

**Institute for Christian Teaching  
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**TEACHING BIBLICAL APOCALYPTIC  
LITERATURE**

**By**

**Leif Hongisto**

**Teacher of Theology and Psychology  
Toivonlinna Jr. College  
Theological Seminary  
Finland**

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**101- 92 Institute for Christian Teaching  
12501 Old Columbia Pike  
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## TEACHING BIBLICAL APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

*Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.*

*Edward Sapir*

### Writing Biblical revelation

*Because God is Truth, all true things express His Light. Light does not get stained although it passes through filth.*

*Augustin*

How does the Christian study the Bible? Paul said, we study the Bible as the Word of God (Thess.2:13). This fundamental position, that the Bible is the inspired Revelation of God and thus the mediator of divine truth, compels us to explore its full potentiality. A prime methodological base for Bible study contains four elements: the recognition of the Bible as the inspired Word of God, a respect for its validity as a conveyor of truth, sensitivity to the revelatory continuity from Genesis to The Apocalypse, and an equal treatment of the authority of all the narratives in the Bible. Furthermore, serious Biblical scholarship to a great extent requires interdisciplinary methodological approaches: religious and philosophical inquiries inevitably entail larger literary issues, while historical inquiry provokes political and sociological questions.

Biblical writings are connected closely to historical settings. The task of ancient scribes was not to preserve the specific historical details of catastrophe so much as it was to preserve the traditional paradigms by which events were to be understood and interpreted. Religious meaning and significance, historical causes and effects, are simultaneously reflected and generated in the Biblical narrative. What is remembered, and how events are remembered depends in turn on the texts giving them form.

The texts in the Bible contain numerous literary forms, including narrative or story, epic, tragedy, satire, lyric poetry, epithalamium, elegy, encomium, proverb, parable, pastore, prophecy, gospel, epistle, oratory and apocalypse. The literary form reflects the prevailing culture (2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 1:1,2; see also SM1, p.19,20).

The Bible is experiential and concrete. It is not primarily an expository treatise on systematic theology, though it contains this too. Instead, it continually presents poems and stories about characters. The stories are full of the usual ingredients of literary narrative - adventure, mystery, brave and wise heroes,

beautiful and courageous heroines, rescues, quests, suspense, romantic love and pageantry. The poems of the Bible, though they are theological in content, are also about the weather, trees, crops, lions, hunters, rocks of refuge and human emotions, such as love and terror and trust or joy. In the book of Ruth, for example, the quest for suffering is addressed on the experiential level (L.Hongisto, *Literary structure and theology in the book of Ruut*. Andrews University Seminary Studies. 1985,1:19-28.). The book is about a woman and her friend who suffer pain, loss of loved ones, despair, anger and anxiety. It is about harvesting, threshing, bonfires and passionate love.

Christians with a high regard for the Bible as God's Word are often so preoccupied with theological content that they are scarcely aware of the artistic features of the Bible. Yet the concern with literary form is so pervasive that it cannot be ignored without drastically distorting the Bible as a written document.

#### **Thoughts for discussion**

- \* Is identifying the actual authors of the Biblical books essential to establishing the authority of a particular book?
- \* Why do we feel uncomfortable about the author using existing documents and traditions instead of creating material fresh and new?
- \* Can you think of good reasons why God did not harmonize the accounts in the Bible for us?
- \* How should a Biblical study program which cultivates an awareness of specific problem areas, without making them all-encompassing, look like?

#### **Biblical narrative: conveying belief**

*There are no facts in themselves. For a fact to exist, we must first introduce meaning.*  
*Friedrich Nietzsche*

The intriguing phenomenon of language is underlined when studying apocalyptic narrative. Human thinking and language are closely related to each other. For how could ideas exist in the mind without words? And how could the power of reasoning operate without sentences? It could be said that there is no thinking without language, because it is language itself which is the organizer that we use when we learn how to think. Saussure argued that 'langue' should take precedence over 'parole', i.e. that the system of language in general should take precedence over the sum total of all the actual utterances ever actually uttered.

The system of 'langue' precedes any utterances - at least in so far as the speaker must have it already internalized before he can even begin to speak. A speaker who knows how to speak only those words which he actually does speak can hardly be using language to signify or bear information. His utterance would be more in the nature of a bird-call. As modern information theory shows, the informational value of a given signal is directly proportion-

When men began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose. Then the Lord said, "My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown (Gen. 6:1-4).

On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a (pit); they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. (Isa. 24:21-24).

