

# LITERARY GENRE AND HERMENEUTICS OF THE APOCALYPSE<sup>1</sup>

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*A relatively new field of specialized NT study is a careful examination of the literary genre or style of different books. Revelation has often been classified as a kind of literature called "apocalyptic," but the category of "prophetic" is probably a better classification for the book. The book calls itself a prophecy. If the genre were primarily apocalyptic, this might constitute a basis for interpreting the book in a non-literal way. The preterist, tradition-historical, continuous-historical, and idealist approaches to the book have at times spiritualized the book in accord with the assumption that its apocalyptic style makes it different from other books. If the book is basically prophetic, however, only a literal interpretation will suffice. The symbols of the book lend themselves to literal interpretation, with allowances for normal figures of speech.*

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Analysis of literary genre has emerged as a relatively new tool for NT study at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Its possible effect on hermeneutics, particularly in interpreting the Apocalypse, justifies an in-depth investigation of relevant issues.

## STYLE OF THE APOCALYPSE

This methodology divides the NT books into groups based on comparisons with extra-biblical literature from the periods immediately before, during, and after the composition of the NT.

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<sup>1</sup>This essay is adapted from a portion of the introductory chapter of the forthcoming Volume One of the two-volume commentary on Revelation in the Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary series produced by Moody Press.

<sup>2</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, "New Testament Genre Criticism for the 1990s," *Themelios* 15/2 (Jan/Feb 1990) 40.

Literary features such as structure, style, content, and function are included in these comparisons.<sup>3</sup> Blomberg identifies the categories of general style to which the Apocalypse has been compared as *prophecy*, *apocalyptic*, and *epistle*.<sup>4</sup> To these may be added *edict*, to which Aune has recently likened the messages of Revelation 2-3,<sup>5</sup> and *drama*, for which Blevins has argued.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 13.

<sup>4</sup>Blomberg, "Genre Criticism" 45.

<sup>5</sup>D. E. Aune, "The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3)," *NTS* 36/2 (Apr 1990) 183.

<sup>6</sup>James L. Blevins, "The Genre of Revelation," *RevExp* 77/3 (Summer 1980) 393-408.

No consensus exists as to a precise definition of genre,<sup>7</sup> so discussions attempting to classify portions of the NT, including Revelation, are at best vague. A few general observations regarding proposed answers to the question of "which genre?" are in order, however. The epistolary element is clearly present at certain points of the Apocalypse, such as in Rev 1:4-5a which has a customary epistolary salutation and in Rev 22:21 with its normal epistolary benediction. Yet so much of the book is clearly of another character that this hardly suffices as an overall category. Aune's case for likening chapters 2-3 to a royal or imperial edict has merit too, but he nowhere claims that this applies to the whole book. Blevins' argument for seeing Revelation as a form of Greek tragic drama provides interesting historical background derived from the Greek theater at Ephesus, but hardly qualifies as an overall literary type.

A recent trend among some scholars has been to view Revelation as primarily apocalyptic. This complicates the problem of definition even further because in addition to disagreement about what constitutes genre, uncertainty also prevails regarding a definition of "apocalyptic."<sup>8</sup> Aune launches an effort to solve this problem by formulating a proposed definition based on the Book of Revelation.<sup>9</sup> This is appropriate because the term "apocalyptic" arose from the first word of the Greek text of Revelation, *apokalypsis* ("revelation").<sup>10</sup> Yet such an effort prejudices the case in favor of categorizing Revelation in a certain way by assuming an answer to the question under investigation and not allowing for the book's uniqueness. Revelation certainly has features in common with the *Shepherd of Hermas* and other works of this type, including its extensive use of symbolism, vision as the major means of revelation, focus on the end of the current age and the inauguration of the age to come, a dualism with God and Satan as leaders, a spiritual order determining the course of history, and pessimism about man's ability to change the progress of events.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>David E. Aune, "The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre," *Semeia* 36 (1986) 66.

<sup>8</sup>Aune, "The Apocalypse" 67-91. As for terminology, a distinction between "apocalypses" (as literature), "apocalyptic eschatology" (as a world view), and "apocalypticism" (as a socio-religious movement) appears to have wide acceptance among specialists in this area of study (Theodore N. Swanson, "The Apocalyptic Scriptures," *J.Dharma* 8 [July 1982] 314; James C. VanderKam, "Recent Studies in Apocalyptic," *Word and World* 4 [Winter 1984] 71-72; Aune, "The Apocalypse" 67), though acceptance is by no means universal (VanderKam, "Recent Studies" 73; Adela Yarbro Collins, "Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century," *Int* 40/3 [July 1986] 235-38). The purpose of this study is not to advance proposed distinctions in definition, but to comment on the literary result. The socio-religious movement that produced the Apocalypse is the one begun by Jesus and continued by the apostles, not the apocalyptic spirit that developed among the Jews following the abuses of Antiochus Epiphanes (contra Swanson, "Apocalyptic Scriptures" 321-27). Within this framework apocalyptic eschatology cannot be distinguished from prophetic eschatology as, for example, being more pessimistic (contra *ibid.*, 314-17). The outlook of the two is no different. The brief evaluation here elaborates on the literary factors of Revelation as compared to other "apocalypses."

