

# THE GENRE OF REVELATION

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## Introduction

The twentieth century has seen the advent of many new fields of study, one of them being genre criticism. It has now become commonplace to classify books of the Bible according to their dominant literary genre, and this has affected how these books have been interpreted. Concerning the book of Revelation, the recent trend has been to classify its literary genre as “apocalyptic.” Bringing this preunderstanding of literary genre to the Bible has affected the interpretation of Revelation more so than other book of the Bible. Thomas notes, “Genre classification has affected how scholars have interpreted various NT books, particularly the last book of the NT.”<sup>1</sup> All agree that Revelation contains apocalyptic, prophetic, and epistolary elements, but some see the apocalyptic elements as so dominant so as to merit giving Revelation an overall apocalyptic understanding. Some take this apocalyptic preunderstanding of Revelation so far so as to promote a non-literal or allegorical interpretation of the book. This is justified by the apparent similarities between Revelation and Jewish apocalyptic literature. No doubt these similarities exist. And indeed, if John’s Apocalypse is cut from the same cloth as these other Jewish apocalypses, then this might be a valid basis for a default non-literal or even allegorical interpretation of Revelation. This is the path that often leads to preterism, historicism, and idealism, while a predominantly literal approach to Revelation leads to futurism.

But is this a valid classification? Is the genre of Revelation really apocalyptic? Just how similar is John’s work to other apocalyptic writings of his day? On what basis does one classify Revelation’s genre? And what are the implications of the genre of Revelation on its

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 323.

interpretation? This paper aims to answer these questions. To begin, a proper definition and understanding of apocalyptic genre will be given. Then the similarities and differences between Revelation and apocalypticism can be examined. This will be followed by an evaluation of Revelation's genre and some concluding implications of its genre on interpretation.

### **Evidence of Genre Override**

Before delving into the characteristics of apocalyptic genre, it is worthwhile to display the importance of this topic by showing just how many scholars and commentators use Revelation's supposedly apocalyptic genre to justify a non-literal or allegorical interpretation. These commentators practice "genre override"—they allow the apparently apocalyptic genre of Revelation to override normal grammatical-historical interpretation. The fact that this "override" occurs before or underneath the interpretation process significantly biases their interpretation of the text. Whether or not these men are justified in this approach will be answered later.

As expected, many of those who use Revelation's apocalyptic genre to justify a non-literal interpretation hold to an idealist view of the book. Sam Hamstra Jr. heavily relies on this presupposition in his interpretation of Revelation. As he says, "You approach apocalyptic literature differently than you would a letter or one of the Gospels. In Revelation words take the place of pigments and brushes to create a portrait designed to visualize great principles, not particular incidents. Resisting the temptation to dissect the portrait described in each vision, you let the vision as a whole impress you."<sup>2</sup> So because Revelation is apocalyptic, by default individual words and details supposedly lose their significance. In the next paragraph he says,

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<sup>2</sup> Sam Hamstra Jr., "An Idealist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. by Stanley N. Gundry and C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 98.

“In times like these, you need a word from the Lord. You don’t need a history lesson of the militant church of either the first or last century. You don’t need a prophetic vision of a day you will never experience in this life.”<sup>3</sup> According to Hamstra, the overall message of Revelation, in true apocalyptic fashion, is not really concerned with the future, but with the present. Thus genre biases him to a non-futuristic outlook from the beginning. Whether this is valid or not remains to be seen, but his is a case in point of genre overriding one’s interpretation of Revelation. A lengthy quote from Mounce sheds more light on the idealist approach to Revelation:

The idealist approach continues the allegorical interpretation which dominated exegesis throughout the medieval period and still finds favor with those inclined to minimize the historical character of the coming consummation. It is supported by the obvious fact that Revelation employs symbols as its major literary device. Its weakness lies in the fact that it denies to the book any specific historical fulfillment. From the idealist’s point of view the symbols portray an ever present conflict: there exists no necessary consummation of the historical process.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that one gets to an idealist view of Revelation by presupposing an apocalyptic genre, which in turn leads to a non-literal interpretation throughout. Thomas sums up this approach, saying, “This interpretation leans heavily on the conclusion that Revelation is basically apocalyptic and uses the allegorical approach that became characteristic of the Middle Ages.”<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, as alluded to by Hamstra above, some use the supposedly apocalyptic genre of Revelation to justify seeing a present-day or timeless-symbolic interpretation of John’s vision, while precluding a futuristic interpretation. This is because of the association made between Revelation and Jewish apocalypses, which were not concerned with the future, but with

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 330.

the present day. Calkins reveals how his preunderstanding of Revelation as a Jewish apocalypse shades his interpretation. First, regarding Daniel, since all Jewish apocalyptic literature has a deeper meaning, Calkins feels justified in allegorizing the book, especially chapters 7–12. Evaluating Daniel as a Jewish apocalypse, he then says, “The point to be born in mind, however, is that this prophecy in the book of Daniel is all focused on immediate historical events.”<sup>6</sup> Since Revelation is so similar to Daniel, and is grouped with the Jewish apocalypses, the same conclusion is drawn. Revelation, just like Daniel, is an apocalyptic work which speaks to the present and therefore any predictive elements in Revelation are to be interpreted spiritually to speak to the present situation, not future events. In other words, Revelation’s apparently apocalyptic genre precludes a futuristic interpretation, because none of the other Jewish apocalypses were truly forward looking. Calkins is another example of how one’s genre preunderstanding overrides grammatical-historical interpretation.