And the Lord said unto Michael: Go, bind Semjaza and his associates who have united themselves with women so as to have defiled themselves with them in all their uncleanness. (Bind) them fast for seventy generations in the valleys of the earth, till the day of their judgment and of their consummation, till the judgment that is forever and ever is consummated. In those days they shall be led off to the abyss of fire: to the torment and the prison in which they shall be confined forever. And whosoever shall be condemned and destroyed will from thenceforth be bound together with them to the end of all generations. And destroy all the (spirits) of the Reprobates and the children of the Watchers, because they have wronged mankind (1 Enoch 10:1-16).

Go, say to the Watchers of heaven, . . . "Wherefore have ye left the high, holy, and eternal heaven, and lain with women, and defiled yourselves with the daughters of men, and taken to yourselves wives, and done like the children of earth, and begotten giants as your sons? And though ye were holy, spiritual, living the eternal life, you have defiled yourselves with the blood of women, and have begotten children with the blood of flesh, and, in the children of men, have lusted after flesh and blood as those also do who die and perish. Therefore have I given them wives also that they might impregnate them, and begot children by them, that thus nothing might be wanting to them on earth. But you were formerly (spiritual) living the eternal life, and immortal for all generations of the world. And therefore I have not appointed wives for you, for as for the spiritual ones of the heaven, in heaven is their dwelling (1 Enoch 15:2-7).

I saw there seven stars like great burning mountains, and to me when I inquired regarding them, the angel said: "This place is the end of heaven and earth: This has become a prison for the stars and the host of heaven. And the stars which roll over the fire are they which have transgressed the commandment of the Lord in the beginning of their rising, because they did not come forth at their appointed time. And He was with them, and bound them till the time when their guilt should be consummated, even for ten thousand years." And Uriel said to me, "Here shall stand the angel who have connected themselves with women, and their (spirits) assuming many different forms are defiling mankind and shall lead them astray into sacrificing to demons as god, here shall they stand, till the day of the great judgment in which they shall be judged till they are made an end of." (1 Enoch 18:13-19:1).

This place is the prison of the angels, and here they will be imprisoned forever (1 Enoch 21:10).

And many chiefs of the stars transgress the order prescribed. And these shall alter their orbits and tasks. And not appear at the seasons proscribed to them (1 Enoch 80: 6, cp. 69:20-24).

Know ye, that their souls will be made to descend into Sheol. And they shall be wretched in their great tribulation. And into (darkness) and (chains) and a burning flame where there is grievous judgment shall your spirits enter; And the great judgment shall be for all the generations of the world. (1 Enoch 103:7-8).

((The author describes how the angels intermarried with men and caused God to bring a flood to destroy their demonic offspring. Then:)) After this they were (bound) in the (depths of the earth) forever, until the day of the great condemnation, when judgment is executed on all them who have corrupted their ways. (Jub. 5:10).

And this is the month the Lord executed his judgment on Sodom, and Gomorrah, and Zeboim, and all the region of the Jordan, and He burned them with fire and brimstone, and destroyed them until this day, even as I have declared unto thee all their works, that they are wicked and sinners exceedingly, and that they defile themselves and commit fornication in their flesh, and work uncleanness on the earth. And in like manner, God will execute judgment on the places where they have done according to the uncleanness of the Sodomites, like unto the judgment of Sodom (Jubilees 16:4-6).

The gentiles went astray, and forsook the Lord, and changed their order, and obeyed stocks and stone, (spirits) of deceit. But ye shall not be so, my children, recognizing in the firmament, in the earth, and in the sea, and in the created things, the Lord who made all things, that ye become not as Sodom which changed the order of nature. In like manner the Watchers also changed the order of their nature, whom the Lord cursed at the flood on whose account He made the earth without inhabitants and fruitless (Test. Napht. 3:3-5).

Thou hast created all things, and governest the whole world, art a righteous ruler, and judgest those who do aught in violence and arrogance. Thou didst destroy those who aforetime did iniquity, among whom were giants trusting in their strength and boldness, bringing upon them a boundless flood of water. Thou didst burn up with fire and brimstone the men of Sodom, workers of arrogance, who had become known of all for their crimes, and didst make them an example to those who should come after. (3 Maccabees 2:3-5).

