implications. However, the remaining composite survived in a grand total of twenty copies! 1 Enoch is thus in a tie with fourth-place Genesis on the Dead Sea best-seller list—eclipsed only by the Psalms, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah. It must be remembered that a few lines from the first book of 1 Enoch are quoted in the New Testament by Jude (vv. 14–15), underlining the fact that this work was important not only among early Jews but Jewish Christians as well.

In addition to 1 Enoch, there are two previously unknown works found at Qumran that might best be labeled apocalyptic. 1) There are ten scrolls which contain sections describing a gigantic messianic temple (the New Jerusalem), works clearly patterned after Ezekiel 40–48. Also to be included in this group of temple apocalypses is Revelation 21:10–27. The other new work is found in some nine copies and known by the title *War Scroll*. To some degree the sectarian equivalent to the Book of Revelation, this text describes the final battles between the Sons of Darkness and the Sons of Light. In a sectarian foreshadowing of baseball's World Series, the scoreboard shows a tie of 3 to 3 after six contests. In the final confrontation the Messiah, bearing the title the Prince of the Congregation, comes forth to lead the Sons of Light to a total and eternal victory over evil, ushering in the Messianic Age. The message is clear: Although God's work may now seem to be opposed by an equally determined and pernicious evil, in the end he will intervene in power and suppress all wicked forces working against his predetermined plan.

### Old Testament Writings

In the Old Testament canon the most obvious apocalyptic portion is Daniel 7–12, usually considered full-blown apocalyptic. Daniel has multiple visions full of symbolism and mystery, including a progression of strange beasts that succeed one another. When the last one is destroyed, the "Son of Man" comes to earth to rule a kingdom that will never be destroyed (see 7:13–14). Before that happens, however, Daniel is shown how terrible the trials will be for God's chosen as the end draws near. War will be waged in and around the "Beautiful Land," leaving destruction at every turn (see 8:9–13). Fortunately, Daniel learns that there is a time limit for the wickedness of this world, for God is in control and has decreed the end of transgression (see 9:24–27). The righteous

will finally be delivered and will shine like the stars forever and ever (12:3).

There are parts of other books in the Old Testament that have some of the characteristics of apocalyptic, though not everyone agrees that they should be called apocalyptic. (Isaiah 24–27) sometimes called the Isaiah Apocalypse, is one of the earliest examples of apocalyptic content and technique. According to the prophet, the earth's condition is wretched and, apart from outside intervention, seemingly hopeless. But God is going to rise up and destroy wickedness from the earth and inaugurate a new order. Isaiah 56–66, another passage with apocalyptic characteristics, pictures a sharp contrast between the righteous who are helplessly suffering under the present world order and God's radical solution when he will violently destroy the wicked and create a new heaven and new earth.

In (Ezekiel 38–39) the pouring out of God's judgment on the earth is described in graphic terms, followed by the cleansing of the land and the restoration of the faithful to a place of security. It is a dreadful day for the earth's inhabitants in (Joel 2:28–3:21) when God vents his anger against sin and restores the good life to the pardoned. In (Zechariah 1–6 and 12–14) the prophet sees numerous visions showing God's intervention to remove evil and to establish a new era of blessing. The prophet Malachi is concerned about the unfaithfulness of the chosen and announces that a day of reckoning is coming when God will purge those who do evil, followed by the creation of a new society.

This selection of passages suggests that a shift from prophetic to apocalyptic eschatology was a trend at the end of the Old Testament period. The office of prophet begins to be replaced by that of the seer led by his angelic guide. To explain this shift in genre, researchers have suggested various factors—from political turmoil to foreign influence. Although a completely satisfying explanation may not be possible, certain clear parallels can be seen in our own world. One need only compare the possible modes and styles of communication available before the advent of television to those which are currently popular. We have traveled from the filmstrip and flannel board to “virtual-reality” in less than a half-century! Cultural shifts have produced an equally shocking change in the

genre of the message as well. Likewise, the rapidly changing world both before and after the Jewish exile to Babylon produced comparable shifts in the delivery of God's message. Thus, the disconcerting and often confusing images of apocalyptic literature require some explanation for those of us still more comfortable with the "good old days" of the prophet!

## How Apocalyptic Functions

Apocalyptic addresses a serious crisis of faith. If God is truly in control, why has he allowed things to get so bad here on this earth? In reply, apocalyptic proclaims that God has not turned his back on the world but will radically and unexpectedly intervene and introduce a universal solution that will solve all problems.

