

Part 2 – Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature

I. The Value in Studying Prophecy/Apocalyptic Literature³⁶

Although Biblical prophecy/apocalyptic literature has resulted in many disagreements concerning its interpretation and fulfillment, a number of incredible benefits come from studying it.

A. It Reminds Us of the Sovereignty of God

In a world that is filled with chaos and wickedness, it is important to understand that God, not Satan or any other power, is in control. God is the king of the universe, both now and in the future. This remarkable truth brings great comfort to believers living in a hostile world (cf. Ps 2:1-12; Is 46:9-10; 1 Thess 4:18; Rev 1:18).

B. It Reminds Us of the Goodness of God

Life, even for the Christian, is hard in that it is filled with sorrow and pain, hardship and difficulty. Our age is characterized by a host of vices and an increased disregard for spiritual things (2 Tim 3:1-5). Studying prophecy, however, reminds us of the goodness of God in that He has written the final chapter and we know how it ends. For the believer, it ends good, in heaven, living in the presence of a gracious, kind, and loving God, a truth meant to calm believers (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:16-18; Titus 2:13).

C. It Motivates Us to Holy Living

When believers anticipate the Lord's return and the earthly reign of Christ, it has a purifying effect on them. They are more apt to not allow sin's presence in their lives when they know how it will all end; whereas, those who fail to contemplate the end have a greater tendency to allow sin to permeate their lives (Titus 2:13-14; 1 John 3:2-3; 2 Peter 3:10-14).

D. It Helps Us Establish Proper Priorities

The reality of future things provides clarity to what is most important in life. Believers who live with a conscious awareness of the coming kingdom of God think differently and more circumspectly about the use of their time, talents, money, and resources (Matt 24:32-51; 25:1-30; 1 Cor 15:58).

E. It Gives Us Hope

“If there is anyone who ought to live with a positive confidence in this world, it is the child of God (Titus 2:13). If there is anyone who ought not to live constantly under a blanket of defeat, fear, and depression, it is the child of God. Though none of us are exempt from painful, negative, even depressing situations, we ought not live in those conditions. A very real joy,

³⁶ Adapted from Zuck 1991: 228-230 and Benware 1995: 11-14.

pleasure, and glory are coming, and they are wrapped up in the ‘blessed hope’ of Jesus’ appearance... Whereas the unbeliever may engage in wishful thinking about the future, the believer can look ahead with a confident expectation that God will accomplish everything that He has promised to do.”³⁷

II. The Difficulty of Studying Prophecy/Apocalyptic Literature

Of all the genres in the Bible, prophecy (including its specialized form of apocalyptic literature) is one of the most misunderstood portions of Scripture by the average student. Although its basic message is not that hard to comprehend, its format has resulted in much confusion and has led to a host of divergent interpretations. Readers of prophetic/apocalyptic literature are often left bewildered and puzzled by what they have encountered in its symbolism and figurative language. In addition, this type of literature has been a happy hunting ground for those eccentrics and charlatans who are intent on finding hidden clues to when and how the world will end.

Some of this is understandable because of the weird and wonderful imagery presented in this genre:

- Beasts rising from the sea (Dan 7:3)
- A talking little horn which speaks boastfully and wages war (Dan 7:8, 20-21)
- Devastating creatures who devour the whole earth in their evil (Dan 7:23)
- Aggressive animals who attack each other with violence (Dan 8:2-8)
- Incredibly specific visions with specific time periods and numerical patterns (Dan 9:24-27)
- Visits from beings of a heavenly nature (Dan 10:4-19)
- Visions of a time when good people and evil people are categorized into different groups in the age to come (Dan 12:2)

“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.’ Unless interpreters understand the unique characteristics of apocalyptic, they are likely to make major mistakes in their study of this genre in Scripture.”³⁸

“[O]f all the genre types in the Bible, prophetic literature is perhaps the most difficult for us to understand. Why? The main reason is probably related to the fact that we have nothing similar to this genre in English literature. Think about it for a moment. We are familiar with narrative because we read stories all the time. Likewise, we are comfortable with Psalms because we are familiar with hymns and choruses. The letters in the New Testament bear some similarities with modern letters, so we are not lost when confronted with the genre of letter. There is, however, little in the literature of our language and culture that resembles the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. The world of the prophets can seem strange and baffling.”³⁹

“Many Christians view Bible prophecy with confusion or cynicism. Some of them are convinced that prophecy is so complicated that only those with special gifts of insight or intellect can make sense of intricate details, such as ten-horned beasts and locusts that resemble horses but have the

³⁷ Benware 1995: 14.