<sup>9</sup>Aune, "The Apocalypse" 86-91.

<sup>10</sup>David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 108; *idem*, *The New Testament*, 226-27.

<sup>11</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 19-23; Paul J. Achtemeier, "An Apocalyptic Shift in Early Christian Tradition: Reflections on Some Canonical

But it also differs distinctly from everything else in this class. Other apocalypses are generally pseudonymous, but Revelation is not. The epistolary framework of Revelation also sets it apart from the works that are similar in other respects. Other writings lack the repeated admonitions for moral compliance that Revelation has (2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19). Revelation is not as pessimistic about the present as other works in this category. In others the coming of Messiah is exclusively future, but in Revelation he has already come and laid the groundwork for his future victory through his redemptive death.<sup>12</sup>

Most distinctive of all, however, is the fact that this book calls itself a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Its contents fully justify this self-claim.<sup>13</sup> Of the thirty-one characteristics that have been cited in attempts to define apocalyptic,<sup>14</sup> all when properly understood could apply to prophecy as well, with the possible exception of pseudonymity (which does not apply to Revelation). Alleged differences between the Apocalypse and generally accepted works of prophecy often rest upon inadequate interpretations of the former.

The Apocalypse is the product of the NT gift of prophecy, administered by the Holy Spirit, referred to frequently in the NT as a gift (e.g. Rom 12:6), as a product of the gift (e.g. 1 Tim 1:18), as a person possessing the gift (e.g. 1 Cor 12:28, 29; Eph 4:11), or as an exercise of the gift (e.g. 1 Cor 14:31). Fully understood, this gift was marked by the following characteristics: (1) it involved immediate divine inspiration of the spokesperson or writer.<sup>15</sup> (2) The gift provided exhortation and encouragement (1 Cor 14:3).<sup>16</sup> (3) It also shared

Evidence," *CBQ* 45/2 (Apr 1983) 232. Ladd is too narrow in his statement that "the central element in apocalyptic is the glorious second coming of Jesus Christ, who will raise the dead, judge persons and usher in the glories of the Age to Come" (George E. Ladd, "New Testament Apocalyptic," *RevExp* 78/2 [Spring 1981] 205).

<sup>12</sup>Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 23-25; Mounce, *Revelation* 23-25; Blevins, "Genre" 393; Lowell J. Satre, "Interpreting the Book of Revelation," *WW* 4/1 (Winter 1984) 60-61.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Feine, Johannes Behm, and Werner Georg Kmmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans., A. J. Mattill, Jr.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 324; Morris, *Revelation* 23.

<sup>14</sup>David Hellholm, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John," *Society of Biblical Literature 1982 Seminar Papers* (Kent Harold Richards, ed.; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 164-65.

<sup>15</sup>Lindblom writes, "Common to all representatives of the prophetic type here depicted is the consciousness of having access to information of the world above and experiences originating in the divine world, from which ordinary men are excluded" (J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973] 6). The same marked prophets in early Christian communities who regarded themselves as spokesmen for an ultimate authority (David E. Aune, *Prophecy* 204). Possession of a direct revelation from God was one thing that distinguished true prophecy from false prophecy (Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* [Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988] 142-43). Evidence of this characteristic is readily available in the Apocalypse where prophets are a group whose special task is to mediate divine revelation to the churches (Rev 22:6, 9; cf. 1:1) (Aune, *Prophecy* 206).

<sup>16</sup>This characteristic accords with the "forth-teller" etymology of the word *prophthw* (*prophts*, "prophet") (Helmut Krmer, "prophthw k. t. l.," *TDNT* 6:783-84). This part of the present/future structure of the gift is easily illustrated in the teachings of Jesus (Aune, *Prophecy* 188). The prophet gives God's call to repentance which torments some (e.g. Rev 11:3, 10) but convicts others to turn to

elements in common with the gift of teaching.<sup>17</sup> (4) It incorporated prediction of the future into its function.<sup>18</sup> (5) The gift of prophecy entailed a degree of authority which was less than that of the OT prophets and the NT apostles, but some kind of authority was inferred.<sup>19</sup> (6) A further characteristic of the NT prophet was his ability to discern the validity of other prophecies.<sup>20</sup> (7) Gifted

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God (e.g. 1 Cor 14:24, 25) (G. Friedrich, "proffhw k. t. l.," *TDNT* 6:828). He is essentially a proclaimer of God's word. His parklhsiw (*paraklsis*, "exhortation") results in the okodom (*oikodom*, "edification") of the Christian community (David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* [Atlanta: Knox, 1979] 8-9). In particular, the Apocalypse is a series of messages to bring consolation and exhortations (Colin Brown, "Prophet," *DNTT* 2:88).