Assuming Revelation to be apocalyptic can affect one’s view of the millennium as well. Poythress explains what is at stake: “One’s decision about the literary genre of Rev 20:1–6 is one of the most crucial factors in its interpretation... This question of genre is closely related to how we distinguish between symbolic and literal description. The literary genre of Revelation guides readers in deciding what in Revelation is intended as symbol and what is intended as a literal or straightforward description of an historical event.”<sup>7</sup> This is precisely the issue at hand. Poythress goes on to favor an apocalyptic view of Revelation’s genre, which leads him to a non-literal understanding of Revelation 20:1–6. Regarding amillennialists, Roy Zuck points out how

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond Calkins, *The Social Message of the Book of Revelation* (New York, NY: The Womans Press, 1920), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6,” *JETS* 36, no. 1 (March 1993): 41.

they argue that “prophecy can be spiritualized because it contains much figurative and symbolic language, and that the great teachings of the Bible are spiritual, not earthly.”<sup>8</sup> Keep in mind that he is including apocalyptic writing when he refers to prophecy. His comment would obviously apply to Revelation, since it is full of figurative and symbolic language. O. T. Allis, an amillennialist, evidences this spiritualizing mindset as he says, “God is a Spirit; the most precious teachings of the Bible are spiritual; and these spiritual and heavenly realities are often set forth under the form of earthly objects and human relationships.”<sup>9</sup> No wonder Zuck observes how “many amillennialists reason that since Revelation is a highly symbolic book, most if not all prophetic literature is to be taken nonliterally, that is, in a ‘spiritual’ sense.”<sup>10</sup> Amillennialists have a predisposition to the “spiritual” understanding of Scripture and this is supported and justified by the supposedly apocalyptic genre of Revelation.

The above quotes are just a small sampling of how many writers use the apocalyptic genre of Revelation to override a literal or grammatical-historical understanding of the book. They justify their non-literal or allegorical interpretation of the book because apocalypses are intended to convey non-literal material. Additionally, since Revelation is so similar to Jewish apocalypses, any futuristic reading is rejected from the start. At this point, the question one must ask after seeing such genre override is whether or not it is justified. Are these men correct in their approach to Revelation? Is Revelation truly an apocalyptic work that merits a non-literal or

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<sup>8</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1991), 237.

<sup>9</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 245.

allegorical interpretation? This will become much clearer after first studying the chief characteristics of apocalyptic genre.

### **Characterizing Apocalyptic Genre**

Part of the confusion surrounding the genre of Revelation as apocalyptic is the lack of consensus concerning a definition of apocalyptic literature. Few sources agree entirely as to which features of structure, style, content, and function comprise the apocalyptic genre. Nevertheless, the main basis for apocalyptic genre classification is comparisons with extrabiblical literature of the time. A brief summary of the origin of this unique literary style will help one understand its truly essential characteristics.

The word “apocalypse” means “disclosure” or “revelation” and comes from the first word of the book of Revelation. However, apocalyptic literature was established long before Revelation was written. After Israel’s return from exile, the nation as a whole no longer went astray to serve pagan gods. Their time in exile solidified their identity and they returned to upholding a strict monotheism. As the centuries progressed, Israel would develop sects that advocated a strict adherence to the Law, the violation of which was seen to bring on their exile in the first place. Nevertheless, even though Israel seemingly repented and followed God after the exile, the voice of the prophets ceased. Additionally, the times were still evil. God’s Messiah didn’t come and God’s kingdom didn’t come, but instead pagan nations continued to rule over Israel. The nation continued to suffer persecution, especially under rulers such as Antiochus Epiphanes IV. During this time, no longer could the Jews blame their suffering on their own faithlessness. In their minds, they were being faithful in their devotion to Yahweh and blameless in their observance of the Law. This left them without an explanation for their disfavor, but an explanation was needed.

Hence apocalyptic writings were spawned. George Ladd writes, “To fill this vacuum, apocalyptic writings appeared between 200 BC and AD 100, which purported to bring revelations from God explaining the reason for the prevalence of evil, disclosing heavenly secrets, and promising the imminent coming of His kingdom and the salvation of the afflicted.”<sup>11</sup> Books like 1 Enoch, Jubilees, the Assumption of Moses, 4 Ezra, 2 Esdras, the Apocalypse of Baruch, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs were all written during this time. These works serve as the basis for the apocalyptic genre. In studying these Jewish apocalyptic sources, it becomes evidence that apocalypticism was both a literary form and a religious outlook. It was both a mode of communication and also a message to be communicated. Because of this, the word “apocalyptic” can be used to refer to the literature characterized by these writings or to the eschatology found in these writings. These two senses of apocalyptic are both useful in understanding the genre, but must be kept distinct. The defining characteristics of these two facets of apocalyptic can now be discussed.