³⁸ Sandy and Abegg, “Apocalyptic,” in Sandy and Giese 1995: 181.

³⁹ Duvall and Hays 2012: 399.

faces of men. Others have been exposed to enough bizarre interpretations and failed predictions that they have retreated into ‘eschatological agnosticism,’ pleading ignorance on prophetic matters.”⁴⁰

However, we must realize that the difficulty in properly understanding and interpreting prophecy lies not with God who communicated the message but with man who interprets it.

Reasons for the difficulty in interpreting prophecy:⁴¹

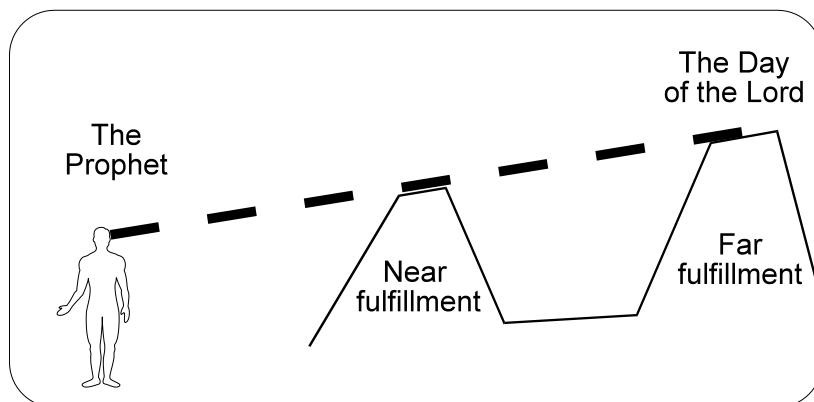
A. The Confusion of Terminology

Different scholars use the same terms with different meanings in mind. For example, some who use the term “literal” use it to contrast the allegorical method of interpretation while others mean by it that the things predicted will be literally fulfilled. In the latter case, “a reference to God reigning in Zion means that in the millennium Jerusalem will be the capitol of the world. The expression cannot be diluted into a general affirmation that God’s rule in history will eventually be victorious.”⁴²

B. The Indistinctness of Prophecy

There may be in one prophecy both a near and a far aspect of fulfillment. In other words, it may have one sense but multiple referents (for example, see Daniel 9:27 which was partially fulfilled in Antiochus Epiphanes in 175 BC but awaits a full and final fulfillment in the days of the Tribulation; also see Daniel 11 where the near aspect [vs. 21-35] is fulfilled in Antiochus and the far aspect is fulfilled in the future Antichrist [vs. 36-45]).

Similarly, some prophecies contain time intervals in them which are not evident until the New Testament makes it evident (for example, see Zech 9:9-10 in which thousands of years separate vs. 9 from vs. 10; also compare Is 61:1-2 with Luke 4:16-21 where Jesus stopped quoting from Isaiah after the phrase “the favorable year of the Lord”, allowing for the thousands of years between His first and second comings).



⁴⁰ Benware 1995: 17-18.

⁴¹ This list adapted from the TMS Hermeneutics – BI 505 syllabus by Dr. James Rosscup Fall 1998.

⁴² Ramm 1970: 241.

C. The Amount of Prophecy

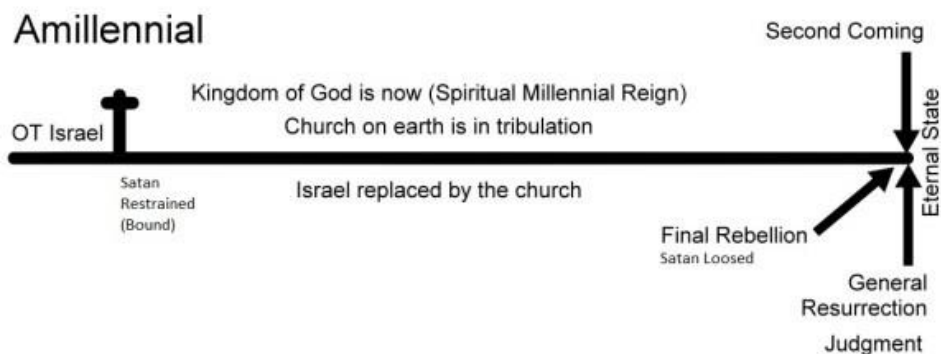
The sheer amount of prophetic, predictive material in the Bible – much of it widely separated from other parts by many years – adds to the difficulty in determining the proper integration and correlation of all the material in reference to its actual fulfillment

D. The Number of Contradictory Eschatological Systems Which Exist

Differences of opinion on the millennial issue (whether the Bible teaches a future 1000 year reign of Christ on the earth) and the dispensational issue (whether the Bible teaches a distinction between Israel and the church) primarily contribute to the existence of such competing eschatological systems.

