

INTERPRETING  
APOCALYPTIC  
LITERATURE

HANDBOOKS FOR OLD TESTAMENT EXEGESIS  
David M. Howard Jr., series editor

---

*Interpreting the Pentateuch: An Exegetical Handbook*

Peter T. Vogt

*Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook*

Robert B. Chisholm Jr.

*Interpreting the Wisdom Books: An Exegetical Handbook (forthcoming)*

Edward M. Curtis

*Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*

Mark D. Futato

*Interpreting the Prophetic Books: An Exegetical Handbook*

Gary V. Smith

*Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook*

Richard A. Taylor

HANDBOOKS FOR OLD TESTAMENT EXEGESIS

INTERPRETING  
APOCALYPTIC  
LITERATURE

An Exegetical Handbook

Richard A. Taylor

David M. Howard Jr.

SERIES EDITOR

 **Kregel**  
*Academic*

*Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook*

© 2016 by Richard A. Taylor

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505-6020.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

All Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

The Greek font GraecaU and the Hebrew font New JerusalemU are from [www.linguistsoftware.com/lgku.htm](http://www.linguistsoftware.com/lgku.htm), +1-425-775-1130.

ISBN 978-0-8254-2761-9

Printed in the United States of America

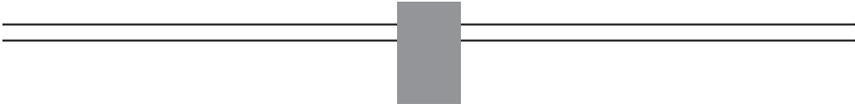
16 17 18 19 20 / 5 4 3 2 1

*To  
Diane  
with love and appreciation*



---

---



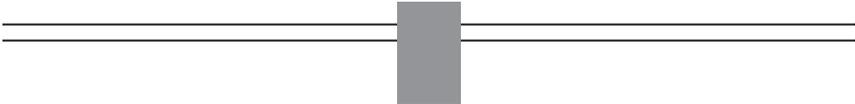
## CONTENTS IN BRIEF

Series Preface .....	13
Preface .....	15
Abbreviations .....	19
1. What Is Apocalyptic Literature? .....	21
2. Major Themes in Apocalyptic Literature .....	41
3. Preparing for Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature.....	87
4. Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature.....	117
5. Proclaiming Apocalyptic Literature .....	133
6. Sample Texts from Apocalyptic Literature .....	153
Appendix: Antecedents of Apocalyptic Literature.....	179
Glossary .....	201



---

---



# CONTENTS

Series Preface .....	13
Preface .....	15
Abbreviations .....	19
1. What Is Apocalyptic Literature? .....	21
<i>Distinctiveness of Apocalyptic Literature</i> .....	23
<i>Renewed Interest in Apocalyptic Literature</i> .....	24
<i>A Context for Apocalyptic Literature</i> .....	26
<i>Problem of Definition</i> .....	27
Apocalypse .....	31
Apocalypticism .....	33
Apocalyptic Literature .....	34
Apocalyptic Eschatology.....	34
Apocalyptic Discourse.....	35
Proto-Apocalyptic .....	36
<i>Trajectory of Development</i> .....	37
<i>Social World of Apocalyptic Literature</i> .....	39
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	40
2. Major Themes in Apocalyptic Literature .....	41
<i>Representative Texts</i> .....	41
The Book of Daniel .....	42
Old Testament Prophets .....	46
Extrabiblical Jewish Apocalyptic Texts .....	52
Apocalypticism at Qumran.....	61
<i>Characteristic Features of Apocalyptic Literature</i> .....	65

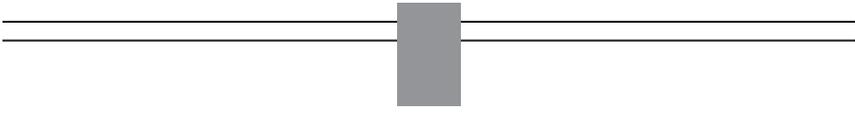
Literary Expression .....	65
Revelatory Content .....	66
Dreams and Visions.....	68
Pseudonymous Authorship.....	69
Hiddenness and Secrecy .....	70
Pervasive Symbolism.....	71
<i>Major Themes of Apocalyptic Literature.....</i>	<i>73</i>
Developed Angelology .....	73
Ethical Dualism .....	76
Deterministic Outlook.....	77
Imminent Crisis.....	79
Faithful Remnant .....	80
Divine Judgment .....	81
Eschatological Hope.....	84
<i>Conclusion .....</i>	<i>85</i>
3. Preparing for Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature .....	87
<i>Comprehending Figurative Language.....</i>	<i>88</i>
Simile.....	88
Metaphor .....	89
Metonymy.....	91
Hypocatastasis .....	93
Synecdoche .....	96
Interpretive Tools.....	96
<i>Learning from Reception History .....</i>	<i>97</i>
Examples of Faulty Interpretation .....	97
Lesson for Interpreters.....	98
<i>Evaluating Issues of Text .....</i>	<i>99</i>
Problems of Language .....	99
Problems of Text.....	99
Textual Resources.....	103
<i>Working with Original Languages.....</i>	<i>104</i>
Bible Study Software.....	104
Lexical Resources .....	105
Grammatical Resources: Hebrew.....	106
Grammatical Resources: Aramaic .....	107
<i>Benefiting from Previous Studies.....</i>	<i>108</i>
Primary Sources for Apocalyptic Texts.....	108
General Works on Apocalyptic Literature.....	110
Essays from Symposia on Apocalypticism .....	113
Apocalyptic Literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls .....	114
Preaching Apocalyptic Literature .....	114
Bibliographical Help on Pseudepigraphical Literature.....	115
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>116</i>

4. Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature .....	117
<i>Guidelines for Interpretation</i> .....	118
Interpreting Grammatically and Historically.....	118
Attending to Issues of Genre.....	121
Locating Interpretive Clues .....	122
Focusing on Macrostructure.....	124
Accepting the Limits of Figurative Language.....	126
Respecting the Silence of the Text.....	127
<i>Pitfalls of Interpretation</i> .....	127
Unnecessary Ignorance.....	128
Misplaced Certainty .....	128
Manipulation of Details.....	129
Creation of Arbitrary Timetables .....	130
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	131
5. Proclaiming Apocalyptic Literature.....	133
<i>Ancient Texts, Modern Contexts, and Finding a Bridge</i> .....	134
<i>A Practical Strategy</i> .....	135
Getting Familiar with the Text .....	136
Resolving the Main Difficulties .....	143
Clarifying the Structure .....	145
<i>Exegetical Outline of Daniel 7</i> .....	146
Summarizing the Main Point(s).....	147
Framing the Presentation .....	148
<i>Homiletical Outline of Daniel 7</i> .....	148
Listening to Other Interpreters .....	149
Bridging to Application.....	150
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	151
6. Sample Texts from Apocalyptic Literature .....	153
<i>A Ram, a Goat, and the Word of the Lord (Daniel 8:1–27)</i> .....	154
Getting Familiar with the Text .....	154
Resolving the Main Difficulties .....	158
Clarifying the Structure .....	161
<i>Exegetical Outline of Daniel 8</i> .....	162
Summarizing the Main Point(s).....	163
Framing the Presentation .....	164
<i>Homiletical Outline of Daniel 8</i> .....	164
Listening to Other Interpreters .....	165
Bridging to Application.....	168
<i>Lessons from Locusts (Joel 2:28–32)</i> .....	169
Getting Familiar with the Text .....	170
Resolving the Main Difficulties .....	172
Clarifying the Structure .....	173

<i>Exegetical Outline of the Book of Joel</i> .....	173
Summarizing the Main Point(s) .....	174
Framing the Presentation .....	175
<i>Homiletical Outline of the Book of Joel</i> .....	175
Listening to Other Interpreters .....	176
Bridging to Application.....	177
Appendix: Antecedents of Apocalyptic Literature.....	179
Glossary .....	201

---

---



## SERIES PREFACE

*AN APPRECIATION FOR THE RICH DIVERSITY* of literary genres in Scripture is one of the positive features of evangelical scholarship in recent decades. No longer are the same principles or methods of interpretation applied across the board to every text without regard for differences in genre. Such an approach can lead to confusion, misunderstanding, and even wrong interpretations or applications. Careful attention to differences in genre is a critical component of a correct understanding of God's Word.

The Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis series (HOTE) offers students basic skills for exegeting and proclaiming the different genres of the Old Testament. Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to interpreting Scripture, this series features six volumes covering the major genres in the Old Testament: narrative, law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, and apocalyptic. The volumes are written by seasoned scholar-teachers who possess extensive knowledge of their disciplines, lucid writing abilities, and the conviction that the church and the world today desperately need to hear the message of the Old Testament. These handbooks are designed to serve a twofold purpose: to present the reader with a better understanding of the different Old Testament genres (principles), and to provide strategies for preaching and teaching these genres (methods).

These volumes are primarily intended to serve as textbooks for graduate-level exegesis courses that assume a basic knowledge of Hebrew. There is no substitute for encountering God's Word in its original languages, even as we acknowledge the limitations of language in plumbing the depths of who God is. However, the series is also accessible to those without a working knowledge of Hebrew, in that an English translation

is always given whenever Hebrew is used. Thus, seminary-trained pastors for whom Hebrew is a distant memory, upper-level college students, and even well-motivated laypeople should all find this series useful.

Each volume is built around the same six-chapter structure, as follows:

1. The Nature of the Genres
2. Viewing the Whole: Major Themes
3. Preparing for Interpretation
4. Interpreting the Text
5. Proclaiming the Text
6. Putting It All Together: From Text to Sermon

Authors are given freedom in how they title these six chapters and in how best to approach the material in each. But the familiar pattern in every volume will serve students well, allowing them to move easily from one volume to another to locate specific information. The first chapter in each handbook introduces the genre(s) covered in the volume. The second chapter covers the purpose, message, and primary themes in the individual books and canonical sections under consideration. The third chapter includes such diverse matters as historical and cultural backgrounds, critical questions, textual matters, and a brief annotated bibliography of helpful works. The fourth chapter sets forth guidelines for interpreting texts of the genre(s) under consideration. The fifth chapter details strategies for proclaiming such texts. The final chapter gives one or two hands-on examples of how to move through different stages of the interpretive process, in order to demonstrate how the principles discussed previously work out in practice. Each volume also includes a glossary of specialized terms; these terms are boldfaced at their first occurrence in each chapter.

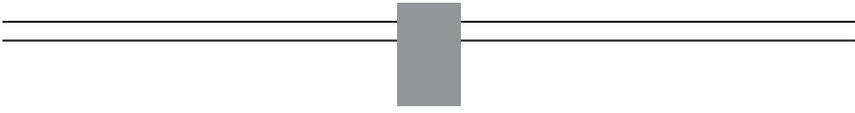
The Scriptures themselves remind us in many ways about the importance of proper interpretation of God's words. Paul encouraged Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15 NRSV). In an earlier day, Ezra the scribe, along with the Levites, taught God's Word to the postexilic community: "So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (Neh. 8:8 NRSV). It is my prayer, and that of the authors and publisher, that these handbooks will help a new generation of God's people to do the same.

*Soli Deo Gloria.*

—DAVID M. HOWARD JR.  
Series Editor

---

---



## PREFACE

*OVER THE PAST HALF-CENTURY OR SO, APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE* has moved from the shadows of biblical scholarship to the forefront of research. The result is a large and ever-growing bibliography of secondary literature dealing with the topic of Old Testament apocalypticism. Only a small portion of that literature can be represented in this work. At the publisher's request, only English-language sources are included.

However, those who wish to pursue research in the area of Jewish apocalyptic literature will not lack for material to read. In my personal database for apocalyptic literature, I have collected more than one thousand items that deal with this topic in fairly general terms and which are relevant for Old Testament study. This database does not include specialized works devoted more narrowly to particular ancient texts, such as the book of Enoch. To include those items would add considerably to the size of the bibliography. There is also a substantial corpus of published research dealing specifically with the book of Daniel. Much of this material is relevant not only for the study of Daniel in particular, but also for the study of apocalyptic literature in general. My database for the book of Daniel approaches four thousand items. Other Old Testament books relevant to the study of apocalyptic literature, such as Zechariah, also have significant bibliographies.

I take this opportunity to express my thanks to some of those who have contributed in one way or another to the completion of this volume. I am grateful to Jim Weaver, formerly editor for academic acquisitions at Kregel. Jim first suggested that I contribute this volume to the Kregel series and then encouraged me along the way. By the time Fred Mabie joined the Kregel editorial staff, this project was more or less

complete. But Fred was able to move things forward, and I appreciate his advice and counsel. I am also grateful to David M. Howard Jr., editor of the series *Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis*. David has provided helpful editorial supervision and suggestions for improvement of this volume.

I am especially grateful to my wife Diane for her encouragement and patience throughout the process of research and writing of this volume. It was during this time that we first learned of her cancer and began a long journey of chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery. She has been an unfailing example of courage, perseverance, and optimism in the midst of circumstances that were at times discouraging and disappointing. We are thankful for renewed strength and improved health. I lovingly dedicate this volume to her.

—RICHARD A. TAYLOR

*For in them is  
the spring of understanding,  
the fountain of wisdom,  
and the river of knowledge.  
—4 Ezra 14:47*



---

---



## ABBREVIATIONS

1QDan <sup>a</sup>	a fragment of Daniel discovered at Qumran cave 1
1QDan <sup>b</sup>	a fragment of Daniel discovered at Qumran cave 1
4QDan <sup>a</sup>	a fragment of Daniel discovered at Qumran cave 4
4QDan <sup>b</sup>	a fragment of Daniel discovered at Qumran cave 4
4QDan <sup>c</sup>	a fragment of Daniel discovered at Qumran cave 4
4QDan <sup>d</sup>	a fragment of Daniel discovered at Qumran cave 4
4QDan <sup>e</sup>	a fragment of Daniel discovered at Qumran cave 4
pap6QDan	a papyrus fragment of Daniel discovered at Qumran cave 6
1QM	<i>Milhamah</i> or <i>War Scroll</i> discovered at Qumran cave 1
1QS	<i>Serek Hayahad</i> or <i>Rule of the Community</i> discovered at Qumran cave 1
5Q15	<i>New Jerusalem Aramaic</i> discovered at Qumran cave 5
<i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
<i>Apoc. Ab.</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Abraham</i>
<i>Apoc. Zeph.</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Zephaniah</i>
<i>2 Bar.</i>	<i>2 Baruch</i>
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford, 1907.
BHQ	<i>Biblia Hebraica Quinta</i> . Edited by A. Schenker et al. Stuttgart, 2004–.
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Edited by K. Elliger and W. Rudolph. Stuttgart, 1983.
DCH	Clines, David J. A., ed. <i>The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . 8 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–2012.
<i>1 En.</i>	<i>1 Enoch</i>
<i>2 En.</i>	<i>2 Enoch</i>