### Apocalyptic Literature

Most agree on five primary characteristics of apocalyptic literature. When applicable for a given characteristic, the prophetic approach will be given along with the differences that characterize apocalyptic and make it distinct.

1. It is revelatory

The central content of prophetic revelation was the will of God, and the means of revelation was the word of God. Future judgment and salvation were foretold by the prophets so

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<sup>11</sup> George E. Ladd, “Apocalyptic,” in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. by J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 1:43.

as to impact people in the present. Also, whereas prophets sometimes received revelation through dreams and visions (Isa 6; Ezek 1; Jer 24), these were not central. “Dreams and visions were never an end in themselves, but were accompanied by an explanatory, accosting word.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast, apocalyptic literature was seen to fill in the revelatory gaps of the silent prophetic voice. The focus was no longer on the word of God, but on the apocalyptist’s vision. God no longer spoke through a prophet, but instead a seer learned entirely through dreams, visions, and heavenly journeys. He discovered the secrets of the hidden world, the solution to the problem of evil, and the coming of the kingdom through these visions. Topics of revelation varied widely. The one thing in common was that these things could not be known naturally, but had to come by special revelation. Apocalyptic writers could not say like the prophets “Thus says the Lord.” They made no claim to direct experience. They were not the source of their own information, but rather looked to an angel for revelation.

## 2. It is imitative

Whereas the prophets spoke of their own genuine experiences, the apocalyptists did not. Few accept that any of their writings describe real visionary experiences. Instead, they were imitative literary devices. The authors used this genre to convey a vivid message. Thus, dreams and visions became a form of literature to convey a message. The chief archetype for this literature was the book of Daniel. Some say that all apocalyptic writings derive from Daniel in some sense.

## 3. It is pseudonymous

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<sup>12</sup> George E. Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols., ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 1:152.

Although there are a few anonymous prophets, none are seen as traditionally pseudonymous. Most used their real names as they were commissioned messengers for God. Not so with the apocalyptists. These writers knew that there were no more inspired prophets, so they placed their revelations in the mouths of famous OT saints. This was done to give their messages a sense of authority and validation. Since no new prophets were rising up, they looked to already established prophets to gain a hearing. This explains the usage of names like Adam, Moses, Isaiah, Baruch, Solomon, and Ezra. Jewish-Christian apocalyptists used the names of Peter, Paul, and Thomas. Morris comments, “The prophet stood forth boldly as he was and spoke in the name of his God. But the person of the apocalyptist was suppressed. He did not stand forth like the prophet but merged himself with the past hero whose words he purported to give.”<sup>13</sup> Some would make pseudonymity one of the top characteristics of the apocalyptic literary genre.

#### 4. It is symbolic

Surely the prophets used symbolism. In fact, in the time right before and after the exile, symbolism in the prophets became more common. For instance, “The visions of Daniel had employed symbolism in a new way to outline the course of history and its great redemptive crises.”<sup>14</sup> Yet symbolism in the prophets was never pervasive, and it was always relative simple and uncomplicated (Isa 6:6–7; Amos 7:1–8:3). The apocalyptic writers built off of this though. “In the use of symbolism, Daniel goes beyond the other prophets and introduces a usage that is imitated by later apocalypses. He uses symbolism to represent events in history... This device

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<sup>13</sup> Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 53.

<sup>14</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic,” in *NBD*, 1:43.

is greatly elaborated in subsequent apocalypses.”<sup>15</sup> So whereas symbolism was a tool in the bag of the prophets, it became the primary mode of communication for the apocalyptists. Symbolism became pervasive, extreme, and even grotesque. Here one can also further see the imitative element of apocalyptic literature.

#### 5. It is pseudo-predictive

The prophets took their stand in the present and proclaimed future historical and eschatological events. Theirs was a predictive prophecy. The apocalyptists on the other hand, in placing their words in the mouths of the prophets, spoke alleged prophecies of the future from the perspective of the OT, but from their own perspective, were merely retracing descriptions of past history couched in pseudo-prophecy. “The apocalyptists often took their stand in the distant past” and “often rewrote the history of Israel from the time of the alleged author to his own time, but cast it in the form of prophecy.”<sup>16</sup> Put another way, “the prophets foretold the future that should arise out of the present, while the apocalyptists foretold the future that should break into the present.”<sup>17</sup> The “prophecies” of the apocalyptists always went up to their present day, at which point the end or kingdom of God was predicted. All apocalyptic prophecy was *ex eventu*, or after the fact. Thus from their own perspective, they weren’t really concerned with their future, but with their present.

