

How to Study Apocalyptic Literature

Sam Dilbeck

As the United States of America approaches election season, predictions of the world's demise escalate. As thoughts of the possibility of conflict rise, many people look to the Bible trying to decipher the signs of the times. Some read the visions found in the apocalyptic and prophetic literature of the Bible and offer theories of their meaning. Often their conjecturing is wild and confusing, and clashing with the rest of God's word. Much of the misperception comes from an improper reading of apocalyptic and prophetic literature.

To properly interpret a text, we must take into account what genre of literature it is. A history book reads differently than a love letter which in turn reads differently than a sports column. Knowing the genre allows the reader to begin with certain understandings, ideas, and expectations, and aids in interpretation.

The book of Revelation presents unique challenges since it is composed of multiple genres. Beasley-Murray observed that Revelation identifies itself by three genres in its opening verses: apocalypse (1:1), prophecy (1:3), and epistle (1:4).¹ Generally speaking, it's the apocalyptic portions that cause modern confusion.

According to Bruce Waltke, the key features of apocalyptic literature are (1) its focus on the end of the ages; (2) its dynamic method of revelation; (3) its frequent dualisms; (4) its oppressed

¹ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary, (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 12.

and persecuted audience; (5) its bizarre images; and (6) its call to repentance.²

In the Apocalypse of John, an angelic tour guide leads the apostle through a dramatic series of visions. These visions were intended to provide persecuted saints an insider's view of their ultimate victory. Like other apocalyptic writings, Revelation uses curious imagery to convey its message.

Knowing apocalyptic and prophetic literature are written in decidedly different style compels readers to approach it differently than an epistle or narrative. Here are six things to keep in mind while reading and studying this genre.

1. *Begin with an open heart.* ~~Confusion~~ comes when people approach the text with a determined point of view. In the book's obscurity these readers find latitude for their false theories. Instead of drawing the meaning out of the text, they read their doctrines into the text. The humble heart may be confident in its understanding, but is willing to consider other ideas when the biblical evidence warrants it.
2. *Seek how the original readers understood the message, then make application to modern circumstance.* Dispensationalists see "signs" in modern times, then go to Revelation to decipher them. The first century saint would not have understood a 21st century reference. What did John want the seven churches of Asia, to whom the book was first addressed, to know? Answering that question allows readers to identify similarities between the original readers and modern readers, and make contemporary applications without making the book irrelevant to the original readers.
3. *Focus on the big picture.* Error often comes when readers get lost in the forest of details and lose sight of the main

² Bruce Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 550.

idea. A grasp of the main idea helps give meaning to the details.

4. *Read the unknown in light of the known.* Because of its fantastic imagery people like to start their New Testament journey in Revelation or some other obscure text. We should allow the truths revealed in the rest of Scripture to inform our interpretation of apocalyptic literature.
5. *Know the Old Testament.* Keener says Revelation contains more Old Testament references than any other New Testament book. He estimates roughly 70 percent of the verses in Revelation contain an allusion to the Old Testament.³ Ignorance of the Old Testament turns Revelation into a thousand piece puzzle with seven hundred pieces missing!
6. *Assume a reference is symbolic unless the context demands it is literal.* Usually biblical texts should be taken as literal unless it becomes absurd to do so. When it comes to Revelation, Gregg cautions, “Though this is a good rule when dealing with literature written in a literal genre, it is the exact opposite in the case of apocalyptic literature, where symbolism is the rule, and literalism the exception.”⁴

God’s word is challenging, not confusing (1 Cor. 14:33). No doubt apocalyptic literature will always present an interpretive challenge. But by beginning with some basic understanding and guidelines readers will be better equipped to receive the message God intended them to have.

³ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 33.

⁴ Steven Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Approach*, ed. Steven Gregg, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1997), 11.