- Ep. Barnabas* *Epistle of Barnabas*  
*HALOT* Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 5 vols. 1994–2000.
- Jub.* *Jubilees*  
*T. Ab.* *Testament of Abraham*  
*T. Levi* *Testament of Levi*  
*T. Mos.* *Testament of Moses*

## WHAT IS APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE?

IN MODERN LIFE, WE ARE OFTEN CONFRONTED with various types of literature. We read newspapers, novels, and academic textbooks; we read wedding invitations, birth announcements, and obituaries; we read summaries of sporting events, magazines, and collections of poetry—and much more. In spite of their many similarities, these means of communication have striking literary differences as well. Perhaps without even realizing it, we understand that different types of literature, each with their own distinctive styles and sometimes stereotypical forms, may impose very different requirements on their reader. We do not read poetry in quite the same way we read the sports page or a comic strip; we do not read a novel in quite the same way we read a calculus textbook or a Hebrew grammar. We instinctively know that such **genres** are distinct, that they may require differing levels of concentration and effort, that some may be less demanding and more enjoyable than others, and that their language does not always work in exactly the same way. By experience we gain the necessary skills that enable us successfully to navigate our way through these various forms of literature.

The literature of the Old Testament also has its distinctive genres, some of which differ appreciably from others. While much of the Hebrew Bible is historical in nature, consisting of narrative accounts of specific events and human dialogue, one also finds in the Old Testament a great deal of hymnic poetry, wisdom literature, prophetic utterances, and legal literature, to mention just a few of these forms. Each of these genres requires special attention from the interpreter in order to ensure that proper

conclusions are drawn from the text. Otherwise, one runs the risk of bringing incorrect assumptions or faulty expectations to the text. This can distort the intended meaning and lead to flawed understanding.

Genres vary considerably in the way they use language to communicate meaning. Some genres, for example, make abundant use of figurative language and complex symbolism. If taken in an overly literal fashion, such language could lead one to misconstrue the message of the author or even to miss the point altogether. Some genres use language in a highly allusive—perhaps even elusive—way that differs considerably from the normally straightforward style of a narrative text. Some genres make extensive use of strange and even bizarre symbols, the meaning of which may not be immediately clear or obvious to the reader. Good readers develop an awareness of these features and approach such literature in light of the expectations signaled in part by the genre. They resist the temptation to impose on such texts expectations that are contrary to those intended by their author. A proper understanding of genre is therefore an important key to valid interpretation of a text. In this work we will focus on a particular genre of Old Testament literature, one that differs in important ways from other genres found in the Old Testament. We will focus on **apocalyptic literature**.

The purpose of this volume is fourfold. First, it presents a summary of the main features, themes, origins, development, and purpose of Jewish apocalyptic literature of the **Second Temple period**. Such an overview will contribute to a better understanding of what sets apocalyptic literature apart from other types of literature. Second, it situates Old Testament apocalyptic literature within the broader context of ancient apocalyptic thought by analyzing its relationship to similar extrabiblical writings. This analysis provides insight into the history of this literature, as well as its relevance and appeal for its original audience. Third, it offers some guidelines that should inform interpretation of apocalyptic literature. These general interpretive principles provide guidance for reaching sound conclusions regarding the interpretation of Old Testament apocalyptic literature. Fourth, it provides a sample treatment of two Old Testament apocalyptic texts. These samples illustrate some of the principles and suggestions presented in the earlier portions of the book.

Our discussion of apocalyptic literature begins by considering a number of preliminary matters related to this unique genre. This initial chapter seeks answers to such questions as the following: What makes apocalyptic literature so different from other forms of literature? Why is there, at present, a revival of scholarly interest in this material? What exactly is meant by the term *apocalyptic*? By what means can this genre be identified as a distinct category of literature? The answers to these questions will provide direction and clarity for topics to be considered in the following chapters.

## DISTINCTIVENESS OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

When compared to the bulk of writings found in the Bible, apocalyptic literature is a very distinctive form of literature. For that reason, it requires special attention and effort in order to grasp accurately its message. When Bible students first approach the book of Daniel in the Old Testament or the book of Revelation in the New Testament, they immediately realize that things are very different from what one finds in most other portions of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Here the reader has entered a different world, one in which the sights and sounds described therein may bear little resemblance to what one finds in the rest of Scripture. The terrain seems unfamiliar. The scenes portrayed by **visions** and dreams are not immediately clear or understandable. Instead, these writings are characterized at times by seemingly impenetrable mysteries, puzzling symbolism, startling predictions, and foreboding announcements. What do these strange things mean? It is as though a mysterious veil rests over the language. Such is the world of apocalyptic literature.

The children's film *The Wizard of Oz* provides an analogy to this befuddlement. Young Dorothy awakens after a fierce tornado, only to find herself no longer at home in Kansas but transported instead to the dazzling and magical land of Oz. With amazement she exclaims to her pet dog, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas any more!" The familiar scenes of inviting farmland and welcome faces of family and friends were only distant memories. They had been replaced by scenes of an amazing new world full of both pleasant surprises and foreboding dangers. Dorothy was not sure what to make of it all.

In a similar way, those who visit for the first time the world of apocalyptic literature may find themselves struck by the realization that they too have entered an unusual and unfamiliar realm—one that leaves the reader both with a sense of amazement and with a sense of disorientation. Kansas (i.e., most of biblical literature) and the land of Oz (i.e., apocalyptic literature) are two very different worlds indeed!

---

1. D. S. Russell, a well-known specialist in Jewish apocalyptic literature, recalls his initial impressions when he began his study of apocalyptic texts as a student: "I found myself in a weird and wonderful world of fantasy and dreams—beasts with sprouting horns, dragons spouting fire, falling stars, mysterious horsemen, mystical mountains, sacred rivers, devastating earthquakes, fearsome giants, demon progeny, monstrous births, portents in heaven, portents on earth. Its often frenzied and frenetic descriptions of coming woes sounded like the product of over-heated minds." Russell's initial impressions of apocalyptic literature are probably not that different from those of many readers who encounter such texts for the first time. See D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 1.

## RENEWED INTEREST IN APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Investigation into apocalyptic literature as a distinct genre is largely a development of the past two centuries or so. Scholarly research on apocalyptic literature seems to pick up steam in the first half of the nineteenth century with the work of the German scholar Friedrich Lücke.<sup>2</sup> Lücke's investigations focused on the book of Revelation, which led him to consider the broader field of apocalyptic literature as well. He is sometimes regarded as the founder of modern study of apocalyptic literature.<sup>3</sup>

The study of apocalyptic literature in modern biblical scholarship has had a checkered history. Scholarly attitudes toward this literature range from serious interest to benign neglect to complete rejection. Prior to about the mid-twentieth century there was a tendency for biblical scholars and theologians alike not only to neglect apocalyptic literature, but in some instances to treat it with a certain dislike or even disdain.<sup>4</sup> The world of apocalyptic literature was one with which many scholars were relatively unfamiliar, and with which they felt uncomfortable. Some were more at home with the cadences of Hebrew poetry and prophecy, or the practicality of the Jewish **wisdom literature**, or the ethical teachings of Jesus and the apostles. To them, apocalyptic literature may have seemed like a foreign land that spoke an unfamiliar language—a strange country whose inhabitants had odd ways of thinking and peculiar forms of expression. Although there were exceptions to this general tendency, many biblical scholars took an unsympathetic stance with regard to this genre of literature.<sup>5</sup> Some simply avoided it. Like an unwanted and rejected Cinderella, apocalyptic literature became a stepchild in the family of biblical scholarship.