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<sup>15</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *ISBE*, 1:153.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:152.

<sup>17</sup> H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic: A Study of Jewish and Christian Apocalypses from Daniel to Revelation*, 2nd ed. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947), 35.

## Apocalyptic Eschatology

Whereas apocalyptic literature relates mostly to the form or presentation of the work, apocalyptic eschatology relates mostly to the content or worldview of the work. Most also agree on five primary characteristics of apocalyptic eschatology. Again, differences from prophetic eschatology will be highlighted where appropriate.

### 1. It is dualistic

Apocalyptic thought is dominated by a dualism between good and evil, God and Satan. “Evil and good are constantly set over against one another, as are evil spirits and good spirits.”<sup>18</sup> This went hand in hand with a dualism between the present age and the age to come. The present age was so thoroughly sinful and evil that it could not be renewed or restored. Only a direct act of God could overthrow it and deliver God’s people from evil. Hence the people looked to the age to come where God would replace the current evil age with a future age of God’s kingdom. Morris notes, “We should also be clear that apocalyptic dualism is always seen within the framework of a basic monotheism.”<sup>19</sup> There was a real dualism, but it wasn’t absolute; God always wins over evil. This dualistic thinking was not unknown to the prophets; “this apocalyptic dualism is a development of the theology of the prophets, who were conscious of the contrast between God’s ideal world and the actual world of nature and history.”<sup>20</sup> However the apocalyptists definitely took dualism to the next level. Isaiah, Amos, and Zephaniah, for instance, all presented this dualistic eschatology, but they also saw a time of

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<sup>18</sup> Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *ISBE*, 1:153.

salvation and restoration for a remnant of Israel, where even the Gentiles would also be converted and worship God. This is absent from the apocalyptists.

## 2. It is deterministic

The apocalyptic writings evidence a very deterministic view of the world and history. The coming of the new age depended entirely on God. Man could do nothing to quicken or delay this coming age. They believed that “the evil age must run its course and the kingdom must await the end of this age.”<sup>21</sup> Certain times or ages had to elapse before the kingdom of God came. Strangely, even though they held to such a determinism, God’s sovereignty was not emphasized. God Himself was pictured as also waiting for the passing of the ages. Even so, most apocalyptic writings culminated in a final and decisive victory of God and His people. “Apocalyptic thought was dominated by the conviction that, no matter how bad circumstances might be at any given moment, God and his people would ultimately triumph over their enemies.”<sup>22</sup> This deterministic facet of apocalypticism led to another feature of the genre—labeling of ages. “A feature of the apocalyptic approach is the use of great historical epochs associated often with the use of numbers.”<sup>23</sup> Examples include Daniel’s 70 weeks and a 7,000 year period of human history.

## 3. It is pessimistic

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<sup>21</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic,” in *NBD*, 1:44.

<sup>22</sup> David E. Aune, “Apocalyptic,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2 vols., ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1:122.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 48.

Another characteristic of apocalyptic eschatology is its pessimism. It was certainly optimistic about the end of history, of the ultimate triumph of God in the age to come, but it was entirely pessimistic about the present age. In a sense of despair, the solution to the problem of evil was thrown entirely to the future, while in the present nothing but evil reigned. “God had withdrawn His help from the righteous and the problem of evil was a complete enigma apart from the coming of the new age.”<sup>24</sup> The general view was that things had to get much worse before they got better in the end. This led them to lose all sense of God’s activity in history. The blessings of God’s kingdom could not be experienced in this age; God had abandoned this age to suffering and evil. Ladd explains the situation that really shows how the dualistic, deterministic, and pessimistic elements of apocalyptic eschatology blend together:

Prophetic eschatology expected the kingdom of God to arise out of history and to be an earthly kingdom within history. However, when this historical hope was not realized, the Jews came to despair of history and to expect the kingdom of God to come from outside of history—i.e., directly from God—to involve a cosmic catastrophe, and to issue in a kingdom so different from earthly experience that it could only be described as a kingdom ‘beyond history.’<sup>25</sup>

This kingdom that was “beyond history” is what the apocalyptists longed for, leading them to show little concern or hope for present history.

#### 4. It is ethically passive

The prophets were not ethically passive. They announced a future judgment upon Israel and urged the nation to repent in the present. The kingdom would come only for a righteous remnant. “The prophets were not interested in the future for its own sake, however, but only for its impact upon the present. They predicted future judgment and salvation in order that, in light

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<sup>24</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic,” in *NBD*, 1:44.