<sup>17</sup>The prophet instructed the church regarding the meaning of Scripture and through revelations of the future (David Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets in the Revelation of St. John," *NTS* 18 [1971-72] 406). The prophetic gift should not be confused with the gift of a teacher, however. The ministry of prophets was more spontaneous, being based upon direct divine revelations. Teachers, on the other hand, preserved and interpreted Christian tradition, including relevant OT passages, the sayings of Jesus, and traditional beliefs of earlier Christian teaching (Aune, *Prophecy* 202). In regard to the OT, the "charismatic exegesis" of traditional materials by NT prophets resembled the practice of the Qumran community in its *pesharim* (ibid., 252). The practice consisted of finding hidden or symbolic meanings which could be revealed only through an interpreter possessing divine insight (Hill, *NT Prophecy* 91; Aune, *Prophecy* 133). Paul illustrates this in his handling of Isa 59:20-21 and 27:9 in Rom 11:25-26 (Aune, *Prophecy* 252). Aune feels this practice could have been followed by one with the gift of teaching also (ibid., 345-46), but this is doubtful.

<sup>18</sup>This was the "foretelling" part which is suggested by the pro- prefix, but which was a later development in the evolution of the word's meaning (Krmer, "proffhw" 783-84; Friedrich, "proffhw" 832-33). This is the chief sense of the word in the Apocalypse, but Paul also predicted the future (e.g. Acts 20:22-23, 29; 27:22 ff.; Rom 11:25 ff.; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:14-17) (Friedrich, "proffhw" 840). Friedrich notes that in Paul, exhortation is dominant in prophecy, but in the Apocalypse prediction is the main focus (ibid., 828-29; cf. Aune, *Prophecy* 5). This, he says, puts John more into the category of OT prophecy than in company with early Christian prophets. Aune disagrees with this appraisal, however (Aune, *Prophecy* 6). The predictive element is one of several features that Colin Brown uses to relate Luke's understanding of the gift to OT prophets, too (Brown, "Prophecy" 87). Hill observes that prediction is clearly not the main function of prophets in Acts (Hill, *NT Prophecy* 108). The degree of prediction as compared to exhortation is probably not sufficient ground to remove any NT writer's idea of the gift from the realm of NT prophecy, however. Though he could predict the future, the NT prophet should not be confused with the mantiw (*mantis*, "diviner"). This latter figure belonged strictly to a secular setting and discharged nothing of the hortatory function of a prophet.

<sup>19</sup>Since they were spokesmen for God, they claimed no personal part in the communication they gave (Aune, *Prophecy* 204), so it is inevitable that they possessed authority (Hill, *NT Prophecy* 87). The limited nature of this authority is quite obvious, however. Utterances of NT prophets were in many cases challengeable in ways that those of an OT prophet would never have been (1 Cor 14:30) (ibid., 135). This limitation may be missed if one takes the prophecies of Paul (1 Cor 7:10; 14:37-38) and John (Rev 22:18-19) as typical. Paul's absolute authority is clear throughout his writings (ibid., 114) and in the Apocalypse John seemingly places himself into the category of the OT prophets through such things as his inaugural vision (1:9-20), his use of symbolic acts (10:10), and his use of oracular formulas (chaps. 2-3) (Rolf Rendtorf, "proffhw k. t. l.," *TDNT* 6:812; Friedrich, "proffhw" 849; Hill, *NT Prophecy*, 87-88). The distinguishing feature was that Paul and John were apostles also, a fact that enabled them to write with a higher degree of authority. This was not possible for the non-apostolic NT prophet (Hill, *NT Prophecy* 132).

<sup>20</sup>In 1 Cor 14:29, Paul speaks of the need for some to evaluate whenever a prophet was speaking

prophets also had an ability to perceive the thoughts and motives of other persons (cf. Luke 7:39; John 4:19; Acts 5:3-4; 8:21 ff.).<sup>21</sup> (8) The use of prophecy was sometimes accompanied by symbolic acts.<sup>22</sup> (9) Most often prophets were residents of a single locality, but some were also itinerant.<sup>23</sup> (10) Most NT prophecy was oral, but some was written.<sup>24</sup> (11) Prophetic language was marked by a variety of literary forms.<sup>25</sup>

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in the local assembly. While there is some disagreement about the identity of the discerners in the verse, the most probable answer is that "the others" referred to are the other prophets in the congregation (Friedrich, "proffhw" 855; Hill, *NT Prophecy* 133; Aune, *Prophecy* 196).

