

# DISPENSATIONAL HERMENEUTICS: The Matter of Genre

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## *Introduction*

The word *genre* is a French term, which simply means kind or species. When applied to biblical studies, *genre* refers to the fact that the Bible contains different types of literature, such as prophecy, epistle, poetry, etc...Such a categorization is made to alert Bible interpreters to the fact that particular *genres* are to be understood in light of the common traits that define a given genre. For example, poetry is not to be interpreted in the same way epistolary literature is to be interpreted. Poetry contains its own unique characteristics such as parallelism. This parallelism must be taken into account in order to grasp what a poetic text is saying. However, this characteristic of parallelism need not be taken into account when interpreting an epistle. Such *genre* sensitivity in no way conflicts with literal interpretation. Charles Ryrie specifically notes that literalism "...does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within the basic framework of literal interpretation."<sup>1</sup> The literal interpreter simply recognizes that words take on their ordinary meaning within a particular genre.

Despite the fact that genre can be a helpful device in interpreting Scripture, today's evangelicals have pushed the concept too far. Today, genre is often used as an excuse for suspending the ordinary rules of hermeneutics. An example from the legal arena may be helpful as a way of explaining how genre classification can be used as a justification for suspending the ordinary rules of hermeneutics. Conservatives often complain that liberals have read into the Constitution ideas that are not found in a literal reading of the document, such as the right to procure an abortion and a strict wall of separation between church and state. Liberals respond by arguing that the founders purposely created an ambiguous document that was not intended be read literally. Rather it was intentionally created to be a "living document." In other words, its ambiguous language was intentionally chosen so that a judge could alter it one direction or another depending upon where society was heading. Such a design was necessary because the founders could not

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 86.

foresee the technological advances that society would experience. Thus, by classifying the Constitution according to the genre “living document,” the judge is no longer required to follow the literal, grammatical, historical method in interpreting its contents.

The phrase that Robert Thomas uses to expose this abuse in biblical studies is “genre override.”<sup>2</sup> Nowhere is this abuse clearer than in the area of so-called “apocalyptic literature.” This categorization is often used as an excuse for the utilization of a dual hermeneutic that treats prophecy non-literally and the rest of Scripture literally.<sup>3</sup> Walvoord spoke frankly about this problem. In 1994, he was asked, “What do you predict will be the most significant theological issues over the next ten years?” He responded, “The hermeneutical problem of not interpreting the Bible literally, especially the prophetic areas. The church today is engulfed in the idea that one cannot interpret prophecy literally.”<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this paper is to expose how apocalypticism is often used as an excuse for dispensing with the literal, grammatical, historical method in the realm of biblical eschatology. The methodological flaws in this approach will be exposed as well.

### *Revelation is Apocalyptic?*

Dispensational interpreters often categorize various prophetic books of the Bible, such as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation, as “apocalyptic literature.” By using this category, these interpreters simply mean that these books unveil or disclose God’s future prophetic program. Defining apocalyptic literature as biblical material that unveils is in harmony with the meaning of the Greek word from which “apocalyptic” is derived. This word is *apokalypsis* and it simply means to unveil or disclose.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 271-341.

<sup>3</sup> One often finds a similar approach regarding how interpreters approach Gen 1–11. Because many see the genre of this section of Scripture as a polemic against pagan cosmology, they use this genre categorization as an excuse for suspending the ordinary rules of hermeneutics. They claim that the literal, grammatical, historical method was never intended to be used in a polemical genre. Thus, they see no problem reading into the text ideas that are not naturally found within the text such as the old earth view, theistic evolution, the day age theory, and the local flood theory.

<sup>4</sup> “An Interview: Dr. John Walvoord Looks at Dallas Seminary,” *Dallas Connection* (Winter 1994, Vol. 1, No. 3), p. 4.

