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THE ISSUE OF GENRE AND APOCALYPTIC PROPHECY

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The study of the book of Revelation presents both challenges and rewards for the end-time people of God. In this enigmatic concluding book of the Bible, God provides both a chart and a compass to His homebound pilgrims as they traverse the final treacherous stretch of their pilgrimage. Amidst many uncertainties, Revelation presents the final generation with one great triumphant certainty—God is in ultimate control of history and will deliver the kingdom to the saints of the Most High.

The Nature of Biblical Apocalyptic

The word "apocalyptic," in its broadest sense, designates the disclosure of God's presence through human agents, bringing to view the divine purpose, presence, and action in the midst of the human situation. Paul S. Minear has pointed out that the term "apocalyptic" in English serves as both a noun and an adjective. As an adjective it is used to qualify any of four different nouns:

1. It may be used to qualify a particular book, type of literature, or genre of speech, whether oral or written. The books of Daniel and Revelation provide the best biblical examples of this usage.

2. The word may be used to qualify the noun "prophecy," thus denoting a dramatic form of prophecy that uses symbolism to portray God's dramatic presence among His people, thus differentiating it from classical prophecy.

3. It can be used to qualify a pattern of thought or a mind-set common to prophets and their faith communities in times of profound crisis and upheaval for the people of God.

4. It may refer to a movement that sees itself as both cosmic and eschatological.¹

From its inception, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has seen itself as an apocalyptic movement, immersed in the thought patterns and world-view of an apocalyptic end-time message. This core self-understanding characterizes both its message and mission. When this self-understanding is removed from focus, Adventism suffers an identity crisis that threatens its unique place and destiny. The discomfort with the concept of “the remnant” as a self-designation of Adventism may, in part, reflect a loss of this apocalyptic self-understanding.

In this presentation I assume that John the Apostle was the author of the Apocalypse. I also assume the Domitianic date of around 96 C.E. for its writing. These assumptions are made with an awareness of on-going scholarly discussion. The focus of my task is to review and establish genre characteristics that impact interpretational methodology. As may be said for all parts of Scripture, but more so for the apocalyptic portions, hermeneutics play a decisive role for the meaning and application of the text.

Revelation is written in a modified epistolary form. There is an opening greeting which reveals the writer and the recipients (“John to the seven churches,” 1:4).² There is the prayer for God’s grace and peace for the churches (1:4) as well as the concluding benediction and final salutations (22:21). In addition to being epistolary, Revelation also assumes a prophetic stance. The writer describes his work as a “prophecy” (1:3) and talks about what must shortly come to pass (prediction). As a prophet, John stands in the tradition of the OT prophets. Like them, he challenges the community of faith with a current, relevant, and divine message. He is not a fortune-teller forecasting the future from a detached position. He is a messenger whose message has an urgent divine moral imperative. His message is not optional and peripheral; it is imperative and central. Thus, in designating his book as a prophecy both in the prologue (1:3) and the epilogue (22:18-19), he requires his readers to respond in faith and action. Indeed, in both passages he urges obedience. Finally, that the book is an apocalypse needs no demonstration. It is the most obvious characteristic of the book. This triple character of the book calls for special hermeneutical considerations.

George B. Caird has pointed out that the name “Apocalypse” not only describes the content of the book but also classifies it into a recognized type of literature.³ This type of literature began with the book of Dan and was followed by many apocalypses all arising in times of great suffering and crises. Many of the apocalypses were written during the period stretching from the hellenizing persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes (167 B.C.E.) to the destruction of the Jewish nation by Hadrian (135 C.E.). The purpose of Jewish apocalyptic was “to

¹Paul S. Minear, *New Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 15-17.

²All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (1995).

³George B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1966), 9.

encourage the Jewish resistance to the encroachments of paganism, by showing that the national suffering was foreseen and provided for in the cosmic purpose of God and would issue in ultimate vindication."⁴ In a similar vein the function of biblical apocalyptic is to assure God's suffering servants of God's presence, care, and control. This is not a document intended for comfortable Christians sitting in their easy chairs, comfortable with their life situation. The Apocalypse was written to be read on the run, between sobs, with an eye on the text and another eye on the lookout for the enemy. The humble attitude the reader should have is well expressed by Ellen G. White:

When the books of Daniel and Revelation are better understood, believers will have an entirely different religious experience. They will be given such glimpses of the open gates of heaven that heart and mind will be impressed with the character that all must develop in order to realize the blessedness which is to be the reward of the pure in heart. The Lord will bless all who will seek humbly and meekly to understand that which is revealed in the Revelation. This book contains so much that is large with immortality and full of glory that all who read and search it earnestly receive the blessing to those "that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein." One thing will certainly be understood from the study of Revelation—that the connection between God and His people is close and decided.⁵

There is a marked difference in the sources and use of symbolism among three categories of apocalyptic literature. The first was pagan in origin. Such were the Sibylline Oracles, documents that were composed by aged women connected with the shrine of a pagan deity. They were apocalyptic in form and drew their symbolism and imagery from Greek religion and culture. Their symbols reflect the superstitions and ideas of their pagan background.