<sup>21</sup>Friedrich, "proffhw" 842; E. Earle Ellis, "The Role of the Christian Prophet in Acts," *Apostolic History and the Gospel* (W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin, eds.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 55. Such ability was widely regarded as a prophetic phenomenon by Jesus' contemporaries (cf. Mark 2:5, 8 and pars.; Mark 9:33 ff.; 10:21 and pars.; 12:15 and pars.; Luke 6:8; 9:47; 11:17; 19:5; Matt. 12:25 and par.; John 2:24-25; 4:17 ff.) (Hill, *NT Prophecy* 60). This ability was a distinctive part of the effectiveness of the gift for Paul (1 Cor 14:24-25) (Friedrich, "proffhw" 842).

<sup>22</sup>Here is another trait it has in common with OT prophecy. Agabus signified Paul's coming imprisonment this way (Acts 21:10-11). John swallows a small book (Rev 10:8-11) and measures the temple with a reed (Rev 11:1) (Friedrich, "proffhw" 849).

<sup>23</sup>Hill, *NT Prophecy* 90.

<sup>24</sup>Revelation received was fruitless until communicated to others. Without communication, poklyciw (*apokalypsis*, "revelation") could not be called prophecy (Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy* 143-44). In spite of the importance attached to written prophecies such as the Apocalypse, most Christian prophets appear to have delivered their messages orally (Hill, *NT Prophecy* 93).

<sup>25</sup>For the most part, the NT prophet did not follow stereotyped oracular formulas. A noteworthy exception here is the use of tde lgei t pneuma t gion (*tade legei to pneuma to hagion*, "these things says the Holy Spirit") formula by Agabus and John (Hill, *NT Prophecy* 107). Aside from this type of rare indicator, Christian prophecy had to be recognized on other grounds (Aune, *Prophecy* 317). (12) Exercise of the gift entailed the prophet's being in a special state of mind, sometimes referred to as "ecstasy."<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>This point is debated (Terrance Callan, "Prophecy and Ecstasy in Greco-Roman Religion and in 1 Corinthians," *NovT* 17 [1985] 139). Also, implications of the term "ecstasy" are not agreed upon. Nevertheless, something different distinguished the prophet's condition as he received divine revelation (Friedrich, "proffhw" 829). (13) The gift of prophecy was in some sense temporary.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Hill, *NT Prophecy* 137. First Cor 13:8-13 makes this point, though the extent of the limited time is debated (see Robert L. Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease," *JETS* 17 [1974] 81-89; *idem*, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts* [Chicago: Moody, 1978] 42-44, 79-81, 106-8, 199-204).

In light of Revelation's self-claims (e.g. Rev 1:3; 22:18-19) and how well it fulfills the qualifications of NT prophecy, the best overall characterization of the literary style of the Apocalypse is to call it prophetic.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 19-29; Elisabeth Schssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation, Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 133-156. Hill's opinion that Revelation is atypical of NT prophecy in general does not have foundation (Hill, *NT Prophecy* 93; *idem*, "Prophecy and Prophets" 401-18). A blending of genre such as prophetic-apocalyptic<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>George E. Ladd, "Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?" *JBL* 76 (1957) 192-200. or prophetic-apocalyptic-epistolary<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Blomberg, "Genre Criticism" 46. is not the best answer because it does not allow for the preeminence of the book's prophetic character. As noted already in the descriptive characteristics of NT prophecy (cf. "[11]" in the list above), sufficient variety exists in how prophets communicated to account for apocalyptic, epistolary, imperial-edict, and dramatic elements, which

are doubtless present in the book but are not representative of its overarching literary character.

At least two other NT literary styles reflect methods of divine communication to prophets different from that to the prophet of the Apocalypse. According to John 14:26, stimulation of the memories of eyewitnesses was a means used by the Spirit to inspire the writing of gospel-type literature. For the epistolary style, according to indications in 1 Cor 2:6-13, he somehow impressed upon the deep consciousness of the writers some hitherto undisclosed data which they in turn transformed into words for communication to an audience. For the apocalyptic-type communication the message was passed on to the prophet in the form of visions. Since observed differences in genre relate more to the manner of revelation than anything else, perhaps a better designation for the Book of Revelation would be a "visional-prophetic" genre. Such a term would distinguish it from the gospel and epistolary styles, which in a broader sense are also prophetic.

It is inevitable that elements of literary genre resulting from each mode of communication differ somewhat from the rest. Yet all fall into the broad category of prophecy as biblically defined. Boring's objection to defining apocalyptic and prophecy as mutually exclusive categories is valid. He says that it leaves "no room for an apocalyptic document such as Revelation to be considered also as a genuinely prophetic document directly concerned with the realities of political history."<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>M. Eugene Boring, "The Theology of Revelation, 'The Lord Our God the Almighty Reigns,'" *Int* 40/3 (July 1986) 261. Mickelsen, on the other hand, makes strict distinctions between genre-types. He deems it impossible for one person to have written three different genres, gospel, epistles, and apocalypse, as tradition attributed to John the apostle.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Daniel and Revelation: Riddles or Realities?* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984) 19. This alleged impossibility is no problem at all, however, if the genre-type was dependent on the manner in which God inspired his prophet.