---

2. Friedrich Lücke, *Versuch einer vollständigen Einleitung in die Offenbarung des Johannes, oder allgemeine Untersuchungen über die apokalyptische Litteratur überhaupt und die Apokalypse des Johannes insbesondere*, 2d ed. (Bonn: E. Weber, 1852). [English: "Attempt at a comprehensive introduction to the Revelation of John, or general investigations into apocalyptic literature in general and the Apocalypse of John in particular."]

3. So, for example, Ulrich H. J. Körtner, *The End of the World: A Theological Interpretation*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 23.

4. As Tupper says, "Apocalypticism is mostly an embarrassment to modern theology. Apocalyptic evokes images of the weird and menacing, the fantastic and grotesque, the ridiculous and the absurd. The label 'apocalyptic' has become a catchword for everything eschatologically illegitimate." See E. Frank Tupper, "The Revival of Apocalyptic in Biblical and Theological Studies," *Review and Expositor* 72 (1975): 280.

5. Wellhausen, for example, stressed the importance of the classical Israelite prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. In his view they represented a high point in the development of Old Testament religion. Wellhausen attached less significance to the later apocalyptic writings, since according to him these later writings by comparison represented a decline in the vitality of Israel's religion. See Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, Scholars Press Reprints and Translations Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).

Nonetheless, about a half-century ago the world of academic biblical scholarship began to experience a renewal of interest in apocalyptic literature. A turning point in German scholarship came around 1960, due in part to the publications of theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg and New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann.<sup>6</sup> Käsemann embraced apocalyptic literature in a way that most scholars of the day had not done. He considered the message of Jesus to be apocalyptic at its core. His approach is summarized by his memorable yet surprising claim that apocalyptic “was the mother of all Christian theology.”<sup>7</sup> Käsemann’s thesis assigned unprecedented importance to the role of apocalyptic thinking in the preaching of Jesus and the early church. In his view, the message of Jesus was in large measure an apocalyptic message. This approach stood in stark contrast to that of most interpreters of his day, who tended to downplay and minimize the significance and relevance of apocalyptic literature. The result was a growing acknowledgment that, while Käsemann might not be correct in all the details of his thesis, his position merited serious consideration.<sup>8</sup>

Käsemann’s understanding of the significance of apocalyptic literature sparked a renewal of interest in the role that **apocalypticism** played in the development of biblical theology. That interest has remained a force in biblical studies over the past four or five decades.<sup>9</sup>

- 
6. For a summary of Pannenberg’s understanding of apocalyptic theology see Hans Dieter Betz, “The Concept of Apocalyptic in the Theology of the Pannenberg Group,” in *Apocalypticism*, ed. Robert W. Funk, *Journal for Theology and the Church*, vol. 6 (Tübingen and New York: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] and Herder and Herder, 1969), 192–207.
  7. See Ernst Käsemann, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague, New Testament Library (London: SCM, 1969), 102. See also Ernst Käsemann, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” *Apocalypticism*, 40. See also the following responses to Käsemann: I. Howard Marshall, “Is Apocalyptic the Mother of Christian Theology?,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids/Tübingen: Eerdmans/Mohr, 1987); Gerhard Ebeling, “The Ground of Christian Theology,” *Apocalypticism*, 47–68; Ernst Fuchs, “On the Task of a Christian Theology,” *Apocalypticism*, 69–98.
  8. Tupper seems to speak in exaggerated terms when he claims that “Käsemann rescued apocalyptic from peripheral obscurity and thrust it into the center of theological debate with his essay on ‘The Beginnings of Christian Theology.’” Käsemann clearly played a pivotal role in the revival of interest in apocalypticism during this time, but that should not obscure the fact that there were others who assisted in the rescue operation that Tupper describes. See Tupper, “The Revival of Apocalyptic in Biblical and Theological Studies,” 279–303, especially 279.
  9. In addition to the numerous published books and essays written on this topic, at least nine academic journals or series have devoted an entire issue to apocalyptic literature over the past several decades. See *Journal for Theology and Church* 6 (1969); *Interpretation* 25 (1971); *Review and Expositor* 72 (1975); *Explor* 4 (1978); *Semeia* 14 (1979); *Die Ou-Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika* 25–26 (1982–1983); *Ex auditu* 6 (1990); *Journal for Near Eastern Studies* 49 (1990); *Calvin Theological Journal* 44 (2006).

During this period, modern scholarship has rediscovered apocalyptic literature and embraced it with fresh enthusiasm.<sup>10</sup>

## A CONTEXT FOR APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

This discussion will focus primarily on apocalyptic literature as found in the Old Testament. However, it will be helpful in this process to consider apocalyptic literature within a broader setting of the history and use of this genre in extrabiblical literature as well. In this way it is possible to avoid an atomistic approach that divorces biblical texts from their original religious and historical settings or from their subsequent use by later communities of faith. Although (for reasons that will be discussed later) it had its beginnings to a large extent in Old Testament prophecy, Jewish apocalyptic literature subsequently flourished during the intertestamental period, reaching its zenith in the second century B.C. It continued its trajectory into the early Christian period, during which time it morphed into a popular vehicle for the expression of Christian **eschatology**. Jewish apocalyptic writings that were produced and circulated from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D. were often intended for a community of faith that was undergoing intense persecution and suffering. These writings offered hope to such communities by emphasizing imminent divine intervention into human events so as to bring deliverance to the righteous and judgment to the wicked.

The writing of Christian apocalyptic literature continued well into the first millennium A.D. There are more than fifty postbiblical apocryphal works based to one degree or another on the book of Daniel.<sup>11</sup> The apocalyptic genre flourished, as certain Christian writers reshaped and imaginatively reused Danielic material.<sup>12</sup>

---

10. I have borrowed the language of rediscovery from the English title of Koch's important work on apocalyptic literature. See Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy*, trans. Margaret Kohl, Studies in Biblical Theology, 2d series, ed. Peter Ackroyd, James Barr, et al., vol. 22 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, [1970]). The word *Ratlos* (i.e., "puzzlement" or "perplexity" of apocalyptic) in the German title of Koch's work reflects a less positive assessment of apocalyptic literature than the word "rediscovery" that appears in the English title.

11. See Lorenzo DiTommaso, "The Early Christian Daniel Apocalypica," in *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity*, ed. Robert J. Daly, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 227.

12. For a helpful discussion of genre issues, with regard to apocalyptic writings of the historical sort dating to the fourth century A.D. and later, see Lorenzo DiTommaso, "Biblical Form, Function, and Genre in the Post-Biblical Historical Apocalypica," in *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Montréal Colloquium in Honour of Charles Kannengiesser, 11–13 October 2006*, ed. Lorenzo DiTommaso and Lucian Turcescu, 145–61, Bible in Ancient Christianity, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham, vol. 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

Some Jewish apocalyptic writings became influential to an extraordinary degree. Even New Testament writers made use of them on occasion. The epistle of Jude, for example, is familiar with the so-called *Book of Enoch*, citing a prophecy of Enoch not found in the Genesis account of Enoch's life. Jude also seems to allude to the *Assumption of Moses*, describing an encounter between Michael the archangel and the devil over the body of Moses. Jude draws these details not from the Old Testament but from familiar apocalyptic writings of the intertestamental period. This says something about the influence and importance of these works during the first century.