And those men took me and led me up on to the second heaven, and showed me (darkness) greater than earthly darkness, and there I saw prisoners hanging, watched, awaiting the great and boundless judgment, and these angels were dark-looking, more than earthly darkness, and incessantly waking weeping through all hours, and I said to the men who were with me: "Wherefore are these incessantly tortured?" They answered me: "Those are God's apostates, who obeyed not God's commands, but took counsel with their own will, and turned away with their prince, who also is fastened in the fifth heaven." (2 Enoch 7:1-3).

For Christ also died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which He went and preached to the (spirits) in prison, with formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah (1 Pet 3:18-20).

For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into (hell) and committed them to (pits) of (eternal gloom) to be held for judgment, if He did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah a herald of righteousness, with seven other persons, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes He consumed them to extinction and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly. . . (2 Pet 2:4-6).

The Angels that did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by Him in eternal (chains) in the nether (gloom) until the judgment of the great day: just as Sodom, and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which in like manner as these (angels) committed fornication and went after alien flesh, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire (Jude 6-7).

Wandering stars, for whom the (nether gloom of darkness) has been reserved forever and ever (Jude 13).

impending judgment

prison

under world's fire

darkness

bound with chains (cf. Revelation)

Sheol

Table 1 Thematic recurrence as corporative memory

al to the range of possible signals that have not been selected. To account for language properly, one must understand the simultaneous system of 'langue', which implicitly lies behind every word at every single moment of utterance.

Of course, it is not only the speaker but also the receiver who must have the system of 'langue' already internalized. 'Langue' must also be shared - and shared, ultimately, by a whole society. No single person can create new words and meanings. As Saussure puts it: "(langue) is the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create or modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of the community." (F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. 1959, p.14.)

The special feature of this 'contract' is that no one ever gets the chance to evaluate it before signing. The individual absorbs language before s/he can think for him/herself: indeed, the absorption of language is the very condition of being able to think. The individual can reject particular knowledge that society explicitly teaches, s/he can throw off particular beliefs that society forcibly imposes upon him/her - but s/he has always already accepted the words and meanings through which such knowledge and beliefs were communicated to him/her.

This factor that we are individuals only within a culture results in that we as individuals learn to understand nature, life and culture unconsciously; our awareness is formed in the particular culture in which we became humans. Our consciousness does not start from zero, but there is something already known at the beginning. Anthony Thiselton (*Believing in the Church*. 1981, p.66) speaks of a 'corporative memory' which we liken to the pre-consciousness, the a priori knowledge. This is an essential way in which a community maintains its identity and vitality in a changing historical circumstance. It is the maintaining of a corporative memory that necessitates the writing of scriptures in any religious tradition. (Table 1)

When reading apocalyptic writings we are confronted with a vast structure of beliefs that gave sense to the text for a body people in a certain setting, but no longer satisfies recipients in a new situation. As the period of time between the composition of a text and its reception lengthens we tend to attribute the uncertainty, the distrust of language and our fear of its manipulation to the specific type of language characteristic of the apocalyptic. We ask ourselves, does it make sense? If so, can we say how or why? To answer these questions the historical-critical method has tried to deal with this problem by reconstructing social settings and developing sociological-anthropological laws in order to determine the intentions behind the texts: why did someone say something about something to someone in some real temporal context.

Paul Ricoeur, whose concern is to understand the symbolic forms of language, suggests that the text be regarded not so much as a matter of the author's intention as of the world the text projects or proposes for our imaginative appropriation. In explaining this concept, Ricoeur makes a distinction between sense and reference. His theory, based on the concept of creating meaning through different levels of language use and structural patterns, challenges the

role of historical criticism.

A text according to Ricoeur outlasts its original author, audience and context. To be interpreted a text must be recontextualized in terms of its new setting and audience. For example, while both the morning star and the evening star have the same reference, Venus, they do not have the same sense. A speaker may know something about one or even both of them without being aware that they refer to the same thing. Every text has an identifiable sense, and thus, structure modes are applicable, yet meaning also includes reference which changes depending on the circumstances of interpretation. (P.Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*. 1976).