The variation in these systems is directly related to the principles of interpretation which determine how a person views the same details of prophecy.

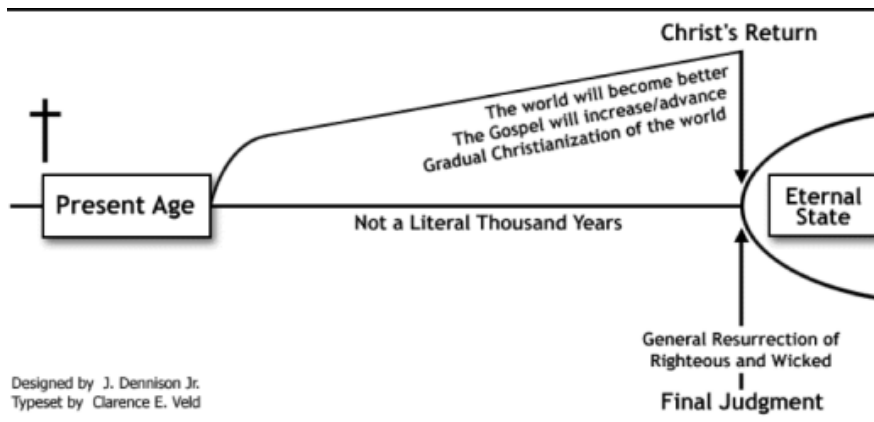
1. Amillennialism



- Summary of Amillennialism (“a” = “no, none”; thus, there is no literal reign of Christ on earth for 1,000 years):
 - a. It says that the Millennium began at the 1st coming of Christ and will continue to His 2nd coming (i.e. that the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 are symbolic of either the present church age or the bliss of heaven after a believer dies). Thus, we are in the Millennium/kingdom now.
 - b. It says Satan was bound at Christ’s first coming and that Christ is now sitting on the throne of David in heaven, ruling and reigning.
 - c. It says that there are two resurrections...the first being a spiritual one (the new birth of the believer) and the second being a physical one (all people at end of millennium).

- d. It says that the Second Coming is a single event where the Rapture and Return of Christ constitute the same thing.
 - e. It says that the Tribulation is present currently as believers always face tribulation.
 - f. It says that at the 2nd Coming, there is one general resurrection and one general judgment.
 - g. It says that the eternal state will be brought in after the 2nd Coming.
 - h. It says that there is no separation between Israel and the church in God's redemptive program. The church is the new Israel. There is no future for Israel as a nation because the church has replaced Israel in God's plan. Apostasy canceled Israel's future blessing. All of God's promises to Israel were either fulfilled or have been forfeited through disobedience.
 - i. It says that the promises to Israel about a land, nationality, and throne are being fulfilled now in a spiritual way among believers in the church and will not result in a material-literal fulfillment with Israel.
- Those who hold to an amillennial approach to Daniel: Edward J. Young, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949); H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978); Iain Duguid, *Daniel* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2008).

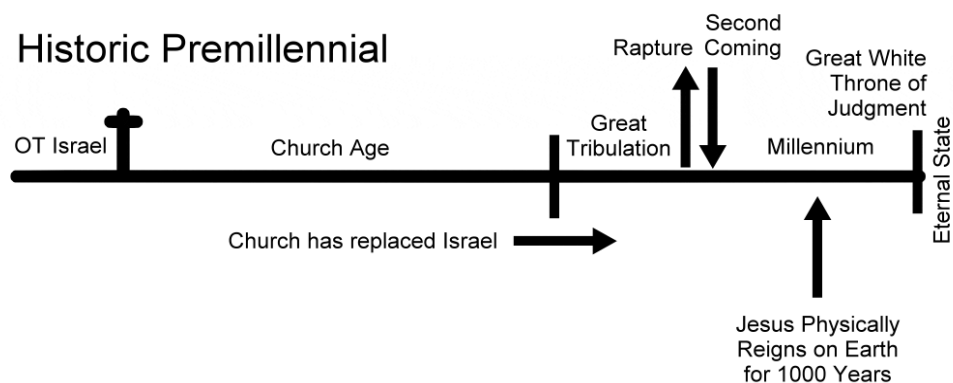
2. Postmillennialism



- Summary of Postmillennialism (Christ's return is after the "Millennium"):
 - a. While the church is not the kingdom, it will bring the kingdom to earth through the proclamation of the Gospel.
 - b. The thousand years in Revelation 20 are not literal but rather refer to a long period of time.