Non-biblical apocalyptic writings have much in common with their biblical counterparts in terms of interests, concerns, style, themes, and purpose. Those who are primarily interested in apocalyptic writings such as the book of Daniel should not neglect these extrabiblical apocalyptic writings. They provide a useful context for thinking about how apocalyptic language works and how this genre is to be understood. By situating the biblical writings within such a framework it will be possible to draw conclusions regarding similarities and differences between these two groups of writings.

### PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

Of all the literary genres employed in the Bible, none is more difficult to define than the apocalyptic genre. Scholars have not found it easy to reach a consensus on what exactly is meant by the word *apocalyptic*. Does this term refer primarily to a particular genre of literature? Or does it refer to a concentration of particular themes, such as final judgment, angelic mediation, and vindication of the righteous? Or does it refer to a particular style of writing, one characterized by strange symbolism and obscure numerology? Or does it refer to a particular form of eschatology, one characterized by imminent divine intervention into human activities? Or does it refer to something entirely different? As Morris remarks, "it is not easy to define what we mean by apocalyptic literature."<sup>13</sup> As a result of this difficulty, there has been a certain amount of imprecision in the way many biblical scholars use the term.<sup>14</sup> A number of factors contribute to this problem of definition.

13. Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 20.

14. The situation, however, is not quite as bleak as that described by Kaufman, who seems to exaggerate the problem. He says, "Unfortunately, there are probably as many different definitions of apocalyptic and lists of works to be included under that rubric as there are writers on Biblical literature." See Stephen A. Kaufman, "Prediction, Prophecy, and Apocalypse in the Light of New Akkadian Texts," in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies, 13–19 August 1973*, ed. Avigdor Shinan, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977), 225.

First, apocalyptic elements are sometimes embedded in writings that are not otherwise apocalyptic in nature. Certain parts of the Old Testament that are not distinctly apocalyptic contain blocks of material with strong apocalyptic elements. The so-called Little Apocalypse (or Isaiah Apocalypse) found in Isaiah 24–27, for example, is a unit of apocalyptic material situated within a much larger corpus of prophetic writing that is not apocalyptic in terms of genre. The book of Joel has certain apocalyptic elements, even though that book as a whole is not what one would call apocalyptic literature. One finds in the books of Ezekiel and Zechariah material that has much in common with apocalyptic literature, although these prophetic books are not entirely apocalyptic. Even in the book of Daniel, which is the most obvious example of apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament, roughly half the book is not apocalyptic, consisting instead of stories related to the life of Daniel. This mixture of genre makes it difficult to define precisely what is meant by the term *apocalyptic* and to delimit properly its literary boundaries.

Second, ancient texts vary a great deal in the degree to which they use features commonly associated with apocalyptic literature. Some works contain stronger concentrations of apocalyptic features than certain other works that should nonetheless be classified as apocalyptic literature. This variety leads to a question more easily asked than answered: How many features or characteristics of apocalyptic literature must be present in a given writing before we allow that the label *apocalyptic* is appropriate in that case?<sup>15</sup> The more numerous or pronounced such features become in a particular text, the more comfortable we are likely to be in assigning the label *apocalyptic* to that text. But there is a grey area here as well. A text may be apocalyptic in terms of its use of symbolism and **determinism**, for example, while other important apocalyptic themes are less emphasized or perhaps even absent altogether. For this reason it may be helpful to think of apocalyptic literature as a continuum, with some texts further along in their utilization of apocalyptic features than other works that may still warrant the label *apocalyptic*. Such variation contributes to the difficulty in defining what is meant by the term *apocalyptic*.

Third, there has been a tendency in biblical scholarship to use the term *apocalyptic* very loosely, without giving adequate attention to what is meant by this word. The word *apocalyptic* was apparently first used in

---

15. Vawter frames the question this way: “But it is unreasonable to demand that a text must exhibit every statistical note of apocalyptic before it can be considered apocalyptic, especially such notes as were incidentally acquired by apocalyptic in its process of development; and it is unreasonable to demand that an early apocalypse should read exactly like a later one, and that anything short of this must not be called apocalyptic.” See Bruce Vawter, “Apocalyptic: Its Relation to Prophecy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 (1960): 42.

biblical studies by K. I. Nitzsch in the eighteenth century to refer to works at least vaguely similar to the book of Revelation, which identifies itself as an **apocalypse** (Rev. 1:1).<sup>16</sup> However, the details of the proposed similarity are rather subjective and perhaps even amorphous at times. Consequently, according to some scholars the term *apocalyptic* has become in biblical studies a slippery word, resisting demands for precision and accuracy in terms of proper use.<sup>17</sup>

Fourth, use of the term *apocalyptic* as a noun is especially beset with difficulties. Without an accompanying word to clarify its meaning, the term can be ambiguous and unclear. As a noun, does *apocalyptic* refer to a genre of literature, or to a community, or to a way of thinking? In light of the resulting confusion, some scholars prefer to jettison altogether use of the term as a noun, retaining its use only as an adjective.<sup>18</sup> Others retain both the adjectival and the substantival uses, regarding *apocalyptic* when used as a noun to be equivalent to the term *apocalypticism*.<sup>19</sup> Still others have questioned the usefulness of the term *apocalyptic* even as an adjective.<sup>20</sup> Since usage varies so much from one writer to

16. See Margaret Barker, "Slippery Words: III. Apocalyptic," *Expository Times* 89 (1977–1978): 324.

17. See, for example, Margaret Barker, "Slippery Words: III. Apocalyptic," *Expository Times* 89 (1977–1978): 324–29; Robert Webb, "'Apocalyptic': Observations on a Slippery Term," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49 (1990): 115–26; Richard E. Sturm, "Defining the Word 'Apocalyptic': A Problem in Biblical Criticism," in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament. Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. J. Marcus and M. L. Soards, 17–48, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series*, vol. 24 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

18. So, for example, T. Francis Glasson, "What Is Apocalyptic?," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 98–105. Glasson says, "I would advocate the abandonment of the word Apocalyptic. I know what an apocalypse is, and I see there is a place for the adjective 'apocalyptic' to denote matters relating to this type of literature. But, as we have seen, Apocalyptic has no agreed and recognizable meaning." His subsequent description of the noun *apocalyptic* suggests a certain amount of frustration on his part: "This is a useless word which no one can define and which produces nothing but confusion and acres of verbiage" (105). Webb concurs: "The word 'apocalyptic' must be limited to adjectival use and its use as a noun abandoned." See Robert L. Webb, "'Apocalyptic': Observations on a Slippery Term," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49 (1990): 126.

19. So, for example, Grabbe. See Lester L. Grabbe, "Introduction and Overview," in *Knowing the End from the Beginning: The Prophetic, the Apocalyptic and Their Relationships*, eds. Lester L. Grabbe and Robert D. Haak, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series*, eds. Lester L. Grabbe and James H. Charlesworth, vol. 46 (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 3. Elsewhere Grabbe suggests that objections to use of the term *apocalyptic* as a noun may for the most part be a North American phenomenon. He remarks that "some North American scholars object to 'apocalyptic' as a noun, but it has a long and respectable history of such usage and is still so used on the European side of the Atlantic." See Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice from the Exile to Yavneh* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.

20. Newsom, for example, admits that "To be honest, I have some reservations about the usefulness of the adjective 'apocalyptic'. There are serious questions whether it refers to a perspective with enough specificity and coherence to be useful in identifying the common

another, care must be taken to understand how the term *apocalyptic* is used by a particular author. In order to avoid confusion, in this work *apocalyptic* will normally be used not as a noun but as an adjective, along with an accompanying word to clarify what the adjective modifies.