A second category of apocalyptic literature was that composed by Jewish authors who were not inspired. Examples include 1 and 2 Esdras, as well as 1, 2, and 3 Enoch. These drew their symbolism and imagery from the OT and from Jewish culture. They tended to be nationalistic in outlook, using imagery and symbolism which reflected this narrow perspective.

Finally, biblical apocalyptic, while also drawing from the same OT literature and culture as that in the second category, had a cosmic scope in the use and application of the same symbols. Freed from superstitions and narrow nationalistic tendencies, biblical apocalyptic envisions a cosmic God who addresses the whole world with an eternal message.

Therefore, we do not expect to find a one-to-one correspondence in meaning between non-biblical and biblical apocalyptic. What we witness here is what

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 345.

Austin M. Farrer has expressed even by the descriptive title of his book, *A Rebirth of Images*.⁶

We need to constantly bear in mind that, whatever challenges we face in interpreting and understanding the book of Revelation, John the author was a pastor who was writing to his congregations. He was not an ivory-tower mystic, removed from the daily realities of his people. He was not even thinking about future theologians. He was writing with a sense of passion and urgency. He wanted to be heard; he wanted to be understood. He wanted the common work-a-day members of his congregation to hear, understand, and act on his messages. He must have believed that the original readers would understand his book. This suggests that our hermeneutic of apocalyptic must be simple and easy to follow; this does not imply a simplistic approach. It must not be esoteric and contrived, requiring many years of academic preparation to understand. On the other hand, it must not be careless and shallow. The primary level of interpretation and relevance is the congregation.

Caird suggests that we must begin by asking ourselves the question, "What did those early Christians know about this book that we do not know?"⁷ If we can know what they knew, we can begin to make some adjustments in our method of investigation. We may begin to ask the right questions and go to the right places for valid answers. We may begin to hear with simplicity and clarity the powerful message of God to His pilgrim children.

Oftentimes, readers approach biblical apocalyptic from the point of view of mere prophetic or predictive curiosity. Even pastors may inadvertently view Daniel and Revelation not as a required part of their congregation's regular spiritual diet but as a place for optional specialized prophetic studies. The result is that there may be no intentional systematic teaching from these two books. For his part, George R. Beasley-Murray has observed that the purpose of biblical apocalyptic is not mere prediction of the future, even though that is done in each apocalypse. Prophecy "is given always in order to call forth repentance, and faith, and obedience in living. Accordingly, the first of the seven Beatitudes which occur in the book of Revelation pronounces the blessedness of those who 'keep the things written in it' (1:3)."⁸

The book openly declares that this is "the Revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1). Throughout the book Christ is presented in rich imagery. He is portrayed as the Lamb twenty-eight times.⁹ He is called "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of

⁶Austin M. Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of the Apocalypse* (Westminster: Dacre, 1949).

⁷Caird, 3.

⁸George R. Beasley-Murray, Herschel H. Hobbs, and Ray Frank Robbins, *Revelation: Three Viewpoints* (Nashville: Broadman, 1977), 17-18.

⁹See Rev 5:6,8,12,13; 6:1,16; 7:9,10,14,17; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1,4,10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7,9; 21:9,14,22,23,27; 22:1,3.

David" (5:5). He is Michael who conquers the Dragon (12:7-9); the Lamb who stands on Mount Zion with the victorious saints (14:1); the Rider of the white horse who is called "Faithful and True," and on whose robe and thigh is written, "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:11-16). It is easy to see that Christ is the focus of this book. There is no other figure that appears as frequently, as consistently, and as triumphantly as Christ. This has great and special significance for the interpreter. The focus should be to unveil Christ and to establish security in Christ. Amidst our attempts to unravel the mysteries of the beasts, the seals, the trumpets, the harlot, Babylon, Armageddon, and a score of other images, we must never lose sight of Jesus. He is the center-piece of the Apocalypse. The book is a revelation of Jesus Christ, not of beasts and numbers. It is true that we have a responsibility to understand other images that God has revealed. But this must not be at the expense of Christ. Whatever we teach about Revelation, the listener must go away with the sense of a fresh view of Jesus and a sense of greater security in Him.