It may be concluded, therefore, that the literary genre of inspired writings 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 them from uninspired but similar works whose writers did, in fact, choose a particular genre.

## INTERPRETATION OF THE APOCALYPSE

Proposals for hermeneutical guidelines in interpreting Revelation have correlated at least partially with the literary style assigned to the book. Several general approaches to the book reflect, for the most part, the difference between assuming a predominantly apocalyptic genre and one that is more prophetic: the contemporary-historical or preterist, the tradition-historical, the historicist or continuous-historical, the timeless symbolic or idealist, and the eschatological or futurist.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Mounce, *Revelation* 41-43; Helge S. Kvanig, "The Relevance of the Biblical Visions of the End Time," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 11/1 (June 1989) 36-37. These categorizations deal principally with the core of the book consisting of Rev 4:1`22:5. The preterist approach says

the book is a sketch of first-century conditions in the Roman Empire, thereby emphasizing its historical background.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 324. A recent variation of the preterist approach is offered by David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion, 1987). Chilton dates the book in the 60's (3-6) and sees the entire prophecy as being fulfilled shortly thereafter (40). Quite assuredly the book must be interpreted in light of its historical setting, but to justify this as the limiting factor, one must assume an apocalyptic genre in which the language only faintly reflects actual events. For example, this extreme degree of spiritualization requires that one see the words about Christ's second coming as fulfilled in the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, despite the fact that he did not appear on that occasion.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>E.g. Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* 63-64. This does injustice to the prophetic nature of the work that requires a second personal appearance of Christ on earth in fulfillment of Rev 19:11-16.

The tradition-historical approach views Revelation from the perspective of background material in Greek or Oriental myths and Jewish tradition.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Kvanig, "Relevance" 36. Most certainly the book draws upon these, especially the OT, but it cannot be divested of its predictive element through suppositions of vagueness connected with its alleged apocalyptic language. It is a prophecy whose scope stretches forward to the return of Christ and beyond. To exclude this from its interpretation denies the prophetic genre that most characterizes the book.

The continuous-historical approach treats the book as a panorama of church history from John's time until the second advent. For proof, the view cites events during the intervening centuries that match the happenings under the seal, trumpet, and bowl series. To produce such a match, however, unwarranted allegorization is necessary. It is not uncommon for interpreters to allegorize prophetic portions of Scripture,<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism, the Two Major Views* (3rd ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1980), 43-46; Collins, "Reading the Book" 229-31. so the continuous historical approach does not necessarily favor an apocalyptic genre. It can resort to this rationale, however, whenever it has difficulty finding events of the Christian era to correspond to the data of Revelation. Efforts to match prophecy with fulfillment in this manner have proven to be futile. For instance, Elliott's suggested equation of the hail and fire mingled with blood under the first trumpet judgment (8:7) with the wars of Alaric the Goth and Rhadagaisus the Vandal against the Western Roman Empire<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>E. B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticae* (4 vols.; London: Seeleys, 1851) 348, 351-53. is wholly without exegetical merit. The same may be said of his theory proposing that the fallen star following the fifth trumpet (Rev 9:1) is Mohammed.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Ibid., 417-18. Such suggestions as these reduce the language of Scripture to meaninglessness because of their propensity to make the words fit some preconceived notion.

The timeless symbolic or idealist advocate has the Apocalypse representing the eternal conflict of good and evil in every age, usually in reference to the particular age in which the interpreter lives.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 143. The book does not refer to specific events, but expresses the basic principles according to which God acts throughout history.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Mounce, *Revelation* 43. This interpretation leans heavily on the conclusion that



Revelation is basically apocalyptic in style, and continues the allegorical approach to the book so characteristic of the middle ages of the Christian era. It is correct in attributing to God certain principles of action that govern his dealings with the world in every era, but it is blatantly inadequate in denying the prophetic genre of Revelation. Fulfillment of the events predicted in the book, most notably the personal return of Jesus Christ to earth, is not found in a repetitive cycle that marks each generation, but will at some future point be historical in the fullest sense of the word.

The timeless-symbolic approach relates closely to the movement of recent hermeneutical trends toward contextualizing in interpretation. "Contextualization" is a term coined in a 1972 publication of the World Council of Churches.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>*Theological Education Fund, Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-77)* (Bromley, Kent, United Kingdom: New Life Press, 1972); cf. also Gabriel Fackre, "Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Int* 43/2 (Apr 1989) 128. It advocates assigning meaning to the text of Scripture based on cultural and sociopolitical factors in contemporary society rather than on the grammatical-historical method of exegesis. It inevitably leads to substituting one or more of the many possible applications for the one correct interpretation of Scripture. Following the assumptions of this approach, various oppressed peoples use the Apocalypse to support their cause. They advocate translating the first century "rhetorical situation" into a contemporary one in a way that results in meanings that may be diametrically opposed to the original ones. For instance, it is held that "we have become conscious of androcentric language and its socializing function" so that "we can detect a quite different rhetorical function and impact" of the symbolic language regarding women in Revelation.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Elisabeth Schssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation, Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 199. This transposing of rhetorical situations enables an interpreter to use the book according to personal preferences, even to the extent of supporting positions as divergent as the political left and right.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 203.