The terminological problem that plagued this discipline in the past was due partly to a failure to distinguish sufficiently between two separate categories. On the one hand, there is the cultural and religious mindset that underlies interest in this way of thinking. On the other hand, there is the literary product that this mindset often produces. It is possible to have the former (i.e., the mindset) without necessarily having the latter (i.e., the written document). There is also a problem of ambiguity with regard to precisely what features in an ancient text—and just how many of them—are necessary in order to justify the label *apocalyptic*. What is the minimum requirement for classifying a document as apocalyptic in nature? There is considerable disagreement on this matter.

The terminological problem of the past continues to be an issue in discussions of apocalyptic literature. It is not possible to answer adequately questions related to this literature unless one first knows what exactly is meant by the terms that are employed.<sup>21</sup> We will therefore distinguish between the following terms that are frequently encountered in the secondary literature dealing with this topic: *apocalypse*, *apocalypticism*, *apocalyptic literature*, ***apocalyptic eschatology***, ***apocalyptic discourse***, and ***proto-apocalyptic***.<sup>22</sup> Clarity with regard to the terminological issues relevant to this topic will add clarity to the overall discussion that follows.

element in a very diverse body of texts. Still, it remains unavoidable, even if it sometimes seems to be little more than a scholarly grunt and gesture toward something that we recognize but cannot quite articulate.” See Carol A. Newsom, “Apocalyptic and the Discourse of the Qumran Community,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49 (1990): 135.

21. I am indebted to Hanson’s attempts to clarify the definitional issues. See, for example, Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 11–12. However, Hanson’s suggestions have not remained unchallenged. Grabbe in particular has been critical of certain aspects of Hanson’s proposals regarding definitions in this area, although Grabbe does not offer any new definitions to resolve the problems he finds. See Lester L. Grabbe, “Prophetic and Apocalyptic: Time for New Definitions—and New Thinking,” in *Knowing the End from the Beginning: The Prophetic, the Apocalyptic and Their Relationships*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe and Robert D. Haak, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe and James H. Charlesworth, vol. 46 (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 107–33.
22. Although Cook questions how helpful these distinctions in terminology actually are, his own categories do not seem to offer much of an improvement. He distinguishes between apocalypticism as a literary phenomenon, as a type of religious thinking (or *Weltanschauung*), and as a social phenomenon. The issues remain about the same. See Stephen L. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Social Setting* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 21.

## Apocalypse

Various ancient works, including the one found at the conclusion of the New Testament canon, describe themselves as apocalypses. But what exactly is an apocalypse? The word derives from the Greek noun ἀποκάλυψις, which refers to an “unveiling” or “**revelation**” of some sort. In early Jewish and Christian literature such revelation typically had to do with specific and detailed disclosures of allegedly future events that were thought to lie outside the grasp of unaided human intellect. This information, however, was assumed to be knowable through divine disclosure to a faithful remnant that was often thought to be living in a time of eschatological crisis. An apocalypse sets forth such information. The disclosure of this information usually takes place through an angelic mediator, often to a famous hero of the community’s past. The author of the New Testament apocalypse (i.e., the book of Revelation) introduces his book this way:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near (Rev. 1:1–3).

The author of this apocalypse describes it as a divinely imparted revelation of future events whose fulfillment is imminent. The revelation was conveyed through angelic mediation to a human recipient, who testified to others concerning the revelation he had received. A special blessing is promised to those who read this apocalypse, to those who hear it, and to those who take it to heart. For this biblical writer, these are features that help define what an apocalypse is.

Recent discussions of apocalyptic literature often begin with a definition of the term *apocalypse* that was first formulated several decades ago by a group of scholars working under the aegis of the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project. Their definition is based on an analysis of all extant examples of such literature during the period 250 B.C. to A.D. 250. According to this definition,

“Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a **transcendent** reality which is both temporal, in-

sofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>23</sup>

This definition summarizes well the form and content of an apocalypse. Missing from this definition, however, is anything that clarifies the purpose of such writings. The definition was subsequently amended to include the following clarification regarding purpose.

[An apocalypse is] intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.<sup>24</sup>

Taking the two parts together, this definition helpfully articulates the essential features of what can properly be called an apocalypse, whether biblical or extrabiblical. Several features of the definition are especially important. First, apocalypse is a literary genre. Its content is revelatory in nature, disclosing information inaccessible apart from divine disclosure. Its literary form is that of narrative literature. The narrative describes the reception of this information from a spiritual intermediary. Second, an apocalypse highlights the role of an angelic messenger. This messenger is sent by God to interact with and communicate to a divinely chosen human being. Third, the revelation conveyed by the angelic mediator has both temporal and spatial dimensions. On the one hand, its salvific significance has to do with final events of the **eschaton**; on the other hand, its message brings the unseen spiritual realm into direct contact with the natural world. Fourth, the purpose of an apocalypse is to shed light on present events by appealing to eschatological events. Its purpose is not only to inform the intellect but also to alter the lifestyle

23. See John J. Collins, *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia, vol. 14 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1979), 9. About a decade following the publication of this volume, Collins reflected on how his thinking on the definition of apocalypse had changed in certain ways since the publication of the Semeia volume. See his preface to the following work: John J. Collins, "Genre, Ideology and Social Movements in Jewish Apocalypticism (Appendix: A New Proposal on Apocalyptic Origins)," in *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies since the Uppsala Colloquium*, ed. John J. Collins and James H. Charlesworth, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 13–14.

24. Adela Yarbro Collins, "Introduction," in *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre, Social Setting*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Semeia, vol. 36 (Decatur, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 6. The clarification cited above regarding the purpose of an apocalypse is rather general, leading some scholars to question its usefulness. Carey, for example, says "this modification has proved too vague to be of much help." See Greg Carey, *Ultimate Things: An Introduction to Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 4.

of the recipients. More specifically, apocalypses offer encouragement, hope, and exhortation for the righteous, while providing warning and admonition for the unrighteous.<sup>25</sup>

The strength of the above definition lies in the fact that it is not an arbitrary construct imposed on the literature with which it deals. Instead, its methodological basis lies in a careful examination of all examples of apocalyptic literature that fall under its purview. It aims inductively to extract from the features of these writings a definition that fits the evidence.<sup>26</sup> It succeeds in doing so. In the present discussion we will accept this definition of *apocalypse* as satisfying the requirements of the available evidence:

“Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. [An apocalypse is] intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.

## Apocalypticism

The term *apocalypticism* refers to the attitudes, presuppositions, expectations, and beliefs that form the religious or cultural milieu of those belonging to movements similar to those that produce apocalypses. In the Jewish apocalypses such groups typically identify their own age as a time of impending violent upheaval, imminent divine intervention, and approaching eschatological vindication of a righteous remnant. This

---

25. For a helpful development of these literary functions in Jewish apocalypses see the following essay: Thomas J. Sappington, “The Factor of Function in Defining Jewish Apocalyptic Literature,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 12 (1994): 83–123.

26. This seems to be the most prudent way to proceed. Anything else runs the risk of foisting preconceived requirements on the data. However, VanderKam sees something of a logical fallacy in this approach. He says, “There is a perhaps unavoidable element of circularity about such definitions in that the characteristics of texts which are intuitively or traditionally regarded as apocalypses constitute the definition which then determines the texts that are to be included in the genre.” See James C. VanderKam, “The Prophetic-Sapiential Origins of Apocalyptic Thought,” in *A Word in Season: Essays in Honour of William McKane*, ed. James D. Martin and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series*, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, vol. 42 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 164.

remnant is sometimes portrayed as a disenfranchised group oppressed by their contemporaries, but not necessarily so.