Minear talks of the wider concept of NT apocalyptic as denoting a movement in which the divinely inspired prophet was involved in a shared vocation with the church. The central element of this movement was the "continuing dialogue between heaven and earth."¹⁰ A proper hermeneutic must take into account the double function of this continuing dialogue to acknowledge the Spirit who possesses the prophet and who also dwells among the believers, guiding them in their understanding of the prophetic message for their time. Thus John tells us that he was in the Spirit on the Lord's day to receive the message (1:10). He then says to his audience, "He who has an ear must hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Perhaps we may say that it is not God's requirement that every believer must understand everything about Daniel and Revelation. What God requires is that all shall understand enough to act in accordance with His eternal will and purpose.

It is helpful to see the larger picture in apocalyptic before delving into smaller details. Because apocalyptic is a drama, it is intended to be both seen and heard. The writer uses the expression "I heard" twenty-three times.¹¹ He says "I saw" thirty-five times.¹² He is frequently invited, "Come and see."¹³ It is the gospel presented in drama. But this is not just ordinary ahistorical drama like a play. In apocalyptic the seer sees two dramas. There is a heavenly drama that often portrays a conflict between the powers of good and the powers of evil. These are a reflection of a counterpart conflict going on in the earthly realm. So events in the heavenly view are to help interpret the earthly events. Thus the struggle between

¹⁰Minear, 17.

¹¹ See Rev 4:1; 5:11; 6:1,3,5,6,7; 7:4; 9:13,16; 10:4,8; 12:10; 14:2,13; 16:1,5,7; 18:4; 19:1,6; 21:3.

¹² See Rev 1:12,17; 4:4; 5:1,2; 6:1,2,9; 7:1,2; 8:2; 9:1,17; 10:1,5; 13:2,3; 14:6; 15:1,2; 16:13; 17:3,6; 18:1; 19:11,17,19; 20:1,4,11,12; 21:1,22.

¹³ See Rev 6:1,3,5,7.

Michael and the Prince of Persia mirrors the struggle between the leaders of Greece and of Persia (Dan 10:13). One must understand what is happening *above* in order to understand what is happening *below*. That is the nature of apocalyptic.¹⁴ The interpreter must constantly move between the heavenly portrayal and the corresponding earthly events in order to make sense of the earthly drama. The key to unlock what is happening below is that which the apocalyptist paints as taking place in the realm above—in the realm invisible to us.

Revelation has a clear relationship with Jewish and Christian non-biblical apocalyptic literature. Two errors are often committed in this regard. On the one hand, there is the error that views Revelation as a redaction and adaptation of contemporary apocalyptic documents more or less through a cut-and-paste process. This view would place Revelation side-by-side and on the same level with other apocalypses. It needs to be constantly remembered that John was a called, trained, and commissioned apostle with a prophetic message for his generation as well as for the future. He must not be reduced merely to a copyist or a redactor. As Richard Bauckham observes, "Revelation should not be reduced, by simplistic application of sociological theory, to a sociologically determined function. Justice must be done to its character as a sophisticated literary work of individual genius, embodying a highly reflective vision of the impact of the divine purpose on the contemporary world."¹⁵

A second error treats Rev as a document with no links of any kind to the apocalyptic world of the first century C.E. A comparison of Revelation with contemporary apocalypses shows that it shared much with them. Key characteristics of the genre are common to both. The use of symbolism and the broad cosmic sweep are shared by both. The underlying questions giving birth to the documents are similar. So while John did not expect his readers to study contemporary apocalypses, he knew of their general exposure to apocalyptic thought patterns and modes of expression. By understanding contemporary apocalypses we may discover certain common patterns, and by contrast we may appreciate the divinely inspired creative elements unique to Daniel and Revelation.

Main Schools of Apocalyptic Interpretation

Over the centuries, students of Revelation have attempted to uncover the enigma of this last book of the Bible. Such attempts have resulted, over time, in the development of four major interpretational approaches with some variations in each school. The central issue is whether to view the visions of Revelation as pointing to John's historical period, encompassing the whole Christian era, or

¹⁴Caird, 10.

¹⁵Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), xii-xiii.

pertaining to the final segment of redemption history. For the purposes of this presentation, only the four major schools of interpretation will be summarized.

The Futurist School

Futurism basically views the book of Revelation as being fulfilled in a brief period just prior to the second advent of Christ. This school of interpretation is termed "futurist" because it passes over the whole historical period and applies apocalyptic prophecies only to the immediate period before the Second Advent. The originator of this theory was a Spanish Jesuit priest, Francisco Ribeira, who, in 1585, published a commentary on Revelation in which he worked to turn aside the Protestant application of the apocalyptic antichrist prophecies and symbols from pointing to the Church of Rome. The Protestant interpretation was that the "little horn" of Daniel (7:8, 11, 20-6), the "antichrist" of John (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7), the "man of sin" mentioned by Paul (2 Thess 2:3-12), and the apocalyptic "beast" (Rev 13:1-10) were all identical and all pointed to the papacy. All the leading Reformers had believed and taught that Rome met all specifications of the great apostasy specified by Paul and indicated by Daniel and John. Ribeira's commentary on Revelation was a counter-interpretation—part of the counter-Reformation of the Church of Rome. Ribeira applied all of Revelation, except the earliest chapters, to the end time rather than to the history of the Church. Antichrist would be a single evil person who would be received by the Jews and would rebuild Jerusalem, abolish Christianity, deny Christ, persecute the Church, and rule the world for three and a half years.¹⁶