<sup>25</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *ISBE*, 1:151.

of that future, they might confront Israel with the will of God.”<sup>26</sup> The apocalyptic writers were different though, in that they didn’t announce God’s judgments on His people. They believed that Israel was righteous before God after the exile, though still persecuted, and that there was no explanation for the evil they suffered. They did not see the problem of their day as sin and therefore there was no need for national repentance. Most were strict legalists, so no attention was paid to the ethical commands. Ethical exhortation was gone because there was no sense of sinfulness. The apocalyptists “were interested in consoling and sustaining the righteous remnant rather than in castigating the nominally religious.”<sup>27</sup>

##### 5. It is historically unconcerned

Finally, the apocalyptists were historically unconcerned in their eschatological outlook. In other words, they saw no connection between history and eschatology. The prophets did see a tension between the immediate historical future and the more distant eschatological future. In the immediate future, they often proclaim historical judgment on Israel. Beyond this historical judgment though comes the eschatological day of the Lord and a future judgment, followed by restoration and redemption. “God will judge His people for their sins in a historical judgment, but He will finally redeem them in the kingdom of God.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the prophets were concerned with the nation’s role in the progress of human history. What happened in the present and near historical future mattered to the prophets, although the distant eschatological future is what they really longed for. Not so with the apocalyptists; they lost this tension. They became historically

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:155.

<sup>27</sup> Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *ISBE*, 1:153.

unconcerned with the workings of present and future human history, because this present evil age was destined for disaster. They could not understand any present historical judgment because they believed Israel was not apostate, but faithful. They could not comprehend their continued persecution, destruction of the temple, scattering, being ruled by Gentiles, etc. “The only solution offered is that God will yet act to rectify the evil of the present. The age will finally come to its end, and God will inaugurate the new age of righteousness. However, this final redemptive act has no bearing upon the present.”<sup>29</sup> Another writer adds, “The apocalyptists put their emphasis on the next world. In that world, not this, God’s purposes would be worked out fully.”<sup>30</sup> So the apocalyptic writings evidence a certain detachment from the matters of the present age, looking forward for the age to come. This characteristic is of course closely related to the pessimistic outlook of the apocalyptists.

### **Comparing Revelation with Apocalyptic Genre**

In this section, the similarities and differences between Revelation and apocalyptic genre will be discussed. Comments relating to the final evaluation of Revelation’s genre will be put off until the next section.

#### **Similarities**

Of the many categories of apocalyptic literature and eschatology listed above, Revelation shows similarities with apocalyptic genre in its revelatory, symbolic, dualistic, and deterministic nature. Much like apocalyptic works, Revelation’s primary mode of revealing information is

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>30</sup> Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 44.

through visions, dreams, and heavenly journeys. There is a shared emphasis on angels and revelation made through heavenly beings. Revelation is also highly symbolic. In fact, this is agreed to be the greatest similarity between Revelation and apocalyptic literature, so much so that some classify Revelation as apocalyptic on this basis alone. Revelation is full of intense, extensive, and bizarre symbolism that has much in common with apocalyptic symbolism. In addition, Revelation also shares a sense of apocalypticism's dualism between good and evil, God and Satan. The contrast between the present age and the age to come found even in Jesus' and Paul's teaching is also present in John's. John clearly has in mind a future age that is distinct from the present age in many ways, one which will be inaugurated by the direct intervention of God. Finally, Revelation has a sense of determinism to it that is similar to that of the apocalyptists. The events of the end are lined up, they are determined by God, and no intervention by man can change this. God will achieve ultimate victory over Satan and evil in the end, and God's people must simply bear their suffering for the present. Mounce sums up the similarities between Revelation and apocalyptic well: "The extensive use of symbolism, the vision as a major instrument of revelation, concentration on the close of this age and the dramatic inauguration of the age to come, the unveiling of the spiritual order lying behind and determining the course of events in history, the use of common apocalyptic motifs—all combine to justify the application of the term apocalyptic to the book of Revelation."<sup>31</sup>

However, regarding these few similarities, one must ask whether or not they truly merit an identification of Revelation as an apocalyptic work. According to David Hill, "Revelation shows its indebtedness to the apocalyptic world of ideas. But do these features make the book as

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<sup>31</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, 23.

a whole apocalyptic? Or do they form part of the apparatus of apocalyptic taken over and made to serve a purpose or intention other than that normally served by apocalyptic writing?”<sup>32</sup>

Looking at the differences between Revelation and apocalyptic genre will help answer these questions.

### Differences

When one sits down and carefully lines up the book of Revelation with other apocalyptic works, he soon notices that there are many significant differences between the two. The most noticeable differences are the lack of pseudonymity, the lack of pseudo-prophecy, the lack of pessimism, and the presence of an ethical standard.

First and foremost, as some would say, is the lack of pseudonymity in Revelation. Ladd comments, “The Revelation was written by a living author who was well known to those to whom he wrote.”<sup>33</sup> This is clearly in stark contrast with all apocalyptic works. Some, like Bruce Jones, believe that pseudonymity is the chief characteristic of apocalyptic, which would obviously imply that Revelation is no apocalyptic work. Jones insists that pseudonymity was so important to apocalyptic writers because it gave their works the sense of being written in the remote past. “In apocalyptic, the pseudonym links the present and the past in a particular way; the past is important only because it points to the present. Along with *vaticinium ex eventu* prophecy, pseudonymity says, in effect, ‘Now is the decisive time. Even the ancient heroes were talking about us.’ Appeal to the past heightens the significance of the present.”<sup>34</sup> Without this

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<sup>32</sup> David Hill, “Prophecy and Prophets in the Revelation of St. John,” *NTS* 18, no. 4 (July 1972): 402.