Apocalypticism is a way of thinking. It is a mindset that looks to imminent divine intervention as the only solution to evils confronting a community that sees itself as righteous. The difference between *apocalypse* and *apocalypticism* is this: while *apocalypse* is a genre of literature and requires written expression, *apocalypticism* is essentially a way of thinking that may or may not produce a literature detailing such beliefs.

## Apocalyptic Literature

The term *apocalyptic literature* is broader and more inclusive than the term *apocalypse*. While apocalyptic literature includes those writings that are specifically designated as apocalypses, it also includes related literature that shares certain characteristics with the apocalypse without qualifying for that more specific label. The term *apocalyptic literature* is broader and more inclusive; the term *apocalypse* is more narrow and restricted.

The expression *apocalyptic literature* refers to a type of writing that adopts to a significant degree the outlook of apocalypticism and portrays those themes through a vivid use of symbolic language. Apocalyptic literature tends to be rich in its **angelology**, vivid in its eschatological expectations, dire in its warning of cataclysmic judgment, and reassuring in its announcement of vindication for the righteous. Such writings may or may not take the form of an actual apocalypse. While an apocalypse is given over more or less entirely to such emphases, apocalyptic literature may incorporate other genres as well. In that sense the apocalyptic element does not stand alone.

Although in the Old Testament only the latter half of the book of Daniel qualifies as an apocalypse, there are other Old Testament writings that, at least in part, fall into the broader category of apocalyptic literature. Examples include portions of the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Zechariah, and various other writings as well.

## Apocalyptic Eschatology

The message of Jewish apocalypses is usually eschatological in nature. As a rule, these writings deal with approaching events of the afterlife, whether regarding individual or corporate destiny for the righteous or the wicked. Of course, non-apocalyptic writings are sometimes eschatological in their emphasis as well. The message of the Old Testament prophets frequently focuses on eschatology, in addition to social ills that were contemporary to the time of the prophets. However, the eschatology of apocalyptic writings tends to be of a different sort when compared to the eschatology of the prophetic literature. The primary

differences between the two have to do with the intensity of warning, the detail of description, and the manner of expression. The apocalypses tend to be more urgent in their appeal, more detailed in their descriptions of otherworldly events, and more given to the use of symbols and figures of speech than is the case with other writings.

The expression *apocalyptic eschatology* is therefore used to refer to a distinctive type of eschatology found in the apocalypses and related literature. This eschatology is characterized by God's sudden and perhaps violent breakthrough into human history in order to accomplish his purposes with mankind. This abrupt and irresistible display of divine power causes disruption of all that is normal or expected in the activity of human beings. It brings salvific deliverance for the faithful and cataclysmic judgment for their persecutors. It typically is described with a concentration of figurative language and symbolism.

### Apocalyptic Discourse

The term *apocalyptic discourse* is used by some scholars to refer to the literary, ideological, and social characteristics of apocalyptic language.<sup>27</sup> This expression calls attention to the social context within which meaning is defined for adherents to a particular point of view. Out of such a social context various beliefs and traditions develop over time, informing the worldview and behavior of members of the group.

Such social discourse is characterized by certain *topoi* (or topics) that are influential in determining the convictions and way of life that find expression in a particular social structure. Carey finds in apocalyptic discourse the following eleven *topoi*: interest in an ultimate reality that is characterized by both temporal and spatial dimensions; use of visions and/or auditions to convey divine revelation regarding otherwise unknowable spiritual realities; emphasis on angelic or divine intermediaries as agents and interpreters of supernatural revelation; pervasive use of symbolic language for conveying revelatory information; use of pseudonymity as a literary device for enhancing the appeal and authority of a writing; descriptions of cosmic catastrophe brought about by divine intervention as a means of eschatological deliverance; **dualism** as a lens through which people, institutions, events, and time may be evaluated; determinism with regard to the course of history; emphasis on judgment and the afterlife; use of **ex eventu prophecy** to describe events that occurred prior to the writer's time; and speculation regarding cosmic bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars.<sup>28</sup> According to Carey, these eleven *topoi* play a significant role in framing apocalyptic discourse.

27. So, for example, Greg Carey, *Ultimate Things*, especially 1–15.

28. *Ibid.*, 6–10.

## Proto-Apocalyptic

The historical development of Jewish apocalyptic literature should be viewed as a continuum whose precise boundaries cannot be pinpointed. There is no specific moment at which apocalyptic literature can be said to begin, nor is there a specific moment at which this literature ceased to be. Prior to the appearance of apocalyptic literature as a fully developed genre there were texts that contained in seminal form ideas closely resembling those found in the later, more developed apocalypses. The expression *proto-apocalyptic* is used to describe those texts that foreshadow or anticipate in germ form ideas especially associated with later full-blown apocalypses.<sup>29</sup> These proto-apocalyptic elements are sometimes found embedded in otherwise non-apocalyptic writings.

In summary, we must distinguish between several related terms.

- *Apocalypse* is a genre of revelatory literature set in a narrative frame. In it an angel communicates to a human being otherwise inaccessible information concerning the supernatural world. This information has to do with eschatological salvation and realities of the supernatural world.
- *Apocalypticism* is the mindset, or worldview, associated with groups that produce apocalypses. It has to do especially with the eschatological expectations and beliefs of such communities.
- *Apocalyptic literature* is the written expression of the emphases that characterize apocalyptic communities, whether found in stand-alone compositions known as apocalypses or in sections of material assimilated into other genres of literature.
- *Apocalyptic eschatology* is a distinctive form of eschatology that reflects the characteristics found in the apocalypses, such as vivid descriptions of final judgment or vindication of the righteous.
- *Apocalyptic discourse* refers to the literary, ideological, and social characteristics of apocalyptic language.
- *Proto-apocalyptic* is an incipient form of apocalyptic ideas that anticipate what is found in the later apocalypses, where such ideas are given fuller and more complete expression.

---

29. Russell prefers the term *embryonic apocalyptic*, using an analogy borrowed from biology. See D. S. Russell, *Prophecy and the Apocalyptic Dream: Protest and Promise* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 31.

## TRAJECTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

By the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the sixth century B.C. an emphasis on apocalyptic motifs was developing within Judaism. Although at this stage such development was only in its incipient stages, apocalypticism would continue to take hold throughout the sixth century. The catalyst for this new approach may have been events connected to the upheaval caused by the Babylonian exile. Such factors as the cessation of the Israelite monarchy, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 586 B.C., the hardships of forced exile from the Jewish homeland, and the subsequent longings for divine intervention and restoration may all have contributed to the beginnings of Jewish apocalypticism.

The intertestamental period brought further developments in Jewish thinking and response to a world characterized by change and upheaval. By the third and second centuries B.C. a new genre of literature was growing in popularity in Judaism, and the genre proliferated during the second and first centuries. This period is characterized by the production of many extrabiblical Jewish apocalypses. These writings were similar in some ways to the Jewish literature that preceded them, and in other ways they were dissimilar.

The apocalypses can be divided into two categories, depending on whether they involve descriptions of an **otherworldly journey**.<sup>30</sup> First, some apocalypses are characterized by the description of a journey to the supernatural realm.<sup>31</sup> In these apocalypses an angelic intermediary escorts a human being on a journey to the spiritual world of the unseen, where the traveler is privileged to observe awe-inspiring sights that are completely out of the ordinary. Often the human recipient of such revelation is a famous biblical hero from the past, such as Abraham or Enoch. These otherworldly journeys take two very different forms. In some cases, the

---

30. Here I am following Collins's analysis of the Jewish apocalypses. For elaboration see John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, ed. John Joseph Collins, Semeia, vol. 14 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 1–20.