Yet "meaning" in the original setting and "significance" for the present situation must be kept separate if literature is to have any coherence. To apply Scripture carelessly without regard to its meaning is to abuse it for the sake of self-generated crusades. Without a well-defined interpretation in the setting of the author, applicational control vanishes and the significance for any given situation becomes a matter of individual whim.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics," *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 122; Normal L. Geisler, "Does Purpose Determine Meaning?" *WTJ* 51/1 (Spring 1989) 153-55.

The futurist approach to the book is the only one that grants sufficient recognition to the prophetic style of the book and a normal hermeneutical pattern of interpretation based on that style. It views the book as focusing on the last period(s) of world history and outlining the various events and their relationships to one another. This is the view that best accords with the principle of literal interpretation.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Tenney, *Revelation* 139; Collins, "Reading the Book" 231-32. The literal interpretation of Revelation is the one generally associated with the premillennial return of Christ and a view of inspiration that understands God to be the real author of every book of the Bible

(Collins, p. 233). Though he used human authors whose individual backgrounds and writing styles are reflected, the divine element in inspiration prevails to the point that the unity of Scripture can be assumed (Collins, "Reading the Book" 232-33; cf. also Fackre, "Hermeneutics" 121, 123). Blomberg's assessment that an "exclusively prophetic interpretation usually insists on an impossibly literal hermeneutic which is therefore inevitably applied inconsistently" (Blomberg, "Genre Criticism" 46) reflects a premature and biased judgment about a subject on which the last word has yet to be written.

Attempts to combine two or more of the above approaches into a single interpretation without allowing for the dominance of prophecy have produced hermeneutical confusion. An example of such a combination is a merging of the idealist and the futurist.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Kvanig, "Relevance" 46-48. The concept proposes that apocalypses spoke of the historical context in which they were written and can be transferred to new situations of later generations time after time, with one final reference to the real end-time tribulation. The signs of the end have been present in every generation, but only God can decide when the real end will come. This type of analysis makes the details of the text almost useless and satisfies itself with general conclusions about the description. These details are alleged to be non-historical.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Ibid., 49-50; Donald Guthrie, *The Relevance of John's Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 30. With a similar approach, Collins' judgment is that the goal of interpretation is "to discern how the text may fulfill its original purpose, or function socially in a way analogous to its effect upon its original readers, in the situation of the interpreter" ("Reading the Book" 242), that "the symbols [of Revelation] are not primarily informational (predicting future events)" (ibid.), and that "a hermeneutic which takes historical criticism seriously can no longer work with an interventionist notion of God" (ibid.). Mickelsen is an example of the combination-approach as reflected in his discussion of "Literary Forms in Daniel and Revelation" (*Daniel and Revelation* 24-27). Other examples of the combination-approach are presented in Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 205-17, Leland Ryken, *Words of Life, A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 135-47, and M. Robert Mulholland, *Revelation, Holy Living in an Unholy World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). Both Ryken (*Words of Life* 143-44) and Mulholland (*Revelation* 18) point out the necessity of what the psychologists call "right-brain" activity (i.e. the ability think by means of images and intuition) in the interpretation of the book, i.e. the effects of parts of the Apocalypse are to be *felt* without cognitive interaction. The assessment of Bauckham is more acceptable: "Out of his visionary experience John has produced a work which enables the reader not to share the same experience at second-hand, but to receive its message transposed into a literary medium" (Richard J. Bauckham, "The Role of the Spirit in the Apocalypse," *EvQ* 52/2 [Apr-June 1980] 72).

For example, Beasley-Murray's opinion is that the importance of locust-plague prophecies is not in their detail, and therefore, glaring inconsistencies that are present in them are of no concern to the author.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 157. Mounce describes the fifth trumpet as the language of ecstatic experience that eliminates any possibility of a consistent pattern. He calls this "a montage of divine judgments upon a recalcitrant world."<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Mounce, *Revelation* 184. Leon Morris speaks of this same section as coming from a "fiery, passionate and poetic spirit" whose details cannot be pressed as though it were "a pedantic piece of scientific prose."<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Morris, *Revelation* 123. Writing in broader terms, Ladd describes apocalyptic language and vision as generally surrealistic rather than rational and logically consistent.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Ladd, *Revelation* 124.

Ryken is quite explicit regarding a combination perspective of the book.