<sup>33</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *ISBE*, 1:152.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce W. Jones, “More about the Apocalypse as Apocalyptic,” *JBL* 87, no. 3 (Sep 1968): 326.

pseudonymity though, the author loses his “appeal to the past.” Furthermore, the emphasis on John’s direct communication with his contemporaries in his own name is a contrast with apocalypticism that cannot be ignored. “Unlike the author of any previous apocalyptic book, John says he is writing to his contemporaries directly and in his own name. The difference is too deliberate to be accidental; we are forced to the conclusion that John wants to stress the difference between his book and previous apocalyptic writing.”<sup>35</sup> This last remark is the key. John, in not using a pseudonym, is deliberately setting his work apart from the previous Jewish apocalypses. He instead places himself in the line of the OT prophets. For good reason, the lack of pseudonymity markedly sets Revelation apart from other apocalyptic literature.

Related to the lack of pseudonymity is the lack of pseudo-prophecy in Revelation. It is significant that Revelation does not use this technique, and neither does Jesus in His apocalyptic sayings for that matter. John takes his stand in his own day and boldly looks to the future, predicting historical and eschatological events to come. The apocalyptists, however, in using a pseudonym, took their stand in the past. For them, looking to the future was really just a retracing of past history. There is no such retracing of history in Revelation. John’s visions are not of past events but of “things which will take place” in the future (Rev 1:19). His prophecies are more in line with those of the OT prophets rather than the Jewish apocalyptists.

Another important difference between Revelation and apocalypticism is the lack of pessimism displayed in the former. Apocalyptic writings place no hope in the present age; their only hope is in the eschatological end, which they pray comes soon. No hope for salvation was found in the present age, nor was there to be found a solution to the problem of evil. John’s

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 327.

Apocalypse is not so pessimistic. “The pessimism which defers God’s saving activity until the End is absent. Though John depicts evil realistically, his book is fundamentally optimistic.”<sup>36</sup> Why is John’s book fundamentally optimistic? Because for John, the critical point in history is not in the future, at the end, but in the past, at the cross. The Lamb that has already been slain dominates John’s writing. God’s people conquer Satan and the problem of evil “by the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 12:11). “In Revelation, the climactic event has already occurred in the victory of the slain Lamb (ch. 5). Now, however, the Lamb’s victory is being worked out in history in the obedient suffering of his followers (12:11: 15:2).”<sup>37</sup> True, John, along with the rest of the NT, shares the view that this present age is evil (Gal 1:4) and even ruled by Satan in a sense (2 Cor 4:4). But no NT writer shares the apocalyptic pessimism about this age. Rather the heart of the gospel message itself is God’s activity within this age to bring men the blessings of His redemption. John is prevented from viewing this age pessimistically because it is in this age that God has worked through the historical Jesus of Nazareth to bring redemption. Apocalypticism knows no such present day optimism.

When it comes to placing ethical demands on God’s people, Revelation continues to differ from Jewish apocalyptic writings. The apocalyptic writers saw no need to demand repentance from God’s people, for they saw Israel as no longer faithless and disobedient to God. Their focus instead was simply to comfort God’s people in the present age in light of unexplained evil. Revelation likewise seeks to comfort God’s people as they suffer in the present age, but it sets itself in the line of prophetic works as it places many ethical demands on

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<sup>36</sup> Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 93.

<sup>37</sup> Alan Johnson, “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1981), 12:401.

God's people. Chapters 2–3, for instance, contain many stern demands for repentance (2:5, 16, 21–22; 3:3, 19). And the vision of the future found in Revelation is given to the churches in the present to spur them into action and obedience. There is even an evangelistic outlook to John's work, as he ends with an invitation to come and drink the water of life (22:17). John's goal is not to present the future as an end in itself, but rather to look to the future so as to affect the lives of God's people today.

Upon even closer examination, more differences between Revelation and apocalyptic literature and eschatology can be demonstrated, but these four are the most prevalent and agreed upon. At the very least, at this point, one should realize that he cannot simply label Revelation as apocalyptic simply because of its highly symbolic nature. This has been the default position of many as seen above. But “while there can be no doubt that Revelation shares certain characteristics common to the apocalyptic genre, it would be wrong to overlook all the ways in which it resists being placed without qualification in that category.”<sup>38</sup> One must deal with these similarities and differences between Revelation and apocalyptic genre before pigeonholing the genre of Revelation as necessarily apocalyptic.

### **Evaluating the Genre of Revelation**

Many modern commentators assume that the genre of Revelation is apocalyptic, but now that the similarities and differences between Revelation and apocalyptic have been seen, how does one evaluate the genre of revelation? Do the similarities outweigh the differences, or vice versa? Surely a case can be made for both sides—that Revelation is or is not primarily apocalyptic—but which side has the best case?