When faced with severe adversity such as the Jews experienced at the hands of the Assyrians or Babylonians or Syrians (or the Nazis), the response of many was to call on God for salvation. When relief failed to come, patience became thin and doubts about God's control and mercy arose. People understandably lost sight of the bigger picture of how God might be at work in the affairs of this world and became preoccupied with the immediacy of their own misfortunes.

Largely in response to this kind of crisis, apocalyptic literature gives its readers a roller-coaster ride through the heavens and into the future. There are thrills as those faced with crisis get a glimpse beyond the problems of the present. The heavenly journeys and descriptions of activities and creatures in the domain of heaven—all so unlike anything known on this earth—help the persecuted put their own misfortunes in perspective: What they are going through is relatively insignificant in the bigger picture of things. But the roller coaster also takes the riders down in the valleys of gloom and despair. The crisis of the present is only going to get worse, for the wickedness so prevalent will increase until it reaches a level unknown in human existence. Through all of this the stage is being set for God's sudden intervention. He is still in control and will win the fight once and for all; he will introduce an eternal solution, which will provide peace on earth. The feeling at the end of the roller-coaster ride is everlasting exhilaration.

The effect of the language of apocalyptic on those who heard was dramatic. It was uplifting as the faithful were reminded of how great God is: Apocalyptic is a call to stand in awe and to worship the **sovereign LORD** of the universe. It was comforting as the faithful were given new hope that this evil world would eventually come to an end: Apocalyptic is a **promise of a new age** when God will have his way on this earth as he does in heaven. The spell-binding scenes of heaven, often revealing the cosmic battle between good and evil, assured the faithful that what they were experiencing was simply a part of a larger conflict between God and Satan. It increased the saints' resolve: If the persecution became so intense that it resulted in death, they would be so much better off, given what they had to look forward to. The graphic descriptions of God's personal visit to the earth to correct all the wrongs, to punish all the wicked, and to create a radically new world encouraged the saints to be patient: The Lamb will once again stand on Mount Zion, and every knee will bow in adoration. All of this was a challenge to **ethical purity** for the things of this world are temporal and tainted by sin. Those who remain faithful will eventually be honored with the glory of the new heaven and earth.

## How to Interpret Apocalyptic Literature

The apocalyptic genre has been subjected to some of the most fallacious interpretations imaginable, largely because Christians are often not careful to understand it as intended and as originally heard. Any portion of Scripture divorced from its primary culture and the intent of the author is a homeless child wandering the streets, vulnerable to violent abuses.

Contrary to the practice of some interpreters, the meaning of a text hinges on what it meant when it was written (not on what it may at first glance seem to mean today). Until we become students of the biblical world and the mind-set of that era, we will err in our understanding of what the Bible intends to reveal. This does not revoke, however, the Bible's relevance for today. It simply indicates that the present significance of a text grows out of what it meant originally. There are essential principles of interpretation to

guide contemporary readers through the special characteristics of the apocalyptic genre.<sup>13</sup>

### Guidelines for Interpretation

1. *Study biblical apocalyptic in the light of apocalyptic ways of thinking in the ancient world.* Apocalyptic is a unique genre with specific codes and ways of communicating, but it was not a genre unique to the Bible. Apocalyptic ways of envisioning things were very common in the biblical world near the end of the Old Testament and through the time of the New Testament. Thus, understanding the biblical examples of apocalyptic within the scope of non-biblical examples is essential.

2. *Read apocalyptic in view of a context of crisis.* People frustrated to the point of despair were the expected hearers of apocalyptic, and authors sought ways to communicate encouragement for them to withstand the torrent of tribulation and to stand tall in the faith.

3. *Do not look for something in apocalyptic that it does not intend to disclose.* The function of an apocalyptic text is the key to understanding it. Though apocalyptic authors do have something important to communicate, it is more hope for the future than information about the future. Since the meaning of a passage is closely tied to the impact that the passage is designed to have on the readers, apocalyptic is generally not a chronological account of the future but a literary shock treatment of bold and graphic images to take our attention away from the problems we currently face and give us hope that God will win a resounding victory over all evil.

4. *Expect apocalyptic to be full of metaphorical language.* Because the apocalyptic genre is intensely literary—with an abundance of figures of speech such as metaphor, hyperbole, and

13. For other helpful discussions of hermeneutical principles for apocalyptic, see D. S. Russell, *Prophecy and the Apocalyptic Dream: Protest and Promise* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994): 94–121; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 231–45; William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 311–12; and Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 221–32.

irony—readers must look carefully at the literary techniques of the authors. The compelling scenes and images are intended to draw readers into the story so that they can experience it like a child enraptured in a fairy tale. Apocalyptic is intentionally vivid in how it describes things.