However, recent evangelical interpreters have begun to vest this term with a new meaning. When they use the term “apocalyptic literature” they are equating the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation with a host of non-canonical, extra biblical writings that flourished from the intertestamental period and into the second century A.D. Examples include *Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Baruch*, *Jubilees*, *Assumption of Moses*, *Psalms of Solomon*, *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and *Sibylline Oracles*. These writings possess a common cluster of attributes. Such attributes include the following: extensive use of symbolism, vision as the major means of revelation, angelic guides, activity of angels and demons, focus on the end of the current age and the inauguration of the age to come, urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions in the immediate future, the end as a cosmic catastrophe, new salvation that is paradisaical in character, manifestation of the kingdom of God, a mediator with royal functions, dualism with God and Satan as the leaders, spiritual order determining the flow of history, pessimism about man’s ability to change the course of events, periodization and determinism of human history, otherworldly journeys, the catchword glory, and a final showdown between good and evil.<sup>5</sup>

It is argued that Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation share many of these characteristics. On this basis, these canonical books are also categorized as apocalyptic literature. The Book of Revelation in particular is categorized with the apocalyptic writings. Not only does the Revelation share many features with these extra biblical books, but it also was composed during the same general time period when the apocalyptic writings were composed. There is no doubt that Revelation is similar to the apocalyptic writings in several respects.

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<sup>5</sup> John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, *Semiotica* 14 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 9.; George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 76-101; Frederick J. Murphy, *Early Judaism: The Exile to the Time of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 130-33; Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views, a Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 10-12.

## *Hermeneutical Changes Resulting From Viewing Revelation's Character as Apocalyptic*

However, categorizing Revelation with the apocalyptic writings significantly challenges the traditional, dispensational interpretation of Revelation. The decision to classify Revelation with the apocalyptic genre alters the hermeneutical principles that one uses in interpreting the book. Consequently, four hermeneutical doors seem to open to the extent that Revelation's character is viewed as apocalyptic. First, it becomes difficult to approach the text with a straightforward literalism. Kenneth Gentry observes:

Before beginning my survey, I must note what most Christians suspect and what virtually all evangelical scholars (excluding classic dispensationalists) recognize regarding the book: Revelation is a highly figurative book that we cannot approach with a simple straightforward literalism.<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere Gentry observes that consistent literalism "is an impossible ideal."<sup>7</sup> Gregg contends that many interpreters fail to take into account Revelation's apocalyptic character. According to Steve Gregg:

A failure to take into account this feature has led some to the most outlandish teachings on this book by some whose rule of interpretation is 'literal unless absurd.' Though this is good rule when dealing with literature written in a literal genre, it is the exact opposite in the case of apocalyptic literature, where symbolism is the rule and literalism is the exception.<sup>8</sup>

What Gregg has done here is argue that the ordinary hermeneutical standard that is used in interpreting other sections of Scripture is no longer applicable to biblical eschatology. In ordinary hermeneutics, the assumption is the author wanted to be understood in literal terms unless something compelling from the text informs the interpreter otherwise. Gregg is arguing that this rule no longer holds true in interpreting

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, "A Preterist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 38.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 2d and rev. ed. (Tyler: TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1997), 151.

<sup>8</sup> Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views, a Parallel Commentary*, 11.

Revelation and that the inverse is true. The assumption of literalism unless a textual clue informs the interpreter otherwise becomes substituted for an assumption of symbolism unless the interpreter is alerted otherwise. Gregg has used the apocalyptic genre categorization to stand ordinary hermeneutical principles on their head. Hamstra does the same thing when he begins with the presupposition that because Revelation is apocalyptic, he views all of Revelation's episodes and visions as symbolic until proven otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

The reason for this presupposition that apocalyptic literature cannot be approached literally is because such writings can be described as crisis literature.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the writing was produced as a result of some impending crisis.<sup>11</sup> In order to highlight the severity of the crisis, the apocalyptist spoke in exaggerated terms. Take by way of analogy the statement, "my world has come to an end because I lost my job." This statement obviously does not communicate a literal end of the world. Rather, it is using heightened language in order to communicate the significance of a personal event.