This especially applies to apocalyptic language, which cannot be reduced to descriptive, factual information. Apocalyptic creates a world for us to inhabit. It is not simply a vehicle for theological-eschatological ideas or concepts, but as a mytho-poetic language evokes imaginative participation. (Table 2)

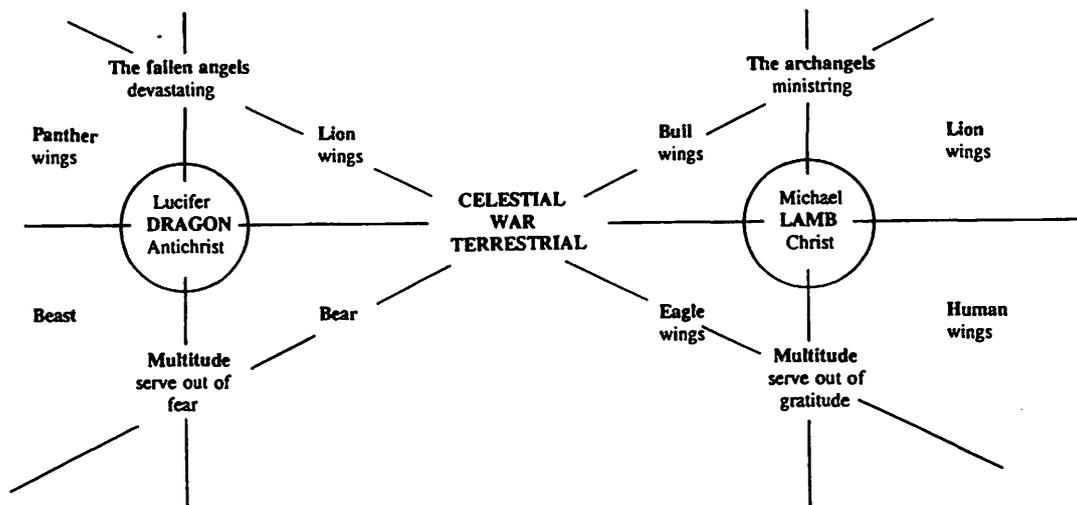


Table 2 Cf. Hes.1; Dan.3,7,8; Rev.4,5,12,13.

According to Schweitzer, it is this symbolic and imagistic aspect of apocalyptic which makes it timeless (A.Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. 1950). Since it appeals to our imagination it has to be analyzed primarily from a literary perspective.

#### Thoughts for discussion

- \* The Bible is like an unfinished script. If the Biblical author requires that we finish the script of the redemptive story within the boundaries set in the previous scenes, what are the implications?
- \* How would you interpret the thought that the text reads you rather than that you read it?
- \* How do we become servants of the text and avoid the peril of making the text serve us?
- \* Every word is a door to a new thought.

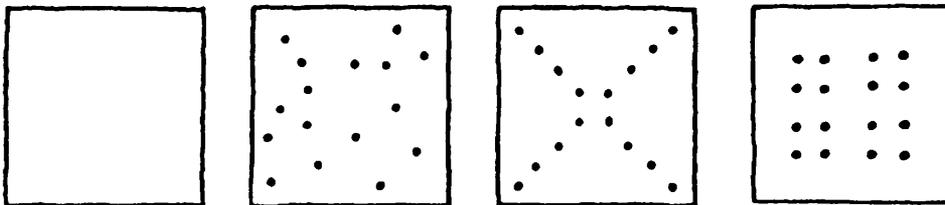
### Biblical narrative: creating order

*Words or speech, written or spoken, do not appear to play any part at all in the mechanism of my thought processes. The basic psychic elements of thought are certain signs and more or less clear pictures, which can be reproduced and combined to order.*

*Albert Einstein*

"In the beginning," says the Book of Genesis, "the earth was without form and void." For twentieth century humans it is difficult to imagine a void, a chaos, because they have learned that a kind of order appears to prevail in both the infinitely small and infinitely large. There is no element of chance either around or in us, but all things, including mind and matter, follow an ordered pattern. This understanding supports the argument that even the simplest blot or scribble cannot exist by pure chance or without significance, although the viewer does not clearly recognize its causes, its origins, and the occasion for it.

On a given empty space - in the illustration the square defined by lines symbolizes the concept of 'emptiness' - we try to scatter sixteen dots in a random, accidental manner. The illustration shows how difficult it is to place the sixteen elements in such a way that they are situated as though by chance, without relation to one another, without evoking a certain structure, a picture, a geometric or figurative representation. (Table 3)



**Table 3** The mind creates order

It is very easy to conceive a structured form, a number of figures or arrangements with the sixteen dots. From this recognition we draw the paradoxical conclusion that producing an ordered form is easier than making disorder.