Ribeira was a more careful student of the historical backgrounds of Revelation than many modern futurist interpreters. He interpreted the first five seals to depict various progressive elements of early Christianity. The white horse represented the apostolic age; the red horse stood for the early persecutors; the black horse symbolized the heresies, and the pale horse signified the violent persecution by Trajan. Ribeira saw a gap between the fifth and sixth seals. In the sixth seal he recognized the signs that would precede the second advent of Christ. He saw Rev 1:1-6:11 as having been fulfilled in the time of John or shortly thereafter. The rest of the book is fulfilled just before the second coming of Christ. Revelation, he held, does not speak to the period between Trajan's era and the brief period just before the Second Advent. By this interpretation one cannot identify any part of Revelation with papal Rome.

There is a renewed interest in futurism among dispensationalists and other groups today. But one of the problems of this school of interpretation is that Revelation is made to be irrelevant to the church during that wide historical gap from Trajan (98-117 C.E.) to a brief period just before the Advent—the very time

¹⁶Don F. Neufeld, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Student's Source Book* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1962), 777.

when conditions both in the church and the world would demand an understanding of the messages this book contains.

The Preterist School

Another Spanish Jesuit, Luis de Alcazar (d. 1613), first promoted the idea of preterism in a systematic formulation. In his book, *Investigation of the Hidden Sense of the Apocalypse*, published posthumously in 1614, Alcazar postulated that practically all of Revelation was fulfilled by the time of Constantine the Great.¹⁷ Therefore, the prophecies of Revelation were fulfilled in the historical period of the Early Church. The Reformers had identified the Roman Church as Babylon, and had succeeded in making Revelation a powerful controversial weapon in their favor.

In order to offset this interpretation, Alcazar attempted to show that Revelation had no application to the future, but that its prophecy could be divided into two major sections (chaps. 1-12 and 13-19), which dealt respectively with the church's conflict against Judaism and against paganism. In this way, Alcazar sought to deflect the attacks upon the Roman Church that the Reformers had made so successfully by using the language of Revelation.¹⁸ This approach sees no reflection of papal Rome in Revelation. Thus, by pushing the period of fulfillment either into the distant past (preterism) or the distant future (futurism), Revelation becomes irrelevant either as a pointer to Rome or as a prophetic voice to the church in the historical period, in which the church needs such a prophetic voice.

While preterism correctly emphasizes a focus on the historical setting, a thorough interpretation of symbols, and a deep appreciation of apocalyptic forms of thought and expression, it negates its strength by removing the contemporary relevance of Revelation for the church. The biblical prophetic perspective is lost. Indeed, by localizing the fulfillment both historically in the earliest centuries and geographically in the territory of the writer, violence is done to some key characteristics of biblical apocalyptic—the elements of cosmic sweep and of eschatological focus. Under preterism, the language and symbolism of the book produce what may be called an apocalyptic overkill—using weapons and descriptions that are larger than the targeted event being portrayed. For example, when Antiochus Epiphanes is made the fulfillment of the little horn of Dan 8, or when the beasts of Rev 13 are made to apply to local Roman rulers, they are too small for the broad cosmic description of the visionary portrayal.

¹⁷Kenneth A. Strand, *Perspectives in the Book of Revelation: Essays on Apocalyptic Interpretation* (Naples, FL: Ann Arbor, 1975), 44.

¹⁸*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Student's Source Book*, 777.

The Historicist School

The historicist approach views Revelation as being anchored in and overarching history from the time of the writer to the time of the great consummation. This interpretation, which views the book of Revelation as a panoramic forecast, in symbols, of the history of the Christian church, is sometimes called the standard Protestant interpretation. Henry Alford (1810-71), NT expositor of the nineteenth century, says that it was the view "held by the precursors and upholders of the Reformation, by Wycliffe and his followers in England, by Luther in Germany, Bullinger in Switzerland, Bishop Bale in Ireland, by Fox the martyrologist, by Brightman, Pareus, and early Protestant expositors generally."¹⁹