Similarly, an apocalyptic understanding of Revelation views John as vesting earthly events with heightened eschatological language in order to communicate the gravity of the immediate crisis. Understanding Revelation in such hyperbolic terms opens the possibility that the global language of Revelation may in actuality be descriptive of a localized phenomenon that John has invested with global language. Caird best summarizes the matter when he says, "What seems to have escaped notice at the time is that Eschatology is a metaphor, the application of end of the world language to that which is not literally the end of the world."<sup>12</sup> Thus, when John speaks of a great city reigning over the kings of the earth (17:18), he is speaking in heightened language of an immediate oppressive force in his own day, such as Jerusalem or Rome. If John used the same hyperbolic methodology

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<sup>9</sup> Sam Hamstra, "An Idealist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 129.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell G. Reddish, ed., *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 24.

<sup>11</sup> John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 38.

<sup>12</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 253.

common in apocalyptic writings in Revelation, then statements such as half of the world's population being destroyed (Rev 6:8; 9:15) and the greatest earthquake in human history (Rev 16:18) cannot be construed literally. Rather, they similarly represent heightened language communicating a past event that the people of God experienced, such as oppression by Jerusalem or Rome. Understanding Revelation in such hyperbolic terms opens the possibility that the global language may in actuality be descriptive of a localized historical phenomenon that John has invested with global language.

This mindset represents a marked departure from literal, grammatical, historical methodology and opens the door to historicism and preterism. For example, whenever the global nature of Revelation's prophecies do not line up with the local scenario of an A.D. 70 fulfillment, preterist Kenneth Gentry dismisses the global nature of the text as mere hyperbole. He notes, "...the preterist view does understand Revelation's prophecies as strongly reflecting actual historical events in John's near future, though they are set in apocalyptic drama and clothed in poetic hyperbole." Preterist Don Preston also relies upon Revelation to belonging to the apocalyptic category in order to find support for his view that Revelation's global language was fulfilled in the local events of A.D. 70. He observes that apocalyptic literature hyperbolizes the destruction of Jerusalem. According to *Sibylline Oracle* 5:153, "the whole creation was shaken" when war began on Jerusalem. If Revelation is also apocalyptic literature, then Revelation must be similarly using hyperbolic language.<sup>13</sup>

A similar approach is seen in Old Testament studies. Many view Isaiah 13–14 and Jeremiah 50–51 as describing Babylon's past fall in 539 B.C. rather than her future fall. The interpretation is held in spite of the fact that the details of these texts go far beyond the historic fall of Babylon. This interpretation is justified on the grounds that Ancient Near Eastern extra biblical writings often describe the destruction of foes in hyperbolic terms. Because Isaiah and Jeremiah incorporated a similar "destruction genre" in their description

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<sup>13</sup> Don Preston, *Who Is This Babylon?* (Don K. Preston, 1999), 56.

of Babylon's fall, the language of Babylon's destruction in Isaiah 13–14 and Jeremiah 50–51 can be applied to her historic fall rather than her future fall.<sup>14</sup>

Second, apocalyptic multivalence is another hermeneutical door that opens when Revelation is classified as belonging to the apocalyptic category. Collins offers the following explanation of apocalyptic multivalence:

In other Jewish apocalypses the Babylonian crisis of the sixth century often provides the filter through which later crises are viewed. The emphasis is not on the uniqueness of the historical events but on recurring patterns, which assimilate the particular crisis to some event of the past whether historical or mythical.<sup>15</sup>

If John also employs apocalyptic multivalence, it is possible that the events of Revelation cannot be anchored to one event but rather can recur repeatedly throughout history. This perspective allows Pate to employ a multi layered hermeneutic in identifying Babylon of Revelation 17–18. Pate concludes that Babylon in these chapters not only refers to a future Babylon but to ancient Jerusalem as well.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, he argues that the beast of Revelation 13 refers simultaneously to both Nero as well as a future antichrist.<sup>17</sup> However, nowhere in the context is it even implied that these texts have more than one meaning. Pate brings an *a priori* presupposition of multiple meanings to the text solely on the basis of Revelation's alleged apocalyptic content. Such a layered hermeneutic again represents a significant departure from the literal, grammatical, historical method where texts were presumed to have a single meaning. Milton Terry explains: "A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and

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<sup>14</sup> Homer Heater, "Do the Prophets Teach That Babylonia Will Rebuilt in the Eschaton?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (March 1998): 31-36.