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<sup>38</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, 24.

Regarding the similarities mentioned above, clearly the extensive symbolic content of Revelation is the most significant. In this sense, the form or manner of revelation in John's Apocalypse more closely resembles the Jewish apocalypses. Some see this as enough to classify Revelation as apocalyptic. Yet this similarity relates only to the literary form of Revelation. Mounce, quoting Beckwith, notes, "The highly elaborated vision, or similar mode of revelation, is the most distinctive feature in the *form* of apocalyptic literature."<sup>39</sup> But the truly defining features of apocalyptic are not so much its literary features, but its eschatological features. "The imagery, the symbolism, was not the essence of apocalyptic thought. It was simply a device, a literary means."<sup>40</sup> It can then be said that the essence behind apocalypticism as a genre is not primarily its form of literature, for even the prophets used elaborate symbolism at times, but its theology and purpose. Contrary to somewhat popular thought, the form of John's revelations and his employment of symbolism and heavenly visions, although certainly characteristic of Jewish apocalypses, are not enough to merit classifying Revelation as apocalyptic.

Furthermore, although Revelation shares some literary features with apocalyptic, in other significant ways, it differs from the literary features of apocalyptic. John clearly presents Revelation in an epistolary format, something absent from all apocalypses. In 1:4–8, he gives an epistolary salutation with typical epistolary components—sender, addressees, greetings, and a doxology. In 22:10–21, he gives an epistolary benediction, also with typical epistolary components—postscript, a summary of the writing, and a legitimization of John as the divinely inspired author. Pate observes, "The combined effect of the prescript and the postscript, not to

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>40</sup> James Kallas, "The Apocalypse—An Apocalyptic Book?" *JBL* 86, no. 1 (Mar 1967): 70.

mention the letters to the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia, is to root Revelation in the real history of its day.”<sup>41</sup> Pate is certainly correct in his observation, namely that the epistolary genre of Revelation must be taken into account, but Pate goes wrong in applying it to the entire letter. Rather Revelation’s epistolary framework points to its occasional nature and therefore it must be understood in light of its original historical context.<sup>42</sup> The point here is that Revelation differs from apocalyptic literary form in a significant way as it is presented as an epistle to John’s contemporaries. This was never the case with apocalyptic literature.

Overall, when the literary and especially eschatological differences between Revelation and apocalyptic are summed, and when the similarities are properly understood, it quickly becomes apparent that Revelation is not an apocalyptic work. These many differences suggest that another genre identification should be considered. In fact, there is enough discontinuity between Revelation and Jewish apocalypticism to outright demand another genre classification. It should be remembered that it was the default association of Revelation with Jewish apocalypses that led to the default reading of Revelation in a non-literal or allegorical manner. With the “default” apocalyptic genre of Revelation in doubt, this interpretive scheme must also be questioned.

One final element that characterizes Revelation in contrast to apocalypses has yet to be discussed. This is perhaps the most important element overall in this debate as it not only shows Revelation to be distinct from apocalyptic genre, but on the positive side, it helps one understand what the true genre of Revelation is. This final element is the authorial intention behind

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<sup>41</sup> C. Marvin Pate, “Introduction to Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. by Stanley N. Gundry and C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 12.

<sup>42</sup> Dave Mathewson, “Revelation in Recent Genre Criticism: Some Implications for Interpretation,” *TrinJ* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 210.

Revelation. One of the most significant factors in classifying the genre of Revelation is how John would have intended for others to understand his work. Does he see himself giving a prophecy in the line of the OT prophets, or does he see himself giving an apocalypse in the line of the Jewish apocalyptists? The answer is the former. Most importantly, John classifies his own work as a prophecy multiple times (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19). John’s focus in Revelation is not on the symbolism itself, but rather on the Word of God couched in the format of symbolism. This is how the OT prophets approached symbolism, which is unlike the apocalypticist’s wholesale focus on the symbolism itself. John’s claim to be writing a book of prophecy has the effect of identifying his message with the Word of God in the OT prophetic tradition. “John stands in the tradition of the major prophets of the OT—foretelling as well as forthtelling.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, it is readily apparent that John’s visions did not rely on the apocalypses for their imagery, but on the OT prophets. Johnson writes, “In no case can it be demonstrated that John depends on the assumed knowledge among his readers of the Jewish apocalyptists for clarity of meaning. On the other hand, he is everywhere dependent on the OT canonical books, especially where symbol and vision play a dominant role.”<sup>44</sup> Thus Osborne can say, “The value of recognizing the prophetic nature of the book underscores that John is not merely producing his own epistle (like Paul or Peter) but is the prophetic channel of a message directly from God and Christ. The origin of this book is not his fertile imagination but God himself.”<sup>45</sup> One final quote sums up this important point well, namely that John’s self-identification as a prophet writing a

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<sup>43</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, revised ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 443.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, “Revelation,” in *EBC*, 12:402.