31. Himmelfarb has written extensively on the otherworldly journeys found in Jewish apocalyptic literature. See especially the following contributions: Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); idem, "The Experience of the Visionary and Genre in the Ascension of Isaiah 6–11 and the Apocalypse of Paul," in *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre, Social Setting*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Semeia, vol. 36 (Decatur, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 97–111; idem, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and *Hekhalot* Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 59 (1988): 73–100; idem, "Revelation and Rapture: The Transformation of the Visionary in the Ascent Apocalypses," in *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies since the Uppsala Colloquium*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 79–90; idem, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

traveler is escorted to the heavenly realm, where he observes scenes that have to do with the bliss of the righteous.<sup>32</sup> In other cases, the journey is not to heaven but to hell, where the scenes that are described concern vivid portrayals of misery, pain, and torture. Apocalyptic texts that describe otherworldly journeys thus share certain common emphases and goals. As Collins points out, the major themes of such literature have to do with an interest in establishing authority for a revealer or king, a curiosity about things otherwise unknowable, and an interest in eternal life.<sup>33</sup> Such features lend a certain predictability to the genre.

Second, some apocalypses lack a description of an otherworldly journey. Instead, they have other emphases that set them apart as a unified group of texts. Perhaps the most elaborate of these is the *Animal Apocalypse*, an apocalyptic text that probably dates to the second century B.C.<sup>34</sup> In the *Animal Apocalypse* Enoch presents to his son Methuselah an overview of world history extending from the time of Adam to the arrival of the messianic kingdom, including mention of such Old Testament figures as Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Saul, David, Solomon, and Elijah, all of whom are presented in terms of animal imagery. Adam, for example, is portrayed as a bull; Eve is a heifer; Noah is a white bull that becomes a human being; Israelites are sheep; Gentiles are wild animals; fallen angels are stars.

Jewish apocalypticism and the writing of apocalyptic texts continued until about the first century A.D., at which time Jewish interest in apocalypticism began to wane. Jewish writings of the following period (e.g., the Targumim, Midrashim, Tosephta, Mishnah, Talmud) show little interest in apocalypticism.<sup>35</sup> The reasons for this transition to a different form of Jewish literature are not entirely clear, although it probably had to do with the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70 and the failure of the second Jewish revolt against the Romans in A.D.

---

32. The most famous of these apocalypses is the *Book of the Watchers*, which probably dates to the second or third century B.C. This text is a part (i.e., 1 *Enoch* 1–36) of the larger composite work known as the *Book of Enoch*. Other examples of apocalypses that contain descriptions of similar journeys are the *Similitudes of Enoch*, which is also a part (i.e., 1 *Enoch* 37–71) of the *Book of Enoch*, the *Testament of Abraham*, and the *Testament of Levi* (chapters 2–5).

33. John J. Collins, “Journeys to the World Beyond in Ancient Judaism,” in *Apocalyptic and Eschatological Heritage: The Middle East and Celtic Realms*, ed. Martin McNamara (Dublin and Portland, OR: Four Courts, 2003), 22.

34. Other apocalyptic texts that lack description of an otherworldly journey include the *Apocalypse of Weeks* (1 *En.* 91:11–17; 93:1–10), 2 *Baruch*, and 4 *Ezra* (= 2 *Esdra*s 3–14).

35. Saldarini says, “Apocalyptic themes are not central to rabbinic literature nor are any passages extensive enough to form what might be called an apocalypse in the usual literary sense.” See Anthony J. Saldarini, “The Uses of Apocalyptic in the Mishna and Tosephta,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 396.

135.<sup>36</sup> These catastrophes were defining events for Judaism of that time. The destruction of the temple—along with continued intense persecution, loss of the priesthood, and expulsion of Jews from their ancient homeland—forced Judaism to seek new and alternative forms of religious expression. In the centuries that followed, Judaism largely left apocalypticism behind in preference for other genres.

### SOCIAL WORLD OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Apocalyptic literature, for the most part, provides little in the way of direct information about the individuals or groups that produced this genre. Who exactly were the authors of these writings, and to what social setting did they align themselves? It would be helpful to know more about the social milieu out of which these writings came. Such information would perhaps provide insight as to why apocalyptic writers wrote as they did. It might also provide clues with regard to the proper interpretation of certain difficult sections found in these writings. However, most of these texts were either pseudepigraphical—falsely claiming to have been written by a famous hero of the past—or they were anonymous, providing no clue at all as to the identity of their author. It is only on the basis of careful analysis of the contents of these writings that it is possible to reconstruct the social setting out of which they came.

The German scholar Otto Plöger concluded that apocalyptic literature developed out of groups that saw themselves as marginalized and on the fringes of their social world.<sup>37</sup> According to him, such groups were usually disenfranchised, relatively powerless, and absent from strategic positions of leadership so far as the religious establishment was concerned. To some extent it was out of their frustrations with organized religion that they wrote apocalyptic literature. They believed that those in power had compromised their personal integrity and had introduced corruption and moral failure into religious observance. Apocalyptic writers sought vindication of the righteous remnant that had not gone along with such religious declension. They longed for divine judgment and punishment of the corrupt established order. They believed that such vindication was imminent and would soon come as a result of divine intervention.

---

36. Saldarini points to a ban by Rabbi Akiba in the second century on books that sought to imitate biblical writings, as well as concern over anything that might be construed as inciting rebellion after the painful Roman elimination of the Bar Kosiba (a.k.a. Bar Kokhba) revolt in A.D. 135, as playing a role in the demise of apocalyptic literature in the rabbinic period. See Anthony J. Saldarini, "Apocalypses and 'Apocalyptic' in Rabbinic Literature," in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, 187. See also Anthony J. Saldarini, "Apocalyptic and Rabbinic Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37 (1975): 348–58.

37. Otto Plöger, *Theocracy and Eschatology*, trans. S. Rudman (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1968): 239.

Many scholars have agreed with Plöger in understanding apocalyptic communities to be disenfranchised and on the fringe of society. Cook, however, has advocated a very different approach to the social setting of ancient apocalyptic movements, rejecting what he calls the deprivation theory of Plöger and Hanson. According to him, such groups were not necessarily disenfranchised or powerless or living at the fringes of society. In many cases their members were actually powerful, influential, and within the mainstream of society. Cook calls attention to many apocalyptic groups throughout history that do not at all fit such a description. More importantly, he also directs attention to a number of biblical texts that can best be regarded as proto-apocalyptic and yet originate out of a priestly or mainstream setting. The key biblical texts to which he appeals are Ezekiel 38–39, Zechariah 1–8, Joel 2:1–11, and Joel 3–4.<sup>38</sup>

It seems best to acknowledge that our information regarding the social location of Jewish apocalyptic groups in antiquity is very limited. To what extent such groups were operating from inside or from outside accepted societal and religious structures is not always clear. It seems likely that apocalypticism was to be found in various social settings. In that case we should not without further evidence think that they were necessarily disenfranchised groups, although in some instances that may well have been the case.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have laid a foundation for thinking about apocalyptic literature by defining our terms and probing certain methodological issues pertinent to the study of such material. We have attempted to answer the question: What is apocalyptic literature? We are now ready to consider some distinctive features of this literature that set it apart from other literature of its place and time. In the coming chapter we shall consider the purpose, main characteristics, and common themes that typify many biblical and extrabiblical texts.

---

38. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism*, 2.