<sup>15</sup> Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> C. Marvin Pate, "A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 160.

<sup>17</sup> C. Marvin Pate and Calvin Haines, *Doomsday Delusions* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Ill, 1995), 42-44.

sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.”<sup>18</sup>

Third, the notion that John used secret codes to disguise the enemies of God’s people mentioned in the book also becomes viable if Revelation is apocalyptic. At times, the apocalyptists disguised through symbolic language the entity that was oppressing them. The apocalyptic writer sought to give hope to the oppressed people of God by predicting the cataclysmic destruction of the enemy that was persecuting them. However, because of fear of retaliation, the apocalypticist was not free to identify the oppressor. Thus, the message had to be disguised in symbolic dress.<sup>19</sup> For example, apocalyptic writings sometimes used Babylon as a code for Rome (*Sibylline Oracles* 5: 143, 159-60, 434). If John was following this pattern, he also does not mean Babylon when he says Babylon. Instead, he is using the word Babylon as a symbolic disguise to identify an oppressor. Thus, when John mentioned Babylon, he might have had in mind Jerusalem or Rome. Thomas notes that such code theories are a far cry from literal, grammatical, historical interpretation when he says, “Another clear distinctive of literal interpretation is its avoidance of assumptions not justified in the text. Theories that ‘Babylon’ in Revelation chapters 14 and 16–18 is a code for Rome have been widespread.”<sup>20</sup>

Fourth, categorizing Revelation as apocalyptic also influences how one interprets Revelation’s numbers. According to Gregg, other apocalypses typically use numbers to convey concepts rather than count units.<sup>21</sup> Thus, categorizing Revelation as apocalyptic literature moves the interpreter away from a literal understanding of Revelation’s numbers and more toward a symbolic interpretation. Some seem to rely upon such an apocalyptic framework by remaining open to the possibility that the number 1000 mentioned six times in Revelation 20 refers to an extended period of time rather than a literal 1000-year time

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<sup>18</sup> Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (1885; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947), 205.

<sup>19</sup> James Kallas, “The Apocalypse—an Apocalyptic Book?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 70.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 336.

<sup>21</sup> Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views, a Parallel Commentary*, 11-12.

period.<sup>22</sup> Others show a similar reluctance of taking the number 144,000 (Rev 7) literally. Still others have questioned a literal interpretation of the numerical measurements of the eternal city described in Rev 21–22.

However, to argue that the number 1000 in Revelation 20 represents just an extended period of time rather than a literal number is to suspend ordinary hermeneutical rules. Deere points out that when “year” is used with a number, the reference is always to a literal calendar year.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Hoehner observes when John writes that Satan will be released from the abyss for “a short time” (Rev 20:3), an indefinite period of time is already indicated. How easy it would have been for John to write that the kingdom would last “a long time” had this been his intention. Interestingly, the phrase “a long time” occurs in Matthew 25:19 to depict the duration of the Lord’s absence prior to His Second Advent. Yet John does not employ such a phrase and instead furnishes a specific number.<sup>24</sup> Zuck notes that if 1000 is not meant to be interpreted literally, then the door suddenly opens for every other number in the Book of Revelation to be construed non-literally as well, such as 2 witnesses (Rev 11:3), 7000 people (Rev 11:13), 4 angels (Rev 7:1), 7 angels (Rev 8:6), and 144,000 Jews (Rev 7:4).<sup>25</sup> Thomas observes that, “no number in Revelation is verifiably a symbolic number.”<sup>26</sup> In sum, if Revelation is no different than intertestamental apocalyptic writings then various hermeneutical doors open that would otherwise remain closed. These include an aversion to literal interpretation, a layered hermeneutic, code theories, and a symbolic use of numbers.