We have grown up with the incision of primary figures, pictures, and schemata, which constantly influence our field of vision and our world of imagination. These signs and systems are organized as to make human communication possible. (Examples of communication through signs and symbols are: wedding rings, a fruit basket for thanksgiving, traffic signs, Fido and 'It's cool to be clear', etc.). Through the interaction of the various communicative systems, (the linguistic system, the narrative system, the body language code, table manners, etc.) the raw data of the world, basically our observations of actions and facts, are then apprehended as a meaningful network of relations and a purposeful process. The use of symbolic systems provides a specific vision of life and of the world. To experience the world as

meaningful through a system of symbolic values means inevitably using it as the subconscious framework within which to live and think.



Table 4

We can not make sense of the shapes of light and shadows until we have arranged them into a meaningful structured pattern. This contrast picture of a hedge interpreted through the Christian symbolic system values turns into a picture of Christ. After this meaning has been introduced the recipient sees order in the same picture which previously was chaotic.

The New Testament literature in general and, for our discussion, apocalyptic in particular, is structured to establish order and to overcome chaos. In the context of apocalyptic writings detecting structures in the text proves to be helpful in asserting the relationship, or the application, of the text to the present day context. Other hermeneutical quests and traditional Biblical scholarship have failed to bring about this result. This can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the communicative process.

Every text constitutes a structural whole. Through its form and structure each text directs our attention to the theme. The human mind functions through the use of semantic appositions and can therefore fruitfully analyze meaning in terms of the structural relationships between semantic components at various levels, from the word to the narrative (Table 5), even to a complete Biblical work (Table 6).

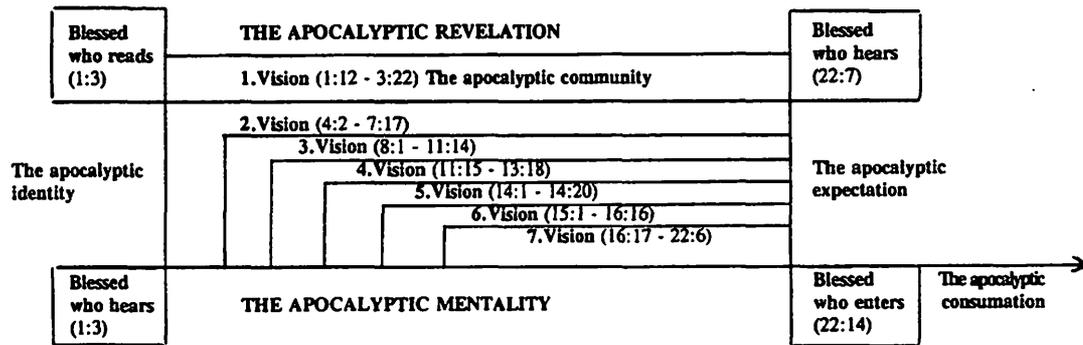
The gospel to the whole world Matt. 24:14 Mark 13:14 Luke 21:20	The abomination of desolation Matt. 24:15
Tribulation Matt. 24:9-13 Mark 13:9-13 Luke 21:12-13	Tribulation Matt. 24:16-22 Mark 13:15-20 Luke 21:21-24
The signs on earth Matt. 24:6-8 Mark 13:7-8 Luke 21:9-11	False messiahs Matt. 24:23-28 Mark 13:21-23
False messiahs Matt. 24:5 Mark 13:5-6 Luke 21:8	The signs in the heavens Matt. 24:29 Mark 13:24-25 Luke 21:25-26
The destruction of Jerusalem & Temple Matt. 23:37,24:3 Mark 13:2 Luke 21:5-7	The destruction of this world Matt. 24:30-33 Mark 13:26-27 Luke 21:27-28
This generation Matt. 23:36	This generation Matt. 24:34 (36-44) Mark 13:32-37 Luke 17:26-36
The scribes & the pharisees and their characteristics Matt. 23:23-35	Two groups of people and their characteristics Matt. 24:45 - 25:30
The scribes & the pharisees sit on the seat of Moses Matt. 23:1-22	The son of Man sits on the throne of glory Matt. 25:31-46

Table 5 The chiastic structure of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse.

In accordance with J.Kidder, *This generation in Matthew*. AUSS. 1983, 21:203-209.

If we extend our literary study of the apocalyptic narrative structures by a historical analysis, which allows us to identify and define the elements in the narrative through their relationship to a world outside the text, we will become more sensitive to and aware of the levels of the author's creativity and his ability to have a poetic effect upon the reader. The implication is that the meaning of life, the deepest convictions about Reality and God, are created by a semiotic effect. Thus, the literary structure functions in itself as a conveyor of meaning.