Rev 12 seems to have served as a starting point in the development and application of the year-day principle in historicism. Joachim of Fiore interpreted the woman of Rev 12 as the Church, the "male Child" as Jesus Christ, and the dragon as Satan. His chief innovation was the interpretation of the 1260 days of the woman in the wilderness as 1260 years. With this new advance in apocalyptic interpretation, the year-day principle was established for future historicist interpreters. The year-day principle had already been applied to the 3½ days of chap. 11 by Tichonius and others, and to the 1290, 1335, and 2300 days of Dan by several medieval Jewish interpreters.²⁰

After Joachim of Fiore adopted the historicist approach to apocalyptic interpretation, his followers in the Franciscan order also adopted historicism. He saw Revelation as portraying prophetic events from John's time down to his own day. This initial discovery led him to anticipate the new Age of the Spirit soon after his own time.²¹ He viewed papal Rome as the fulfillment of prophetic Babylon. Though he loved his church, the Church of Rome, he referred to it as Babylon. He prayed for it and hoped for revival and reformation.²²

While historicists may differ in many details, they generally agree upon certain key features in interpreting Revelation. Within the scope of historical continuity, they all see the antichrist and Babylon as pointing to papal Rome. They view Revelation as portraying certain politico-religious developments leading to suffering on the part of God's saints and to the final consummation. They agree on the relevance of the book of Revelation today.

¹⁹Henry Alford, quoted in Albertus Pieters, *Studies in the Revelation of Saint John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 43.

²⁰"Hisatory of the Interpretation of the Apocalypse," *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1976-80), 7:116-17.

²¹*Ibid.*, 117.

²²C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 2, *The Message of Revelation for You and Your Family* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 276.

Because of its application of the Apocalypse to the whole period of history from the writer's time to the end, historicism tries to discover both meaning and relevance for every age. This lends tremendous strength to this method. Clearly, interpreters of this school are concerned with the great details of history in their attempt to compare the symbols of Revelation with the course of history.²³

The Idealist School

The idealist view is the latest of the four to appear on the interpretational scene.²⁴ This position sees the book as being basically symbolic and spiritual in nature. It does not see a historical correspondence for the visions of Revelation. This means that Revelation presents views that refer to spiritual ideas and principles. In this interpretation one is not to look to history for the identification of the little horn of Dan 7 and 8, or the beast of Rev 13, or Babylon of Rev 14 and 17. These symbols only represent spiritual ideas and principles. Do not look to history for their fulfillment; look into people's attitudes and values. Revelation is ahistorical; it is a timeless portrayal of the conflict between good and evil, between Christ and Satan.

The strength of the idealist school is that it attempts to find personal relevance for the lives of individual readers. Clearly we see the great-controversy theme overarching all human history. The conflict between good and evil is apparent in every generation and in every life. But to take away the historical dimension of Revelation is to remove the historical and moral imperative. Why do I need to respond and repent now? It is because something climactic is about to happen. And how do I know it is about to happen? I see it in the unfolding prophetic-historical drama.

Determinism and Grace in the Apocalypse

The basic outlook of apocalyptic prophecy points to unconditional prophetic outcomes. Since it presents a cosmic sweep which is cast in the setting of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, there are conditional statements within the larger prophetic profiles. While there is a threat to spit out Laodiceans if they remain in a lukewarm condition (3:16), there are great promises for the overcomers of Laodicea (3:20-22). None of the conditional elements are large enough to change the larger prophetic outcome. Thus we may say that, so far as the larger prophetic outcome is concerned, apocalyptic is bound by a strong element of unconditionality. There are no large variables that can now alter historical forecast. What has been decreed is now unfolding according to the determinate sovereignty of God. Babylon is bound to fall, break up, and come under the final

²³Pieters, 45.

²⁴Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 143-44.

judgment of God. The Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet are bound for divine judgment and punishment. Armageddon is coming with unnegotiable certainty.

Some have seen in the harsh language of biblical apocalyptic an indication of a vindictive divine Sovereign. The language of fire and brimstone is indeed sobering. The fate of the persecutors of the saints is portrayed in grim pictures. But within that determinism of the destruction of the strongholds of evil, there is a persistent conditionality of grace for individuals. In the letters of Jesus to the seven churches, Jesus' self-introduction always inspires hope and implies an invitation. Christ, the author of the seven letters, "holds the seven stars in His right hand "and" walks among the seven golden lampstands (2:1). He is the first and last "who was dead and has come to life" (2:8). He is the faithful and true Witness (3:14). To each church He holds hope and promise for the overcomer. He appeals to all who have ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). This conditionality of grace for individual salvation underscores the tender compassion of the sovereign God of the Apocalypse.

The Thematic Center of Revelation

Some scholars, such as Bauckham,²⁵ have noted the particular difficulty of linking Rev 12-14 to the structure of the whole book. The beginning of chap.12 seems fresh and abrupt, forming no clear linkages to chap. 11. There seems to be both a linguistic and a thematic disjunction with the preceding vision of the trumpet judgments. Rev 11:19 ends the passage: "And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm." Rev. 12:1 announces, "A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars."