*5. Do not attempt to identify the significance of every detail in apocalyptic.* The metaphorical language of apocalyptic often cannot be deciphered, partially because its language is so unique that other uses in Scripture of similar motifs may be of little value for understanding apocalyptic. Furthermore, the images within a single apocalypse may be fluid, such that the meaning of a motif varies within the same piece of literature. This may leave the significance of some portions of an apocalypse a mystery. And that is the way it should be: If we could solve all the puzzles of apocalyptic, it would defraud the genre of the mystery that is intended to surround it.

*6. Keep all options open for how apocalyptic predictions will be fulfilled.* The subject matter of apocalyptic is heaven and the future, both areas unknown in human experience. Because of the inherent limitations of human language to describe something that humans have never experienced, the descriptions of creatures, scenes, and people of heaven or of the future may not be the same in reality as they are in the visionary literature of apocalyptic.

*7. Seek to understand the main point of an apocalyptic text.* Apocalyptic tends to be impressionistic, more like an abstract painting which communicates an overall impression. If you stand too close to the painting trying to examine the detail of the artist's work, you fail to grasp what the picture is intended to present. Likewise, correct interpretation of apocalyptic seeks to understand the big picture—the meaning of the whole rather than the meaning of the parts. Sometimes the details in apocalyptic are for dramatic effect; there may be no significance other than how the imagery of the scene is enhanced by the details. The details in apocalyptic must not be seen as allegorical in the sense that each detail has a corresponding reality.

*8. Appreciate the full and rich symbolism of apocalyptic.* Once apocalyptic is correctly understood, readers will be freed to enjoy the beautiful imagery used to describe heaven and the future.

Though the terminology of apocalyptic often denotes something different from what those same words may mean in their normal sense—the description may be more symbolic than literal—nevertheless, every detail in apocalyptic is significant in portraying God's perspective on things to come.

### The Judgment of Gog

Ezekiel 38–39, a prophecy concerning Gog, provides an example for applying the principles of interpretation for “drawing out the meaning” of biblical apocalyptic.<sup>14</sup> In the broad sense, Ezekiel 38–39 is prophetic literature, though with clear apocalyptic characteristics. This illustrates the most likely beginning of all apocalyptic literature, originating in prophecy. Some students of apocalyptic classify this pericope as an example of transitional apocalyptic—standing midway in the development from prophecy to full-blown apocalyptic.<sup>15</sup>

Metaphorical symbolism is not so highly developed in these two chapters of Ezekiel as in Daniel, or in later apocalyptic literature, yet there are a number of clear metaphorical images. The character of Gog, the seven-year burning of his weapons (39:9), the seven-month search for bones (39:15), and the gathering of beasts and birds to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the fallen enemy and his horses (39:17–20) are examples of expressions which have an element of mystery. The repetition of similar sets or cycles of prophecies obviated by such expressions as “prophesy and say” (Ezek. 38:2, 14; 39:1), “son of man” (Ezek. 38:2,14; 39:1,17, NASB), and “thus says the LORD God” (Ezek. 38:3, 10, 14, 17; 39:1, 17, 25, NASB) are also evidences of apocalyptic genre.

Contextually, Ezekiel 38–39 forms the future and final judgment on the heathen nations, in the guise of Gog, for the purpose of establishing a restored Israel safely in the land (see Ezek. 37). Having

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14. Dr. Patterson regularly assigned a paper in his Major Prophets class to be entitled: “Apocalypticism and the Prophet Ezekiel.” When I took this class in the spring of 1981, I instead prepared a study on the New Covenant in Ezekiel—a paper which he graciously received. I am thankful for this opportunity to fulfill his course requirement even if it is somewhat late! (MGA)

15. Stone, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 385–87.

been thus established, the prophet relates final details pertaining to the eschatological temple, worship of God, and final division of the Holy Land (see Ezek. 40–48).

The controlling purpose or “big idea” of the passage is the hope of security for those God has “resurrected” or restored (see Ezek. 37). Despite all the hardships that life might bring, with true apocalyptic character, God demonstrates his sovereign control (38:4), suppresses all evil forces working against his predetermined plan (38:22), comforts his people with a knowledge of himself (39:22), and promises that he will never abandon his redeemed people (39:29).

As noted above, these two chapters are clearly constructed around the repetition of similar sets or cycles of prophecies. God’s command to Ezekiel (son of man) to prophesy forms the major divisions, while the formula “thus says the LORD God” introduces subordinate discussions or scenes.