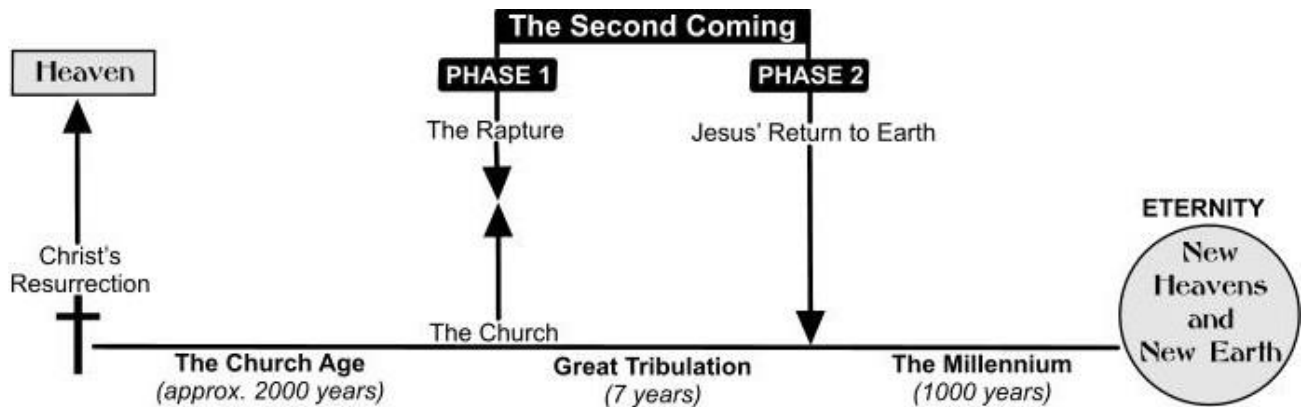
- c. The Kingdom is spiritual not literal (i.e. the rule of Christ in the hearts of believers).
- d. The world gets better through the spread of the Gospel and results in a golden age during the last part of the present age as Christ rules spiritually among church saints. Evil in all its many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions and Christ will return to a truly Christianized world. Christian principles of life and conduct will become the accepted standards in public and private life.
- e. It views the two resurrections differently: first spiritual, second physical.
- f. It employs a figurative interpretation of prophecy.
- g. All resurrections and judgments are after the millennium.
- h. All the promises made to Israel in the OT are fulfilled in the church presently in a spiritual sense.

3. Historic/Covenant Premillennialism (Christ's return is before the Millennium):



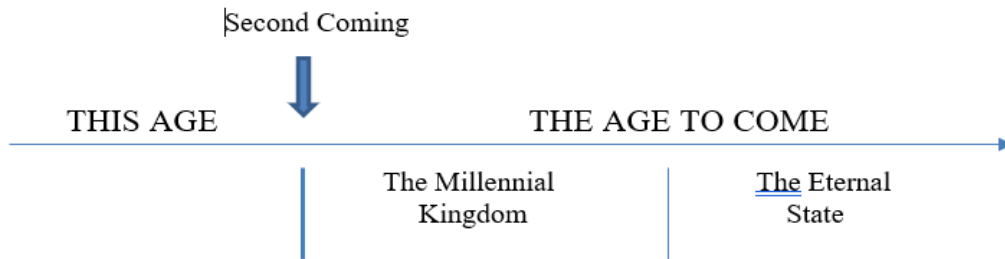
- Summary of Historic Premillennialism:
 - a. It is called Historic Premillennialism because the argument is that this was the view that was held by the church fathers.
 - b. Most believe the Millennium will be 1000 years but some believe that it will simply be a long time.
 - c. It includes a post-tribulational rapture.
 - d. It does not go at all to the OT to support the idea of a millennial kingdom. Thus, it does not accept a millennial kingdom in which Israel has the primary focus. It does not make a clear distinction between the church and Israel because it tends to spiritualize many of the OT prophetic passages and applies them to the church. In this sense, this position is similar to amillennialism.