### *Revelation is Prophecy*

However, opening these hermeneutical doors on the basis of categorizing Revelation with the apocalyptic books is unjustified. A closer scrutiny demonstrates that

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<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1997), 347.

<sup>23</sup> Jack Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4-6,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (January-March 1978): 70.

<sup>24</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, “Evidence from Revelation 20,” in *The Coming Millennial Kingdom*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 249.

<sup>25</sup> Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs: CO: Chariot Victor, 1991), 244-45.

<sup>26</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 408.

the differences between Revelation and the apocalyptic works outweigh any similarities between the two.<sup>27</sup> For example, although apocalyptic literature was typically pseudonymous, Revelation bears the name of its author (Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Moreover, Revelation fails to share the pessimism of the apocalyptists who despaired of all human history. Rather, Revelation reflects the optimism of God working redemptively through the lamb presently as well as in the future. Furthermore, apocalyptic literature contains no epistolary material. By contrast, seven ecclesiastical epistles are found in Revelation 2–3.

In addition, non-canonical apocalyptic literature did not emphasize moral imperatives. Although there are occasional exceptions to this rule (1 Enoch 91:19), the apocalyptists are not generally motivated by a strong sense of moral urgency. The reason for this is the apocalyptists' conviction that they were part of the righteous remnant. They saw their role as one of encouraging the remnant to endure, remain faithful, and have hope rather than persuade people to turn from known sin.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Revelation utilizes moral imperatives. Humanity's need for repentance is not only found in Christ's exhortations to the seven churches (Rev 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19), but the exhortation to repent is found throughout the book as a whole (Rev 9:20-21; 16:9, 11). Moreover, the coming of messiah in apocalyptic literature is something that takes place exclusively in the future. By contrast Revelation portrays Christ as having already come and laid the groundwork for His future coming through His redemptive death (Rev 5:6). Finally, Revelation makes numerous self-claims to be prophecy (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). In fact, Revelation employs the term *prophētēs* or its cognates eighteen times. These differences between Revelation and apocalyptic literature are summarized in the following chart.<sup>29</sup>

Apocalyptic Genre	Revelation
Pseudonymous	Not pseudonymous
Pessimistic about the present	Not pessimistic about the present

<sup>27</sup> Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 323-38.

<sup>28</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2d ed. (New York: OUP, 2000), 227.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 338.

Apocalyptic Genre	Revelation
No epistolary framework	Epistolary frame work
Limited admonitions for moral compliance	Repeated admonitions for moral compliance
Messiah's coming exclusively future	Basis for Messiah's future coming is past
Does not call itself a prophecy	Calls itself a prophecy

Additional dissimilarities can be observed. For example, apocalyptic literature has a different view of suffering than that portrayed in Revelation. In apocalyptic writings, suffering is something that emanates from God opposing forces rather than from God Himself. The apocalyptists did not see suffering as something good that is to be submitted to. By contrast, in Revelation, suffering comes from the hand of God (Rev 5:5). Therefore, at times, suffering is something good and must be submitted to.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, apocalyptic literature is pseudo-prophecy or *vaticinia ex eventu*, which means “prophecies after the fact.” In other words, apocalyptists typically portray a historical event as future prophecy. However, this is not so in Revelation where John looks from his own day into the future.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Revelation is dominated by an already not yet tension as John looked to the needs of his own day as well as the distant future. Yet, this same tension is not evident in other apocalypses.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, other apocalypses typically use numbers to convey concepts rather than count units. By contrast, Revelation appears to use many numbers to indicate specific count units. For example, many futurist scholars believe that various numbers found in Revelation, such as 1260 days (Rev 12:6) or 42 months (Rev 11:2; 13:5), are direct references to the unfulfilled aspects of Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy (Dan 9:24-27). Hoehner's calculations indicate that the fulfilled aspects of this prophecy had the potential of being accurate to the exact day.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it stands to reason that the prophecy's

<sup>30</sup> Kallas, “The Apocalypse-an Apocalyptic Book?": 69-80.