### The Word of the Lord to Ezekiel Concerning the Future Foe (38–39)

- Prophecy #1: The Foe moves against God’s people/Two perspectives (38:2–13)
- Scene a: I (God) will bring you against my people (38:3–9)
- Scene b: You (Gog) have devised this evil against my people (38:10–13)
- Prophecy #2: The Foe is judged/God is made known in judgment (38:14–23)
- Scene a: You (Gog) will attack in the “last days” (38:14–16)
- Scene b: I (God) have announced judgment in the “former days” (38:17–23)
- Prophecy #3: The Foe is destroyed/Trial brings blessing (39:1–16)
- Scene a: I (God) will judge as I have spoken (39:1–8)
- Scene b: God’s people are blessed in the aftermath of trial (39:9–16)
- Prophecy #4: The Foe is sacrificed/God does not forsake his people (39:17–29)
- Scene a: God’s people are satiated with God’s supply (39:17–24)
- Scene b: I (God) will never hide from those who are truly mine (39:25–29)

This four-part structure reveals a literary masterpiece whose conception clearly rivals the most ingenious of present-day writers. In the first scene of prophecy #1, Ezekiel examines God's initiation of Gog's unprovoked attack (see 38:3–9). The second scene probes the same incident from the point of view of Gog himself, as he devises "an evil plan" against an "unprotected" people (38:10–13). Ezekiel would have us ponder the paradox of events in our lives; none of them are to be separated from either God's design or from human responsibility.

Prophecy #2 reviews the attack upon God's people from Gog's perspective, an event now revealed to be reserved for the "last days" (38:14–16). Plowing new ground, the second scene of prophecy #2 reveals that indeed God had spoken in "former days" through his prophets concerning Gog's attack on Israel. God is not caught unaware. Indeed he has already given notice of the attack which is yet to occur.

Verse 17 also makes it clear that, for Ezekiel, Gog is a metaphor for "enemy." We miss the point in searching for the present geographical descendant of this mysterious character. The message declares that these enemies of God's people will be judged (see 38:17–23). Natural catastrophes form the apocalyptic agents of his judgment (see 38:19–22) for the now clear purpose that the nations "will know that I am the LORD" (38:23).

Prophecy #3 again reviews the judgment of God on Gog (see 39:1–8) and underlines the purpose stated in the previous scene (39:6–7). In the latter part of prophecy #3—here introduced by "then"—an astounding fact is revealed: The trials of God's people bring incredible blessing in their wake (39:9–16). Instead of dying under implements of war, they are now sustained by them. Instead of becoming spoil, God's people take spoil. In an ironic twist (especially evident in the Hebrew), Gog is given a place in Israel (39:11)—a place of burial! God is a master of transforming our trials into blessing.

In a now familiar pattern, prophecy #4 returns to emphasize the second scene of prophecy #3 as God's people have their needs satisfied by the spoils of war (see 39:17–24). The metaphorical imagery is constructed of components unique to the biblical text. God is pictured as sacrificing the foe to his people, filling them

with the fat and blood—elements which are elsewhere reserved for God alone (see Lev. 3:17; 17:6). In the second scene, Ezekiel closes the pericope with a pointed play on words. Having gathered his exiled people to their land, God promises that “I will leave (*’otîr*) none of them [in exile] any longer. And I will not hide (*’astîr*) My face from them any longer, for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel” (39:28b–29, NASB). God will never abandon his regenerate people.

The principles of interpretation suggested above have rescued the message of this passage from a number of unhelpful rabbit trails (Does Gog stand for Russia?) and troubling questions (Can modern weapons be burned as fuel?). The expectation of metaphor in apocalyptic literature underlines the graphic nature of these elements. The rich irony (or otherwise biblical impossibility!) presented in the picture of God’s sacrificing the enemy to Israel and feeding his people forbidden fat—and quenching their thirst with banned blood—presents a shocking portrait speaking of both great judgment upon the godless and miraculous supply for the elect. These bold images draw the reader into the composition in a way that a simple statement of encouragement could never do. Characteristic of apocalyptic, Ezekiel gives his prophecy in a way that captivates the imagination.

Ezekiel’s message, proclaimed to a people still ensnared in the bonds of Babylonian captivity, is one of hope. Although clearly declaring that the future of God’s people included additional trials, the passage emphasizes that God is in total control and will bring ultimate judgment upon his enemies and glorious blessing upon his people.