The Literary Structure Of the Book Of Revelation



<p><b>The Lampstand - The seven churches - The first temple vision (1:12)</b></p> <p>1. Ephesus 2:1-2. Smyrna 2:8- 3. Pergamum 2:12- 4. Thyatira 2:18- 5. Sardis 3:1- 6. Philadelphia 3:7- 7. Laodicea 3:14-</p>	<p><b>The Singing in the Temple - The seven angels - The fifth temple vision (14:2,3)</b></p> <p>1. The gospel 14:6- 2. Babylon fallen 3. The sign of the beast 14:9- 4. The wheat harvest 14:15- 5. The sickle 14:17- 6. The wine harvest 14:18- 7. The next vision (15:1-16:16)</p>
<p><b>The Table of Presence - The seven seals - The second temple vision (4:2, 5:1)</b></p> <p>1. The white horse 6:1-2. The red horse 6:3- 3. The black horse 6:5- 4. The pale horse 6:7- 5. The souls under the altar 6:9- 6. The second advent 6:12- 7. The next vision (8:1-11:14)</p>	<p><b>The temple open - The seven bowls - The sixth temple vision (15:5)</b></p> <p>1. The bowl of acres 16:2- 2. The bowl of blood 16:3- 3. The bowl of revenge 16:4- 4. The bowl of fierce heat 16:8- 5. The bowl of darkness 16:10- 6. The bowl of drought 16:12- 7. The next vision (16:17-22:6)</p>
<p><b>The Golden Altar - The seven trumpets - The third temple vision (8:3)</b></p> <p>1. The hail (Baradiel) 8:7- 2. The meteor (Ziqiel) 8:8- 3. A star (Kokbiel) 8:10- 4. The celestial signs 8:12- 5. The fallen star 9:1- 6. The Voice 9:13- 7. The next vision (11:15-13:18)</p>	<p><b>The roles in the temple - the twelve spectacles - The seventh temple vision (16:17)</b></p> <p>1. The whore 17:1- 2. Babylon 18:1- 3. The white horse 19:11- 4. The loud cry 19:17- 5. The final confrontation 19:19- 6. The pit unlocked 20:1- 7. Judgement thrones 20:4- 8. The white throne 20:11- 9. The resurrected 20:12- 10. An open Heaven 21:1- 11. The City 21:9- (12 characteristics: 12 gates, 12 angles, 12 tribal names, 12 foundation stones, 12 apostles, 12 names, 12 x 1000 furlongs in measured length, 12 x 12 cubits in measured depth, 12 jewels, 12 pearls, 12 harvests, 12 x 12 x 1000 inhabitants) 12. The river of life 22:1-</p>
<p><b>The Ark of Covenant - The seven signs - The fourth temple vision (11:19)</b></p> <p>1. The woman 12:1- 2. The dragon 12:2- 3. The dragon on earth 12:13- 4. The beast 13:1- 5. The cross 13:3- 6. The antichrist 13:11- 7. The next vision (14:1-14:20)</p>	

Table 6 The apocalyptic narrative carries the reader forward into the future and confirms the hope of his future vindication by God. The very fact that these discourses were written down provides a sure indication that they were intended to serve as guides for an ongoing community, no matter how imminent that community considered the end of their age to be.

Thoughts for discussion

- \* Education is a combination of facts, fantasy, feelings and alternation.
- \* Investigate the meaning of: knowledge is a process not a product.

**Biblical narrative: meaning and validity**

*Every metaphor is a little myth. Giambattista Vico*

It is hard to overestimate the difficulty in determining what should be understood as literal and non-literal language in apocalyptic. Since modern grammar fails to show whether or not a certain locution is a figure of speech, interpreters have assumed the right, in confronting Biblical texts, to attribute most apocalyptic language to symbolic speech. This enables them to evade facing the problem of the difference between the past world of the written document and the present world of the modern interpreter. Symbolic speech also serves to provide relevance for our faith and time by supplying a pattern for reconstructing into categories of modern thought what the authors really meant.

The study of the literary structure evident in patterns of apocalyptic raises the issue of the usage of symbols and the meaning they convey. In apocalyptic simile is recurrent as a literary device, e.g.: someone like the Son of Man, or the likeness of the four living creatures. We can question whether steno-symbols, analogy or any literary imagery has prominence in apocalyptic. For example, does the statue to which the three young men refused to bow represent the actual statue in its literal meaning, in the given temporal situation, or more than just one idol through an allegorical meaning. Does the bowing of the three men refer to an action characteristic for a general category of actions according to typological interpretation (bowing to the statue as a type for relying upon a manmade theory)?