<sup>31</sup> Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 94.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 115-39.

unfulfilled aspects will also be fulfilled to the minutest detail. Thus, the numbers 1260 days and 42 months should not be taken as merely communicating concepts but rather should be interpreted as specific count units. According to Thomas, Revelation contains no verifiably symbolic numbers. Rather, non-symbolic utilization of numbers is the norm.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, Revelation's heavy dependence upon on Ezekiel and Daniel also raises questions as to whether the book should be categorized as apocalyptic. Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied 400 years before apocalyptic literature became dominant in the intertestamental period. Also, Revelation 12:1 borrows imagery from Genesis 37:9-10, which took place in the patriarchal era nearly 1800 years before apocalypticism began to flourish. Finally, some apocalyptic writings fail to present a precise eschatological scheme.<sup>35</sup> Yet, many have argued that Revelation 6–19, with its telescoping and fixed seven-year duration, does communicate a fixed eschatological scheme. A chronology of events also seems to be employed in Revelation 20–22.

In sum, although Revelation has many affinities with apocalyptic literature, it is difficult to classify the book as apocalyptic because these similarities seem outweighed by the differences between the two. A better classification for the book is prophecy rather than apocalyptic. This classification best takes into account Revelation's numerous self claims to be prophecy. It also takes into account Revelation's similarity to the pattern exhibited by the Old Testament prophets who not only called God's people to repentance but also comforted them through visions of victory to take place in the distant future (Isa 40–66; Ezek 36–48; Amos 9:11–15). Revelation fits this identical pattern by not only repeatedly calling the seven churches to repentance but also providing these oppressed churches with a prophecy to be fulfilled in the distant future regarding the believer's ultimate triumph (Rev 4–22). Categorizing Revelation as prophetic is also substantiated upon observing that Revelation alludes to the Book of Daniel more than any other Old Testament book. Moreover, Jesus specifically referred to Daniel as a prophet (Matt 24:15). Because Revelation's content relies so heavily upon Daniel, it stands to reason that the material found in Revelation should also be categorized as prophetic. The existence of the Greek

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 408.

<sup>35</sup> Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 56.

word *apokalypsis* that appears in the opening verse of the book does not disqualify Revelation from being categorized as prophecy. This word simply means unveiling and does not have the meaning that modern scholars attach to the term “apocalyptic.”

### *Literalism and Revelation*

The decision to categorize Revelation as of the prophetic genre rather than the apocalyptic genre significantly changes the hermeneutical landscape. If Revelation is prophecy, then one interprets Revelation just as he would interpret any other section of prophetic material. The same literal, grammatical, historical method that is used to understand other sections of prophetic material is also what is needed in order to understand Revelation. Therefore, a new set of hermeneutical principles is not needed to properly interpret Revelation.<sup>36</sup> The previously described hermeneutical doors associated with apocalypticism close to the extent that the genre of the book is prophetic rather than apocalyptic. Instead, the interpreter is confined to literalism, which can be defined as attaching to every word the same meaning that it would have in normal usage.<sup>37</sup>

A consistent application of a literal approach to Revelation logically leads the interpreter away from viewing the book’s contents as being fulfilled in the past and instead leads to the futurist interpretation.<sup>38</sup> A relationship exists between literalism and futurism because the ordinary import of Revelation’s words and phrases makes it impossible to argue that Revelation’s contents have already been fulfilled. The destruction of half of the world’s population (Rev 6:8; 9:15), and the greatest earthquake in human history (Rev 16:18) obviously has never taken place.