## Conclusion

The unique and often mystifying characteristics of apocalyptic literature can lead interpreters to two equally problematic conclusions. On the one hand, it would appear at first glance that the crucial task is the interpretation of symbols and the application of passages to current events—all this in a well-meant attempt to prove the Bible to be as up-to-date as this evening’s newscast. Changes in the political arena, such as in the Middle-East and the former Soviet Union, have spawned dozens of books and broad-

casts explaining how prophecy is being fulfilled and that the end of the world is near. Similarly in decades past, the war to end all wars, the atrocities of Nazi Germany and policies of the Catholic Church fueled a similar industry. On the other hand, some students of the Word simply throw up hands in despair of understanding such outlandish passages of apocalyptic and move on to texts which on the surface appear to be more applicable to “where we live.” Obviously either approach should be described as shrinking “from declaring . . . the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27, NASB).

The genius of apocalyptic literature is the message of hope. In the face of perverse evil God’s people are being exhorted to persevere to the end. For although the game may seem lost—or for the more optimistic, tied up—we are assured that God is preparing to intervene and judge evil by supernatural means. Biblical apocalyptic is a wake-up call to a most refreshing eternal perspective: God will bring a permanent solution to sin’s evil effects, and we will be there to enjoy it!

### Recommended Reading

Collins, John J., ed. *Apocalypse: Towards the Morphology of a Genre*. Semeia 14. 1979. This collection of articles deals with the questions of definition and description of apocalyptic literature in the canon and various Near Eastern sources.

———. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*. New York: Crossroad, 1984. This volume is an indispensable analysis of the full range of apocalyptic literature composed by the Jews. Form, authorship, date, and content of each apocalypse are discussed in detail.

———. “Apocalyptic Literature.” In *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters*, edited by R. A. Kraft and G. W. E. Nickelsburg. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986. This chapter is a review of research on Jewish apocalyptic and an assessment of the present status of scholarship. It includes a very helpful bibliography.

Collins, John J. and James H. Charlesworth, eds. *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies Since the Uppsala Colloquium*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991. This collection of eight essays by lead-

ing scholars in the field of Jewish apocalypticism reflects the current status of research on apocalyptic in the biblical world.

Hanson, Paul D. "Apocalyptic Literature." In *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, edited by Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker. Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1985. This chapter summarizes the problems of definition, time of origin, and sources of apocalyptic, with specific focus on apocalyptic texts in the Old Testament. Helpful bibliography is included.

———. *Old Testament Apocalyptic*. Interpreting Biblical Texts. Nashville: Abingdon, 1987. This overview of Old Testament apocalyptic is written for a general audience of serious Bible interpreters. Special attention is given to the significance of apocalyptic for today, with specific examples of apocalyptic passages and their relevance.

Hellholm, David, ed. *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983. The wide-ranging papers collected here were presented at a conference that has become a watershed in the study of apocalyptic. Many of these papers are still very important.

Hewitt, C. M. Kempton. "Guidelines to the Interpretation of Daniel and Revelation." In *A Guide to Biblical Prophecy*, edited by C. E. Armerding and W. W. Gasque, 101–16. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1989. Written from an evangelical viewpoint, this chapter is a balanced discussion of how to interpret Daniel and Revelation since they are apocalyptic. Other chapters in this book are also valuable.

Morris, Leon. *Apocalyptic*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972. This brief but classic introduction to apocalyptic surveys the characteristics of the genre and the importance of the genre for biblical studies.

Reddish, Mitchell G., ed. *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1990. This anthology of apocalyptic literature—intended as a reader to introduce students to the genre—is a very handy collection of the principal forms of apocalyptic, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian apocalypses.

Rowland, Christopher. *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*. New York: Crossroad, 1982. This thorough analysis of apocalypticism—with special attention to rabbinic and early Christian apocalyptic—focuses on apocalyptic revelation of the mysteries of the four realms of the universe.

Russell, D. S. *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992. This solid introduction to apocalyptic summarizes most of the important questions about apocalyptic. The discussion of the various ways to define apocalyptic is especially helpful.

———. *Prophecy and the Apocalyptic Dream: Protest and Promise*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994. This popular introduction to apocalyptic is written for Christians who are perplexed by Daniel and Revelation and the many confusing explanations of future events. It includes a helpful discussion of principles of interpretation.

Stone, M. E. "Apocalyptic Literature." In *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*. CRINT 2 edited by M. E. Stone, 383–441. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984. This survey of the apocalyptic genre is a thorough discussion of common features in apocalyptic and the relationship of apocalyptic to wisdom and prophecy.