4. Dispensational Premillennialism (Christ's return is before the Millennium, where Israel is the focus)



- Summary of Dispensational Premillennialism:
 - a. Christ raptures the church away from earth before the Tribulation because the primary purpose of the Tribulation is the discipline of Israel and the nations rather than the church.
 - b. Christ is not presently reigning in His kingdom (as promised in the Davidic Covenant). He will return to earth after the Tribulation to establish the Millennial kingdom, an actual, earthly kingdom. Thus, the Millennial kingdom is entirely future.
 - c. In the Millennium, the nation of Israel will experience, through the effectual work of the New Covenant, all the blessings of God promised to Abraham and David pertaining to Israel's land, seed, blessing (through the earthly reign of Christ on the throne). Thus, this view does go to the OT to support the idea of a millennial kingdom.
 - d. The church has not replaced Israel and is, therefore, not fulfilling the promises made to Israel as a nation.
 - e. There are two physical resurrections: 1) The resurrection of the saved (some at the resurrection of Christ, church saints at the Rapture, and OT/Tribulation saints at the Second Coming); 2) The resurrection of the unsaved (at the Great White Throne judgment).
 - f. The biblical covenants and the promises in the OT that God will establish His kingdom (Daniel 2:44) will be fulfilled in the future in two phases: 1) In the millennial kingdom of Christ; and 2) In the eternal state.

“God’s great purpose in establishing His future kingdom on *this present earth* is to fulfill His many promises given in the Scriptures and to clearly demonstrate to all of creation that He alone is the sovereign God. It was on this earth that God was apparently defeated (in Eden and at the Cross), and it on this earth where He must be clearly victorious, defeating all usurpers and establishing His rule. Closely connected with this is the need to fulfill His specific covenant promises to Israel. The promises given in the Abrahamic, Davidic, Palestinian, and new covenants are fulfilled in the millennial kingdom. The purpose of the millennial (Messianic) kingdom especially relates to fulfilling these covenants made with Israel. The second (eternal) phase of the future kingdom of God will maintain God’s sovereign ruling authority over a new heaven and a new earth.”⁴³



NOTE: It is important to understand that the most determinative issue in separating one eschatological system from another is the method of hermeneutics.⁴⁴

1. The Hermeneutics of Amillennialism

a. A Spiritualizing of Prophecy

Although amillennialists generally interpret the Scriptures literally, when it comes to prophecy they see a “spiritual sense.” They argue that prophecy can be spiritualized because it contains a large amount of figurative and spiritual language and that the great teachings of the Bible are not earthly, but spiritual.

Additionally, they argue that the NT interprets and reinterprets the OT and they view the NT as having priority over the OT. For amillennialists, the OT-NT relationship is often described as one of ‘type-antitype’ and ‘shadow-reality’ in which the new supersedes the old. A major implication of this type-antitype understanding of the testaments is the assertion that the nation Israel was a type that has given way to the superior anti-type—the Christian church composed of both Jews and Gentiles. Thus, the true Israel is now the church and the promises to Israel about a land and a temple find a spiritual fulfillment in the church.

“[T]he interpretation of figurative speech requires something other than an explicit, straightforward, dictionary meaning of the word. A figure, in whatever sense, requires

⁴³ Benware 1995: 280-281.

⁴⁴ This list is adapted from Zuck 1991: 236-238.

recognition of the fact that it is a figure, and that its interpretation transcends the explicit word value. This would seem to imply that the interpretation of figurative language is beyond the scope of the literal method of interpretation.”⁴⁵

b. The Unity of the People of God

God has a single overall program in all ages, a program of redemption to provide salvation for the people of God, whether in the OT era or the NT. This program is worked out in two covenants: 1) The covenant of works – a covenant in operation from the creation of Adam through the Fall in which God promised him (and his descendants) eternal life if they obeyed the Lord and death if they disobeyed; 2) The covenant of grace – a covenant made between God and the elect after the Fall in which salvation is given by grace to those who trust in Christ by faith

c. The Church Has Replaced Israel

There are not separate and distinct programs for Israel and the church in God’s economy. There is one program (redemption) and one people of God throughout all ages. As a result, the promises to Israel are not only applicable to the church but incorporated into it.

2. The Hermeneutics of Premillennialism

a. A Normal, Grammatical Interpretation of Scripture

Premillennialists emphasize a literal, historical, grammatical method of interpretation in which the normal understanding of the text is correct. The key issue relates to authorial intent: What did the prophetic author intend? This allows for the biblical writer to use symbolic language, but insists that any interpretation must be based on the author’s intent. When one accepts the literal method of interpretation, the text itself becomes the clear-cut authority without question.