By using the literal approach, the interpreter takes Revelation’s content in its ordinary sense until he encounters some obvious clue in the text alerting him to the fact that figurative or symbolic language is being employed. How does the interpreter recognize when figurative or symbolic language is being used? One clue involves looking for overt textual indicators alerting the interpreter to the use of figurative language. One such

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<sup>36</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 38.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 89-92.

<sup>38</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 139, 42.

situation is found in Rev 11:8, which notes that Jerusalem “is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt.” Here, the use of the adverb “spiritually” is designed to alert the reader to the fact that an allegorical or spiritually application is being made.

Another clue involves the use of the word sign (*sēmeion*). When John uses this word, it alerts the interpreter to the fact that he is speaking figuratively or symbolically rather than literally. For example, because John uses *sēmeion* to describe the woman in Revelation 12:1, it is obvious that the woman is symbolic or representative of something. Another clue involves the words “like” (*homoios*) or “as” (*hōs*). When John employs such language, he is indicating a correspondence between what he saw in the vision and what he was trying to describe. For example, Revelation 8:8 says, “...And something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea...” The word “like” alerts the interpreter to the fact that John is simply using comparative language to describe what he saw and the mountain is not to be interpreted literally.

Another clue involves an identical correspondence in the Old Testament. Because the leopard, lion, and bear in Revelation 13:2 are also used in Daniel 7 to depict nations, the interpreter is alerted to the fact that John is employing symbolic language. Thus, the leopard, lion, and bear also represent nations in Revelation 13 just as they did in Daniel 7. Yet another clue involves an interpretation in the immediate context. If something is interpreted for the reader, then the thing interpreted is obviously a symbol. The woman in Revelation 17 is obviously a symbol because the immediate context interprets her to be a city (17:18). A final clue involves looking for absurdity. For example, if the woman in Revelation 12:1 were literally clothed with the sun the heat would destroy her. Because a literal interpretation yields an absurd result, symbolic language must be in use.

After identifying figurative or symbolic language, how is such language to be understood? Sometimes the immediate context interprets the symbol. For example, the dragon of Revelation 12:3 is interpreted as Satan in 12:9. Walvoord identifies twenty-six instances in which a symbol is interpreted in the immediate context.<sup>39</sup> Another method is to see if the same symbol is employed elsewhere in the Old Testament. For example, the

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<sup>39</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 29-30.

same symbol of the woman used in Revelation 12:1 is also used in Genesis 37:9-11 to depict Israel. Thus, the woman of Revelation 12 is symbolic of Israel. This strategy is useful because 278 of Revelation's 404 verses allude to the Old Testament.<sup>40</sup>

Fruchtenbaum's work is helpful to the interpreter in this regard because it contains a lengthy appendix listing all of the Old Testament allusions found in Revelation.<sup>41</sup> A final method for understanding Revelation's symbolic language is to note that John through his use of "like" or "as" is attempting to describe futuristic events that are beyond his linguistic ability. Thus, he communicates through language of correspondence. In other words, in order to communicate the contents of his vision, he uses similes or language of comparison by equating things from his own world to the futuristic events that he sees in his vision.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, probably the most significant decision that the interpreter can make regarding what hermeneutic he will use in interpreting the Book of Revelation is determining if Revelation's character has more in common with the prophetic or apocalyptic genre. Viewing Revelation as apocalyptic opens numerous hermeneutical doors such as viewing Revelation's global language as local language, multivalence, code theories, and symbolic numbers. Conversely, those who see Revelation as belonging to the prophetic genre are bound by the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation, which takes Revelation's words or phrases in their ordinary sense unless a convincing textual clue informs the reader to do other wise. While Revelation has some affinities with apocalypticism, these similarities are overshadowed by vast differences between the two. The book has far more in common with prophecy. Thus, the similarities between Revelation and apocalypticism are not sufficient to cause the interpreter to dispense with a consistent application of literalism when deciphering the book.

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah* (Tustin: Ariel Ministries, 1983), 454-59.