After naming and describing the preterist, the continuous historical, the futurist, and the idealist as the four major approaches to the Apocalypse, he writes,

I think that the book is a combination of all of these. We should begin with the situation of the church to which the book was written. Because of the literary form of the book, which portrays events symbolically, its relevance extends throughout the history of the world. Babylon, for example, may have been the Roman empire for John's first century audience, but in Old Testament times it was literally Babylon, and it has taken many forms throughout history. The literary mode of symbolism means that the events portrayed in Revelation are perpetually relevant and will be ultimately relevant at the end of history.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Ryken, *Words of Life* 144-45.

All the authorities cited above as viewing apocalyptic genre to exclude literal interpretation would insist on interpreting it literally, however, when it speaks of the personal return to Christ to earth in Rev 19:11-16. They are distinctly idealistic in their understanding of earlier sections of the book. Morris is perhaps typical of the rest when he writes concerning the trumpet-plagues, "This is true throughout the ages and it will be so till the End."<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Morris, *Revelation* 123. Yet in their overall approach to the Apocalypse, this group of interpreters mix the idealistic-type interpretations with a futurist viewpoint regarding the general thrust of the Apocalypse. They have John in sort of a "dream world" until their personally contrived formula has him revert to a literal mode of predicting the future in more precise terms.

To be sure, the bulk of the Apocalypse resulted from John's prophetic trance(s) (cf. *n pneumati* [*en pneymati*, "in the spirit"], Rev 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). There is, however, no justification for equating such a trance with a dream where logical coherence is nonexistent. Though in some sort of ecstatic state, John's spirit was wide awake and its powers were exercised with unusual alertness and clarity.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Columbus, Ohio: Luther Book Concern, 1935) 58. If anything, his senses were *more* alert for details rather than less alert. It is shortsighted to dismiss the details of the Apocalypse as meaningless or to explain them in some idealistic and timeless sense on the basis of John's prophetic state.

The combination-approach is deficient on another ground: it leaves to human judgment the determination of where the details of a text end and its general picture begins. Allowing this liberty for subjective opinion cannot qualify as objective interpretation. In other words, it cannot satisfy the criteria of a grammatical-historical system of hermeneutics such has characterized an evangelical Christian understanding of Scripture. This method must be applied to Revelation also. If Revelation is a prophecy, it must be treated as other prophecy and its details must be objectively meaningful and historical. Only in this way can the general picture of which the details are a part be historical. No provision can be made for elasticity of interpretation that allows for a change in meaning from generation to generation and from place to place.

The preferred approach to the Apocalypse is to interpret according to normal principles of grammar and facts of history, remembering the peculiar

nature of predictive prophecy throughout the Bible.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>The original historical setting of the prophecy is of utmost importance, but a peculiar characteristic of predictive prophecy is that at times, the prophet himself did not grasp the full import of his own prophecy (1 Pet 1:10-12). This being the case, the same limitation applies to his readership and to succeeding generations, until the fulfillment of the prophecy finally illuminates fully the divinely intended meaning. This is usually referred to as "literal" interpretation. One may wonder how a book of symbols and visions such as Revelation can be interpreted literally.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Peter Mendham, "Interpreting the Book of Revelation," *Saint Mark's Review* 122 (June 1985) 26. This is not so difficult to understand if one keeps in mind that the symbols and visions were the means of communicating the message to the prophet, but they have a literal meaning unless otherwise indicated in the text. They do not furnish grounds for interpreting the text in a non-literal fashion. They are to be interpreted as one would interpret the rest of the Bible.

The verb *smanen* (*esmanen*, "he signified") in Rev 1:1 furnishes an advanced notice of the symbolic nature of God's communication with John. This has nothing to do with how the resultant communication should be interpreted, however. Ryken makes the same basic mistake as Ironside in taking the Apocalypse to be a book of symbols that cannot be interpreted literally.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Ryken, *Words of Life* 143-44; H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (New York: Liozeaux, n.d.) 13. Both men fail to distinguish between the process of revelation and that of interpretation. Ryken's faulty judgment is in not recognizing that literal interpretation makes ample allowance for figures of speech that are clearly represented as such and in seeking to make a distinction between "literal" and "historical."<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Ryken, *Words of Life* 143. By blurring this characteristic of literal interpretation, he opens the door to treat details of the text quite loosely. Literal interpretation sees a distinction between symbols and symbolic or figurative language. The latter receives full recognition, but the former may have a meaning that is quite literal and historical.

The proper procedure is to assume a literal interpretation of each symbolic representation provided to John unless a particular factor in the text indicates it should be interpreted figuratively. For example, John saw in vision form a dramatization of a multitude of 144,000 (Rev 7:4) which in future fulfillment will be a literal multitude of 144,000 people because nothing in the text indicates that the number should be understood in some hidden sense. On the other hand, the city where the two witnesses will be slain is called "spiritually" (*pneumatikw*, *pneumatiks*) Sodom and Egypt (Rev 11:8), indicating that a figurative rather than a literal interpretation of the proper names is in order.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Bauckham criticizes the use of *pneumatikw* as justification for a non-literal interpretation of the two cities and says the adverb refers to Spirit-given perception (Richard J. Bauckham, "The Role" 79). Whether the word refers to the Holy Spirit or not is debatable, but the end result is the same: this is not a reference to the literal city Sodom or the literal country Egypt. So a literal interpretation is the assumption unless something in the text indicates otherwise.