Bauckham suggests that the reason chap. 11 ends so abruptly may be to give chap. 12 the sense of a fresh start. Something happens in chaps. 12-14. The vision of the woman and the dragon catapults us back to a period before the opening of the book. It sets the stage for the beginnings of the great controversy between Christ (under the name Michael, "the One who is like God") and Satan ("the Adversary"). Thus the chief protagonists are named and the battle lines are drawn.²⁶ Michael Wilcock has titled this section (11:19-15:4) "The Drama of History."²⁷ He points out that this section is flanked by two openings of the temple

²⁵Bauckham, 15.

²⁶Ibid., 15.

²⁷Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1975), 110.

(11:19 and 15:5), highlighting the beginning and ending of the scene.²⁸ C. Mervyn Maxwell refers to these three chapters as the "Great Controversy," which forms "the central theme of the book."²⁴

With reference to the section beginning at Rev 12, G. R. Beasley-Murray observes,

These chapters constitute the most substantial parenthesis in the Revelation. Yet they are more than a parenthesis, for they form the central section of the book. Not only do they come at the midpoint of the work, they provide an understanding of the nature of the conflict in which the Church is engaged, and into which John sees she is to be drawn to the limit.²⁵

In Rev 12-14 the cosmic conflict is set in sharp contrast. There are two protagonists (Christ the champion, and Satan the villain), two forces, and two religious systems fighting for control of the world. At first it seems an unequal match, with righteousness represented by a lamb, a vulnerable woman, and a small remnant, while wickedness is represented by a dragon, beasts, and the majority of earth-dwellers. But the Lamb is victorious. Interestingly, at the opening of the drama in 12:1-3 the dragon's enmity against the Son of God is revealed as the dragon waits to destroy the male Child. Then the drama rewinds to the heavenly beginnings of the great conflict. As a result of the heavenly conflict, heaven is divided and earth is soon divided too. At the beginning of the conflict there seems to be a mismatch in favor of the dragon as he faces the apparently helpless male Child. But Christ is victorious and the dragon is cast out. As the conflict unfolds on earth there seems to be a mismatch again as the beasts stand against the apparently vulnerable remnant. But they overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, and they stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion as victors (14:1-3).

in Rev 12-14 the whole great controversy is played out from its inception to its grand finale. We may therefore refer to these chapters as the thematic key to the whole book. We might even see them as the micro-apocalypse within the macro-Apocalypse. The whole Bible is summed up in these three chapters. The fall of Lucifer, the fall of mankind, the spread of evil, the persecution of the saints, the great commission, the central issues of the great controversy, reformation with regard to the Law and the Sabbath, the collapse of human religion, and the final triumph of the saints are all summed up in a few powerful dramatic strokes. This, surely, among all apocalypses, is the apocalypse par excellence. This unit—the thematic core of Revelation—begins with an expression of wonder: "A great sign

²⁸Ibid., 115.

²⁴Maxwell, 310.

²⁵G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 191.

appeared in heaven" (12:1). The next section also begins with a similar expression of wonder: "Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous" (15:1). The opening wonder is the foolish challenge of the dragon against the Son of God. The closing wonder is the triumphant victory of the saints who stand before the throne.

The Use of the Old Testament in Revelation

Of all NT books, Revelation has by far the largest number of allusions to the OT. While it is true that Revelation has no direct quotations of the OT, it makes the richest use of it by employing imagery, symbolism, and a variety of allusions. Such allusions include the use of OT persons, places, events, themes, and language. Thus we find Jezebel, Mount Zion, Sodom, Egypt, Babylon, the Song of Moses, the Exodus theme, and other words and phrases that point clearly to the OT. Perhaps the single most important interpretational key of Revelation is the discovery of its broad use of the OT. This, more than any other, will open new horizons of research and understanding to the diligent student.

John's intended audience was composed of mature believers who shared with him a deep and clear knowledge of the OT. Those believers of his generation were simple, unlearned peasants and artisans, but they studied, knew, and cherished the Scriptures. The numerous allusions that are made to other Scriptures without explanation bear this out. There seems to have been little or no attempt on John's part to explicitly point to certain specific passages that he was alluding to. John expected his readers to know the OT in detail; hence, he made many allusions to it without explanation or direct quotation.²⁶ Even without understanding everything, they must have understood enough to make sense of God's will and direction for them. In this context Bauckham writes correctly,

It is a book designed to be read in constant intertextual relationship with the Old Testament. John was writing what he understood to be a work of prophetic scripture, the climax of prophetic revelation, which gathered up the prophetic meaning of the Old Testament scriptures and disclosed the way in which it was being and was to be fulfilled in the last days. His work therefore presupposes and conveys an extensive interpretation of large parts of the Old Testament prophecy. Allusions are meant to recall the Old Testament context, which thereby becomes part of the meaning the Apocalypse conveys, and to build up, sometimes by a network of allusions to the same Old Testament passage in various parts of the Apocalypse, an interpretation of whole passages of the Old Testament prophecy.²⁷

John's use of the OT is not haphazard or coincidental. There is a clear design and purpose that guides him in his selection of OT passages, events, and allusions. Because he is following a design, the interpreter should understand the design and

²⁶Bauckham, xi.