Regarding prophecy, while it is acknowledged that many prophetic passages contain figurative language and that they are often written in poetic style, the method of literal interpretation is still the same. The method for interpreting prophecy must not be distinct from the method of interpreting other kinds of biblical literature. Interpreting the text literally does not preclude the use of figurative language.

Thus, the meaning of OT passages is anchored in the OT passages themselves. Rather than assuming that the NT is the interpreter (or even reinterpreter) of the OT, premillennialists begin with a literal understanding of each OT text.

One of the primary tenets of premillennial hermeneutics is consistency in interpretation. It does not approach nonprophetic passages in the normal sense and, in contrast, approach prophetic passages in a spiritualized, nonliteral sense.

⁴⁵ Harbin, “The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology,” in Zuck 1995, 37.

“The word *literal* is perhaps not as good as either the word *normal* or *plain*, but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensational interpretation often does...To be sure, literal/ historical/grammatical interpretation is not the sole possession or practice of dispensationalists, but the consistent use of it in all areas of biblical interpretation is. This does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within the basic framework of literal interpretation.”⁴⁶

b. A Distinction Between Israel and the Church

The faithful application of a normal, grammatical interpretation of Scripture necessitates a clear distinction between Israel and the church. To make the church the “new Israel” ignores the nature of God’s covenantal commitments and promises to Israel. In short, God is not done with Israel.

“The present [church] age is something of a parenthesis. From Genesis 12 through the Gospels and deep into Acts, God’s primary purpose dealt with Israel. In the Gospels and Acts, the Lord Jesus is offered to Israel as Messiah. The coming of the kingdom was contingent upon their response. Because of Israel’s negative response, God is now working with the church, distinct from Israel...The church, therefore, is a mystery, never prophesied in the Old Testament...It is neither a “new Israel” nor a new form of the kingdom.”⁴⁷

CHURCH	vs	ISRAEL
A mystery unrevealed in prior ages (Eph 3:5)		Never spoken of as a mystery
Began in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost		Began with the call of Abraham (Gen.12)
"Membeship" is by spiritual birth		Membership is by natural birth
Citizenship emphasis is heavenly		Citizenship emphasis is earthly
Believers are priests		Priests from Levi
One "new man" of Jew and Gentile (Eph 2:15)		Given Covenants and promises

⁴⁶ Ryrie, 1996: 40.

⁴⁷ Toussaint, “Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist,” in Bateman 1999: 249.

c. The Certainty of Israel in the Land with an Earthly King

The OT promises to the nation of Israel that they will one day be regathered to and have possession of the land with their Messiah-King ruling over them are unconditional and have not yet been fulfilled. Such promises contained in the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants guarantee that the nation Israel will be saved and restored with a mediatorial role to other nations in the future. This mediatorial role occurs during the Millennium under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

III. The Nature of Prophecy/Apocalyptic Literature

Many commentators note that Daniel consists of a combination of history, prophecy, and apocalyptic literature. “The first division of the book (chaps. 1-6) consists of historical material and some prophecy (chap. 2); the second division (chaps.7-12) contains both history and prophetic apocalyptic messages. Prophetic-apocalyptic may be the best designation, for Daniel takes on the character of both prophecy and apocalyptic.”⁴⁸

A primary question that must be considered is: Are prophecy and apocalyptic distinct or is one (apocalyptic) the subset of the other (prophecy)?

A. The Meaning of Apocalyptic

The term “apocalyptic” originates from the Greek word *apokalypsis* referring to the content of “revelation, disclosure” and *apokalypso* referring to the act of “uncovering, revealing.” It refers to an “an unveiling” (cf. Rev 1:1). Thus, literature considered under this category may be expected to largely deal with revealing what has been hidden.

“The term may be used in more ways than one. In the first instance it applies to a group of writings with certain characteristics...mostly from the last two centuries BC and the first century AD. In the second place it denotes the ideas and concepts that are so characteristic of this kind of literature. There may thus be ‘apocalyptic’ sections in writings which as a whole do not come within this category.”⁴⁹

B. The Characteristics of Apocalyptic

“[A]pocalyptic literature had a ‘mixed parentage’ and reflected in its growth a wide variety of historical circumstances. The long period between the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC and its capture by the Romans in AD 70 showed many fluctuations in Israel’s fortunes. It began in the despondency of the exile, continued under the authoritarian rule of foreign powers, and ended in catastrophe. The pressures under which the Jewish people had to live during that time were well-nigh insufferable. It is perhaps hardly surprising that, in such circumstances, the voice of protest began to be heard, and men and women began to “see visions and dream dreams” of better days to come when God himself would intervene and bring about his salvation. And so it

⁴⁸ Miller 1994: 45.