Literal interpretation refrains from the tendency to find hidden meanings in the Apocalypse. "Green grass" in the first trumpet of Rev 8:7 has at times been seen as a hidden symbol, the grass standing for human beings and the green portraying the prosperous conditions of those people.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Walter Scott, *Exposition of the*

*Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, n.d.) 186. Alford points out the incongruity of such an interpretation, noting that the later trumpet judgments distinguish clearly between grass as a natural object and men who are distinctly so labelled in explicit terminology (Rev 8:11; 9:4, 15).<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, & Co., 1903) 4:635. Analogy requires that in the same series of visions, when one part destroys earth, trees, and grass, and another inflicts no injury on earth, trees, or grass, but does harm men, that grass must carry the same meaning, i.e. a literal one, in both cases.

The same principle applies, but even more conspicuously, in conjunction with the sixth seal judgment (Rev 6:12-17). At times, commentators have understood the cosmic disturbances to picture human arrogance and the overthrow of principalities and powers supporting the authority of earthly kings.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup>E. g. William Barclay, *The Revelation of John* (2 vols., 2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 2:15; G. V. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (HNTC; New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 80. The most conspicuous deficiency of this type of interpretation is that the thing allegedly symbolized by the convulsion of the heavens (6:12-14), i.e. a convulsion of the nations, is described immediately after the heavenly phenomena in literal terms (6:15-17) (the same way as in Hag 2:21-22).<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or "The Day of the Lord"* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, n.d.) 255.

Another clear distinctive of literal interpretation is its avoidance of assumptions not justified in the text. Theories that "Babylon" in Revelation 14 and 16-18 is a code-word for Rome have been widespread.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Mounce, *Revelation* 274; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 225; Mickelsen, *Revelation* 25; Ryken, *Words* 144-45. The fact that the text of Revelation locates the city on the Euphrates River (16:12) has been no deterrent to this symbolic understanding. Neither has the fact that Rome, because of its geographical location, has never been and could never be the great commercial city described in Revelation 18.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Alford, 4:471. Babylon did eventually become a code-word for Rome, but not during the period of the NT's composition.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>"Babylon" in 1 Pet 5:13 is not an exception to this generalization.

Attempts to assign a symbolic connotation to the thousand years in Rev 20:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 have been multiplied. Lewis is typical of the wide assortment of attempts to explain away the literality of a future millennium on earth when he writes, "The biblical millennium . . . is not the glorious age to come, but this present era for giving the message of salvation to the nations."<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Arthur H. Lewis, *The Dark Side of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 65. The trend of this view is to take one thousand as a symbolic number and identify the period with the interval between Christ's first and second advents.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* 507; Mulholland, *Revelation* 304-9; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 209. All who adopt this tactic, however, are at a loss to explain how two resurrections in Rev 20:4-5 can be described as separated by one thousand years without referring the millennium to the future and dispensing with the need to spiritualize its significance. The two resurrections are designated by the same verb: *zhsan* (*ezsan*, "they lived," "they came to life"). By common agreement, the latter resurrection is clearly a bodily one, so the former one must be too, necessitating that both be future and positing a future thousand-year period between them.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Alford, 4:732-

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33; George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 141-50. The literal approach is fair and consistent. To interpret otherwise marks an end of "all definite meaning in plain words."<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Alford, 4:252.

Kuyper acknowledges that the language of Rev 20:1-10 found anywhere else would require literal interpretation, but thinks that its surroundings in this book require the terminology to be understood non-literally.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *The Revelation of St. John* (John Hendrik de Vries, trans.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1935) 263. Ladd points out the fallacy of this reasoning. He disagrees with the position that "the spiritual interpretation departs from the proper principles of hermeneutics because this is literature of a different type to which the ordinary rules of hermeneutics cannot apply."<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Ladd, 147. He finds no contextual clue in Rev 20:4-6 to support a spiritualized interpretation.<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Ibid., 146.

Since in broad perspective the Apocalypse is prophetic in nature as is the rest of the NT, a different set of hermeneutical principles is not needed to interpret it. A normal grammatical-historical methodology is the natural and necessary interpretive framework.

## CONCLUSION

Hermeneutical confusion on many fronts is the inheritance of biblical interpreters of the 1990's. The indecision that besets students of the Apocalypse is an example. It behooves serious exegetes to probe carefully the underlying assumptions of currently emerging theories and to formulate sensible evaluations of them. This type of investigation and this alone can alleviate the confused state which otherwise beclouds an accurate understanding of Scripture.