As a general rule we ought to follow the principle that the meaning of a sentence is the literal one, the one that the author intended to convey by expressing it. In certain instances, although figurative language is not introduced as such, the author intended it to be so understood. Where we find both a literal and a metaphorical version of a saying or event, it is commonly the literal one which came secondary, figurative speech was followed by a literal statement. As an example, a look at Joshua's prayer at the battle of Aijalon reveals the following text:

"O sun, stand still over  
Gibeon,  
O moon, over the valley of  
Aijalon!"

So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped,  
till the nation avenged itself on its enemies,  
as it is written in the book of Jashar.

Joshua 10:12,13

In this poetic style the book of Joshua recorded the prayer that God would grant victory over the enemy expressed metaphorically by the wish that the sun would stand still. It was a later commentator who transformed the prayer

into a miracle (Josh. 10:13-14), attributing a literal meaning to the metaphor.

In Biblical narrative myth has become an interpretative framework for making sense of historical experiences. Paul, at times, uses history to reinterpret myth. His use of the expression "the elements of the world" (Gal. 4:3: Col. 2:8), where "the historic element of the cross ... is taken up into the myth to transform it> henceforth the victories of God over all the forces in the universe which are resistant to His will are to be won, not by might, but by the persuasive constraints of self-sacrificing love." (G.B.Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. 1980, p.242)

Using a diachronic mode of expression, one could say that myth is a working hypothesis based on the hope of recurrent effectiveness. Myth is also referential in the same way that metaphor is. It tells a story about the past, but only in order to say something about the present and the future.

Apocalypse, on the contrary, is not a hypothesis, but faith. It is faith that victory is not only the outcome but the incipience of history. In between alpha and omega, the world is wearing out, but history continues to unwind according to the teleological purpose of God. Apocalyptic cannot be treated as metaphor since the delay of the parousia points beyond a metaphorical understanding of apocalyptic language.

#### Thoughts for discussion

- \* Does a text through the merits of symbolism become more illuminating?
- \* Can the use of imagery become a hindrance to understand the text by drawing the attention to the symbols rather than to that which they are supposed to illuminate?

#### Biblical apocalypticism

*There is not much to argue about here: the means must be asked what the end is.*  
*Bertol Brecht*

Apocalypse designates a writing within the literary genre of apocalyptic writings. Hence, the book of Revelation in the New Testament is regarded as the basic model of apocalyptic writings. The particular characteristics they have in common are symbolism, visions and dreams, pseudonyms, and literary frames.

Apocalyptic writings use symbolism. This makes apocalyptic often unintelligible to modern man. It has been suggested however, that a generally accepted symbolism was widely understood within certain Jewish circles. This would be supported by the way different apocalypses make use of the same imagery. The bizarre symbolism not only consisted of beasts and natural phenomena, but often also symbolic numbers.

Much of the content of these writings is presented in the form of visions and dreams. The witness is taken into heavenly places to be shown hidden truths that are being presented. These truths have purposely been kept secret until these last days.

Apocalyptic is pseudonymous. Unlike the classical prophets, the apocalyptic writers usually did not claim direct inspiration; rather, they seem to have agreed with their time in believing that the prophetic canon had closed. Nevertheless, it seems that the apocalypticist felt that he was saying things the

hero of the past would have said. However, he did not stand forth boldly but instead chose to speak through a hero whose character related to his message.

Along with pseudonymity, the apocalypticists employed **literary frames** to increase the credibility of their messages. Through these narratives they could comment freely on Biblical revelations.

As we have come to see, the term apocalyptic refers to three different, yet related, phenomena: (1) a religiously motivated social movement called apocalypticism, (2) a system of religious beliefs called apocalyptic, and (3) a distinctive literary genre of apocalypsis. It may be more accurate, however, to use the term either as an adjective or as an adjectival noun. None the less, the major problem in the study of apocalyptic is the extremely scanty knowledge of the religious currents in Judaism during the intertestamental period, when apocalyptic especially flourished. Nevertheless, we can establish that apocalyptic was widespread in Judaism and early Christianity - where it found expression in various kinds of religious and social movements - and that it is dominantly present in the New Testament.