⁴⁹ Morris 1973: 20.

was that with the protest went the promise that, despite all that individuals and nations might do, God's purpose would at last be fulfilled and his kingdom come."⁵⁰

From this emerge a number of characteristics of this literature:

1. A Revelation by God

The revelation given by God covers a wide range of subjects (i.e. end time events, the coming kingdom, the coming of Messiah, final judgment, etc.) but the common theme in each revelation is that it is not naturally known, but rather supernaturally given through special revelation.

2. Through a Mediator (Angel or Christ)

In Daniel, the mediator is usually an angel (Gabriel – 8:16; 9:21, 10:10-11).

3. Given in a Time of Exile or Gentile Oppression

Much of the apocalyptic literature was written by prophets when they were outside of the land of Israel, during the time of Gentile domination (605 BC – 100 AD):

- Ezekiel and Daniel were in Babylon
- Zechariah, though in Jerusalem having returned from Babylon, was writing in a time when Israel was still until Gentile oppression
- John (Revelation) was on the Island of Patmos

“Apocalyptic is a literature of crisis to which it responded with confidence and courage: evil could not stand and would not prevail. True, the promises made by the prophets had not yet been fulfilled and the hopes of people like Daniel had not yet been realized. But these were simply promises postponed and hopes deferred. The great day was surely coming and was coming soon! Their protest, then, was much more than a wringing of hands and a cry of despair; it was an affirmation that God was sovereign ruler over earth and heaven and would deliver up the kingdom to ‘the saints of the Most High.’”⁵¹

4. Which Consists of Visions

Such is the case in Daniel (7:1-2; 8:1; 10:1).

5. Includes Many Symbols

“A feature of much apocalyptic that often makes it unintelligible to modern men is the use of strange symbolism... This type of literature abounds in beasts and seals, in rivers and mountains and stars, in personages celestial and infernal... Symbolism and significant numbers, then, abound. Whether they explain them or not, the apocalyptists use their bizarre

⁵⁰ Russell 1994: 14.

⁵¹ Ibid., 19.

symbolism and their curious numerology consistently. Any student of these writings must make an effort to grapple with the phenomenon.”⁵²

6. Refers to the Distant Future

This reality is clearly evident in Daniel (8:17, 19; 11:35, 40)

7. Culminates in the Triumph of the Kingdom of God Over Earthly Kingdoms

“Absolutely characteristic of this class of literature is the thought that in His own good time God will intervene. He will bring the present evil world to a cataclysmic end and establish a better state of affairs. The absolute rule of God is the significant thing...absolutely fundamental is the thought that in the end God will prevail. He will overthrow all the evil this world contains. The apocalyptists were just as sure that God could and would defeat every evil man and every evil thing as they were that even the best efforts of good men could not bring this about...As they looked around them they saw the righteous oppressed and with no way out of their troubles. Humanly speaking there was no hope. But this did not weaken their faith in the slightest. The salvation they looked for would not be in the here and now but in an age yet to come.”⁵³

NOTE: “An examination of the Old and New Testament canons reveals that only two works contain material that conforms to the above criteria: the Book of Revelation and the Book of Daniel (particularly chaps. 7-12). Therefore, it seems best to limit the canonical apocalyptic material to these two compositions.”⁵⁴

C. The Function of Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic writings were meant to encourage God’s oppressed people in a time of crisis and to give them hope in God’s future deliverance.

“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...But the roller coaster also takes the riders down in the valleys of gloom and despair...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.”⁵⁵

“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

⁵² Morris 1973:36, 37, 39.

⁵³ Ibid., 43, 45.

⁵⁴ Miller 1994: 46.

⁵⁵ Sandy and Abegg, “Apocalyptic,” in Sandy and Giese 1995: 186.