²⁷Ibid.

be guided by it if he is to come up with the correct interpretation. Thus, passages sharing words or phrases in common with OT passages are to be studied and interpreted in relation to the OT passages.²⁸

G. K. Beale has suggested three categories of allusions to the OT found in Revelation:²⁹

1. Clear allusions are those passages in Revelation that share an almost identical wording with OT passages. They also share a “common core meaning”³⁰ and are not likely to have come from anywhere else.

2. Probable allusions are those that, though not so clear, contain wording or ideas which may be linked to the OT. Sometimes the linkage may be structural. At other points the passages may share a clear thematic link.

3. Possible allusions are those that exhibit only generally similar or parallel wording or thought.

Jon Paulien discusses another category he refers to as “echoes” of the OT.³¹ These would refer to concepts or words no longer bound to specific OT passages, but reflecting a shared motif.

The interpreter of Revelation must have a panoramic view of the text to be able to grasp the broad strokes of apocalyptic movement. The interpreter is then to read the specific passage under review. In the reading of the passage the interpreter must both see and hear the movement taking place. Very often within the passage under study some allusions to the OT become evident. The eyes and ears must be kept tuned to the OT since Revelation has what Kenneth A. Strand calls the “biblical perspective.”³²

Foundational Considerations for Interpreting Revelation

Fruitful study of Revelation requires a particular frame of mind. To understand and appreciate the colorful imagery, enigmatic symbolism, and dramatic movement, the reader needs to have an insight into the worldview of apocalyptic. An intentional awareness of the following considerations helps maintain such a worldview.

1. Revelation belongs to a literary genre called “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* which means “unveiling or uncovering.”

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield, 1998), 62.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Jon Paulien, *Decoding Revelation's Trumpets: Literary Allusions and Interpretation of Revelation 8:7-12*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 11 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1988), 175-77.

³²Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis*, 2d ed. (Naples, FL: Ann Arbor, 1970), 20-23.

It sets out to draw the curtain aside so as to bring to view God's presence, action, and purpose in history.

2. Revelation is God's message for His ordinary children, not just for theologians or biblical specialists. It is written for the comfort and encouragement of the whole church. And only as we give Revelation back to the congregation will the church be edified by it.

3. Revelation brings to view in dramatic fashion God's hand in human affairs. In answer to the question, "How long, O Lord, how long?" (6:10), it reveals the present divine control of history and God's future triumph.

4. Revelation was written for a people in crisis. It is a tract for hard times. The writer was exiled to the Isle of Patmos for his faith (1:9), and many members of his immediate audience were being imprisoned and persecuted in a variety of ways for their faith.

5. Revelation unveils a transcendent continuity, that is, a present vertical dialogue between heaven and earth. The present heavenly activities in behalf of the saints are brought to view. It also presents a linear continuity, that is, a historical thread between the present crisis and the ultimate consummation. God's future decisive actions for the ultimate vindication of His people are unveiled. God sits on the throne. He will write the final line in history.

6. Revelation was written with an eschatological focus, specifically on the end time. The purpose of this is to prepare God's people for the impending crisis of the final drama in earth's history.

7. Revelation is Christocentric, that is, it focuses on the victorious Christ. All beasts and other powers only have significance as they relate to Christ. Therefore, all heaven and all creation are portrayed in worship of the transcendent Christ.

Special Principles for Interpretation of Revelation

Over half a century ago, Louis F. Were began doing some significant work outlining principles of interpreting the NT, and especially Revelation, in light of OT backgrounds. His work has been developed and adapted by many students of Revelation. I am indebted to this history of development for the principles herein presented.³³

1. The symbols are to be traced back to the OT. While there will be some interesting parallels of symbols in Revelation with Greco-Roman practices, John does not intend his readers to go and study that culture to discern his message. The OT holds the richest contextual background for interpreting Revelation. Thus the meaning is to be drawn from the full richness of the OT.