<sup>45</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 13.

prophecy is a crucial factor in classifying the genre of Revelation: “The author of the book of Revelation considered himself to be a prophet, and that his writing, while employing much of the traditional apparatus of apocalyptic but lacking many of the most characteristic features of that genre, may justifiably, and probably correctly, be regarded as prophetic in intention and character, especially in its concern with and interpretation of history.”<sup>46</sup>

After considering all that makes Revelation distinct from apocalyptic genre, as well as all that Revelation has in common with the OT prophets, it becomes evident that Revelation’s genre lines up more with prophetic than apocalyptic. Thomas takes an opposite view whereby he neglects the apocalyptic elements of Revelation and classifies it entirely as a prophecy: “In light of Revelation’s self-claims and how well it fulfills the qualifications of NT prophecy, the best overall classification of the literary style of the Apocalypse is to call it prophetic.”<sup>47</sup> He later concludes that “the alleged apocalyptic genre of Revelation related more to the manner of revelation than to literary style and was not the choice of the human author but was an inevitable result of the manner in which God chose to reveal His message to the prophet. This, of course, distinguishes biblical writings from uninspired but similar works whose writers did, in fact, choose a particular genre.”<sup>48</sup> This is a good point. The worldview and eschatology of Revelation is so distinct from apocalyptic writings that it cannot be classified along with them, but this doesn’t diminish the fact that God chose to use this apocalyptic literary style to reveal the end times. However, because symbolism does dominate Revelation so much, it may be

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<sup>46</sup> Hill, “Prophecy and Prophets in the Revelation of St. John,” *NTS* 18, 406.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 326.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

going too far to entirely neglect the apocalyptic element of Revelation. Ladd suggest a new category, “prophetic-apocalyptic,” to separate canonical materials from Jewish apocalypses, not so much in form, but in worldview. This seems like a good evaluation of Revelation’s genre. Another writer seems to get it right, saying, “We prefer to think of Revelation as a ‘hybrid’—one part apocalypse (form) and another part prophecy (function), one modifying the other.”<sup>49</sup> All in all, to classify Revelation as apocalyptic reveals a misunderstanding of the differences between Revelation and this genre. At the same time, the combination of apocalyptic, prophetic, and epistolary elements in Revelation points to its unique genre. All of these elements impact one’s reading of Revelation, but John’s intent in writing and self-identification as a prophet tip the scale in favor of prophetic as the genre of Revelation. Perhaps the best view is indeed a hybrid view, a prophetic-apocalyptic view, with priority given to the prophetic elements.

### **Conclusion**

This paper opened asking whether or not it is valid to implement a non-literal or allegorical interpretation of Revelation because of its assumed apocalyptic genre. Indeed, if the genre of Revelation is seen as being in the line of the Jewish apocalyptic writings, then this non-literal approach would be justified, as these apocalyptic descriptions were not intended by their authors to be taken literally nor to describe the future. The conclusion, however, is that no, this is not a valid approach to the interpretation of Revelation because Revelation is not primarily apocalyptic. Genre override, where grammatical-historical hermeneutics are overridden by apocalyptic genre, is not valid for Revelation simply because Revelation is not apocalyptic. Any

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<sup>49</sup> Robert W. Wall, *Revelation*, New International Biblical Commentary, ed. by Kenneth Barker (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 23.

scholars who at the presuppositional level relegate Revelation to describing non-literal and non-futuristic events because of its allegedly apocalyptic genre have misclassified the genre of Revelation and therefore called into question all of their subsequent interpretations. Johnson adds, “Any identification of the Apocalypse with the writings of the extrabiblical apocalyptists must be severely qualified. Indeed, the reader would do well to reexamine every method of interpreting Revelation that rests on this assumed similarity.”<sup>50</sup>

How should one understand and interpret Revelation then, in light of its more prophetic genre? To the extent that Revelation is prophetic one should expect some information about future, historical events. Revelation, as a prophetic work, envisages what will take place in history at the eschatological consummation. As John stands in the line of the OT prophets, one should approach Revelation in the same manner as one would approach the OT prophetic books. There is no reason to discard the rules of normal grammatical-historical interpretation, which are sufficient to handle prophetic literature.

At this point, even though Revelation is to be classified as prophetic and not apocalyptic genre, some might object and claim that this still doesn’t preclude a non-literal or allegorical interpretation of the symbolism found within Revelation. This is a legitimate objection and is an area for further study. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with how one interprets the symbolism found within Revelation. This answer is left to works on hermeneutics or a future paper. This paper has instead dealt with the wholesale writing off of Revelation as symbolic and allegorical because of its supposedly default apocalyptic genre. Hard work must still be done to answer this objection, but it can be said that the burden of proof is on those who seek to justify

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<sup>50</sup> Johnson, “Revelation,” in *EBC*, 12:401-02.

abandoning grammatical-historical interpretation for symbolism. Traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics as it stands is fully equipped to deal with symbolism and figurative language.

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