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 Lamb will once again stand on Mount Zion and every knee will bow in adoration... Those who remain faithful will eventually be honored with the glory of the new heaven and earth.”⁵⁶

D. The Relationship Between Prophecy and Apocalyptic

“In simple terms apocalyptic is prophecy – but of a specialized kind... apocalyptic is prophecy but with a special focus and in a striking format.”⁵⁷ Though the lines between prophecy and apocalyptic are blurred, the following chart describes some of the distinctions between them:⁵⁸

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.
Prophecy calls the people of God back to obedience to God.	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.
Prophecy announces that God is going to judge sin and offer salvation, usually to be accomplished through natural means or human agents.	Apocalyptic announces that God himself is going to intervene and judge the world through super natural means: he will ride out of heaven on a white horse and rule the nations.
Prophecy presents its message as direct speech from God: “Thus says the Lord.”	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).
Prophecy predicts both immediate and distant aspects of God’s judgment and salvation.	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.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 187.

⁵⁷ Sandy and Abegg, “Apocalyptic,” in Sandy and Giese 1995: 178.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 178-179.

E. The Location of Apocalyptic

1. Outside the Biblical Canon

Numerous extra-biblical writings from the inter-testamental time (during intense persecution especially at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes) are considered apocalyptic (i.e. 1 Enoch, The Apocalypse of Baruch, Apocalypse of Peter, some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, etc.).

2. Within the Biblical Canon

“In the Old Testament canon the most obvious apocalyptic portion is Daniel 7-12, usually considered full-blown apocalyptic. Daniel has multiple visions 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.”⁵⁹

Some have suggested that Isaiah 24-27, Isaiah 56-66, Ezekiel 38-39, Zechariah 1-6, and Zechariah 7-12 also constitute apocalyptic.

In the NT, Revelation is the clearest example of it.

IV. Interpreting Prophecy/Apocalyptic Literature⁶⁰

Interpreting this genre of literature accurately requires hermeneutical consistency, namely that the literal-historical-grammatical method of interpretation applied to narrative portions of Scripture also be applied to prophetic portions.

A. Interpret the Passage Literally

This is the most important rule of all the rules for interpreting prophecy. This rule starts with the assumption that God wants us to understand the end times, not be confused by them. God based His revelation about prophecy on the normal rules of communication. Literal interpretation understands that, in normal communication and in the Scriptures, figures of speech are frequently used as communication devices. Literal interpretation does not ignore such devices, but recognizes the literal point behind them since **symbols and figures of speech represent something literal.**

“The curse of the allegorical method is that it obscures the true meaning of the Word of God.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., 184.

⁶⁰ This list of interpretive principles was adapted from Benware 1995: 19-29.

⁶¹ Ramm 1970: 30.

For example: The four beasts of Daniel 7 represent real nations, as do the ram and goat of Daniel 8; the kingdom of God described in Daniel 2 and 7 represents a true, earthly kingdom like the other earthly kingdoms; the numbers of Daniel 12 are literal, not symbolic of long time-periods.

B. Compare Prophecy with Prophecy

God did not give all the prophetic details to one particular biblical writer. Many authors over a period of centuries received God's revelation about the end times. Thus, since God is the author of all of Scripture, no prophecy will contradict another prophecy.

“Often New Testament authors will refer back to Old Testament prophecies. They do this for a variety of reasons, including to show that a prophecy has been fulfilled and to tie together a previously given prophecy with the one being given to the New Testament writer. Whereas the New Testament message could give a deeper or clearer understanding of the Old Testament passage, that Old Testament portion does explicitly or implicitly include the same message.”⁶²

For example: The future millennial kingdom spoken about in Daniel is also described in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Revelation; the Antichrist described in Daniel 7, 8, and 11 is further described by Paul (2 Thessalonians) and John (Revelation).

C. Be Aware of Possible Time Intervals

The prophets were not always aware of the fact that there was going to be an interval of time between prophetic fulfillments. It is as if they viewed them as distant mountain ranges without realizing the valleys that lay between them. When describing prophetic events side by side, a prophet did not always mean that the prophecies would take place at the same time.

For example: Daniel's prophecy of the 70 weeks in chapter 9 contains a gap that is critical to its understanding and becomes clear only in the progress of revelation.

D. Be Aware of Double Reference Prophecy

One prophecy may have an earlier, partial fulfillment and a later, complete fulfillment.

For example: The prophecy about the “abomination of desolation” (Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) was partially fulfilled in Antiochus Epiphanes in 175 BC but will have its complete fulfillment in the future Tribulation.

E. Interpret Prophecies in Light of Their Immediate and Larger Contexts

Often symbols in prophetic passages are interpreted in the text by the prophet.

For example: Daniel frequently stated the meaning of the symbols/visions he revealed (Dan 2:36ff; Dan 7:17ff; Dan 8:20-22).

⁶² Benware 1995: 24-25.