2. The covenant promises made to the nation of Israel in the OT are reinterpreted in the context of the new people of God in Revelation. John does not

³³Louis F. Were, *Bible Principles of Interpretation—Establish Truth and Safeguard Against Last-day Errors* (Victoria, Australia: A. B. Were, 1973).

pick just any promise of Israel and apply it to the church. When we examine the promises he selects, they are found, though given to Israel, to be intended through Israel to benefit the nations. Thus Revelation carries the divine intention to its intended logical conclusion. For example, in the OT covenant claims of God's marriage to Israel (cf. Isa 54:5; Jer 3:14) we discover a reinterpretation of Christ's cosmic marriage to His celestial bride (Rev 19:7-9).

3. What is portrayed locally in the OT is reinterpreted universally in Revelation. A good example of this is David's conquest of Jerusalem against the Jebusites and his standing as victor with his brave soldiers on Mount Zion (2 Sam 5:6-8). Although this is a local victory, it is recast as a cosmic victory of the Lamb over the dragon and evil powers. The Lamb now stands on Mount Zion with the victorious 144,000 (14:1-3). The same principle may be demonstrated in the local triumphs of Deborah at the waters of Megiddo and of Elijah at Mt. Carmel, who slaughtered the prophets and priests of Baal at the Kishon River by the same waters of Megiddo. These local events may be reinterpreted in the cosmic battle of Armageddon, with all the world gathered for a final showdown.

4. Revelation extends to the nations the promises made locally to Israel. A noteworthy example of this is when John views not just the house of Aaron but the entire throng of the redeemed as priests (Rev 1:6). It should be noted that this is not an arbitrary selecting and extending of promises. A careful study will reveal that Revelation brings to a climax a development that was already in the OT. For example, Exod 19:5 states God's intention of making all Israel a kingdom of priests. But through idolatry at Sinai, God's original plan of universal priesthood was frustrated and only the tribe of Levi was consecrated to represent Israel (Exod 32:26-28). Beale refers to this tendency as "universalization" of the OT in Revelation.³⁴

The universalizing process is seen in Zech 12:10, which refers to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem mourning over the Messenger whom they pierced, when the prophet declares, "And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born." When this passage is alluded to in Rev 1:7, it applies to the whole world as it will stand before Christ when He returns the second time: "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so, Amen."

This same universalizing principle may be demonstrated in the song by the Red Sea being transposed to the song by the Sea of Glass (Exod 15; cf. Rev 15:3-4). The fall of the ancient city of Babylon is also transposed into a universal experience (Jer 51; cf. Rev 14:8; 17:1-18:24).

³⁴Beale, 18.

5. The literal in the OT becomes spiritual in Revelation. There is a movement from the concrete and literal to the abstract and spiritual. The literal and concrete city of Babylon of OT times is recast as an abstract and spiritual opponent of the people of God (Jer 51; cf. Rev 17-18). Sodom and Egypt are concrete powers or places in the OT; however, these are portrayed as spiritual realities in Revelation (Gen 18:20-19:25; Exod 1-14; cf. Rev 11:8).

6. The earthly in the OT becomes the heavenly in Revelation. Events that are enacted in the earthly realm are recast on a higher heavenly realm. Jerusalem, the earthly capital of Israel (2 Sam 5:6-10; cf. Josh 15:63), is transposed into the heavenly New Jerusalem (Rev 21:2). Earthly Mount Zion is reinterpreted as the heavenly Mount Zion (2 Sam 5:6-10; cf. Rev 14:1).

7. The law of repetition and progressive enlargement is to be noted. Themes that started in seed form in earlier Scriptures enlarge as they are repeated in later Scriptures. As these themes are repeated, they become larger and ascend higher in spiritual or theological significance. These themes meet their fullest expansion in the book of Revelation. Thus the seed of the woman of Gen 3:15 comes to view in Revelation as the male Child who appears as the victorious leader of the armies of heaven and defeats the devil (Rev 12:7-12; 19:14-15).

Conclusion

Looking at the special hermeneutical principles involved in interpreting Revelation, many readers are daunted by the apparent complexity of it all. The code language of the book seems so otherworldly that we may be tempted to leave the book to highly trained biblical professionals. However, God intended the book to be read with profit by all His faithful children. Ellen G. White has expressed the matter correctly:

Let none think, because they cannot explain the meaning of every symbol in the Revelation, that it is useless for them to search this book in an effort to know the meaning of the truth it contains. The One who revealed these mysteries to John will give to the diligent searcher for truth a foretaste of heavenly things. Those whose hearts are open to the reception of truth will be enabled to understand its teachings, and will be granted the blessing promised to those who "hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein."³⁵

The book of Revelation plays a crucial role in providing an understanding of God's end-time movements as the drama of human history draws to a climactic consummation. It is difficult to imagine how this kind of ending of human history could be adequately expressed in nonapocalyptic language. This genre seems to

³⁵Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles in the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 584.

be uniquely fitted to make the necessary broad cosmic sweep that fills the whole horizon with graphic color and movement. This is the revelation of the ages.