(1) **Apocalypticism** has been defined as a particular form of eschatology, covering any type of belief that looks forward to the end of history as something which gives structure and meaning to the whole. It is this special kind of eschatology - apocalypticism - that provides the apocalyptic movement with its (1) identity and (2) interpretation of reality. The debate about the best way to understand the content of apocalypticism still continues in scholarship. G. von Rad has articulated the problem: "Even a full list of characteristic features would not be entirely satisfactory, for we would thus achieve only a transcription of the phenomenon, not a description of it". (G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology II*. 1965, p.302) However, two factors have been isolated which contribute to the forming of this particular mentality: social setting and a new way of thinking.

(2) **Apocalyptic** (best used as an adjective or an adjectival noun) is usually employed either to name revelatory writings, the apocalypses, or to designate the thought-world of these texts. The term as used in Revelation 1:1 designates an unveiling of divine plans, indicating a divine message of the imminent end of the world, or at least the end of the present form of the world. The literature bearing this name may thus be expected to be largely taken up with revealing what has been hidden from the ordinary person.

(3) **Apocalypsis** - The root meaning as found in the New Testament is derived from the Greek "apocalyptein," to reveal, and "apokalypsis," revelation, uncovering, disclosure.

### **Biblical apocalyptic identity**

*No one knows where Moses was buried, but we know where he lived and we still know all about his life. Nowadays everything is the other way around. We know only where the burial places are. Where we live is unfixed and unknown. We roam about, we change, we shift. Only the burial place is known.* **Yehuda Amichai**

A certain **social setting** is provocative for apocalyptic thinking, namely when the devastating experience becomes real, either on an individual level or on the level of a group within society. This takes place when the institutional structures are threatened with destruction. The cultural vacuum demands

answers on the part of the individual whose viability of life has been called into question. (P.Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*. 1975, p.148)

The changed social setting produces a **new way of thinking**, due to the fact that the immediate needs are not met within historical reality and identity can not be found in the existing religious institution nor in the given society. Attention is therefore focused upon the otherworldly. God is the one who can provide rescue from the presently felt dissolution.

Similarly, the old traditions receive a new interpretation and a new mode of expression. Emphasis is laid on aspects which previously were not prominent since life was smooth. The world of mediating angels and of a Messianic Judgment leading into future life become especially meaningful during the experience of devastating helplessness. The understanding of history goes through a complete reorientation. As a result we may delineate three distinctive features of apocalyptic historical understanding: (1) deterministic, clear sequences of historical events are irreversible and unconditional. This differs from the view of the classical prophets who opt for alternative outcomes for history, depending on man's response in a given situation. (2) The view of history is **pessimistic**. Until the time comes when God will intervene, things will be hopeless. There is no solution within the framework of human endeavor. This age will not improve; the only hope is in the future. (3) History is meaningless until the **eschaton** takes place. This belief reflects an attitude based on the concept that history has no bearing on the final outcome. God will break in on the present historical process, but His intervention in history is not a continuous one as pictured in the prophets.

The prevailing social order was often unable to accommodate the **apocalyptic mentality**. The tension took on three main expressions. (1) Because the present age is evil - that is, dominated by the power of the opponents of God - the righteous are persecuted and suffer. The only hope for the righteous is divine intervention. In awaiting that day, the tendency is to **withdraw** from society, only to return in the future. (2) Another alternative is for people to function **underground**. Apocalyptic literature has been called underground literature, a "consolation of the persecuted." The apocalypticist wrote to encourage people who were in difficulties but who did not choose to completely withdraw from society. (3) There were movements of **rebellion** at the time when apocalyptic thought flourished. These rebellious tendencies found support in the apocalyptic writings and their propagation of the nearness of the last days; as well as in their assurance of the intervention of God as lying in the immediate future. This conviction served as an encouragement to those who believed they would hasten the last historical happenings and the intervention of God by their own initiative.

**Apocalyptic eschatology** is more than a literary form to express eschatological events. Apocalyptic eschatology is a particular religious perspective, which does not seem to be the exclusive property of any single party in the Jewish/Christian society. There are several eschatological teaching features. (1) **Divine intervention is expected**. Characteristic of this thought is that God will intervene. The apocalypticists differed as to how the end would be brought about, but they usually thought it would take place soon. (2) The end will be marked by **God's judgement**. The unrighteous will be destroyed, the people of God vindicated; the coming of the Messiah will be that of a warrior-king, and it will reverse the order in society. (3) The Messianic intervention has a cosmic,

**universal scope.** The focus is not on a local and contemporary situation. A universal conflict is pictured between good and evil. The Most High has not made one world, but two (Ezra 7:50); thus the present suffering is contrasted with future salvation. There is a sharp discontinuity between this wicked age and the blessed future. Much has been said about the Iranian origin of this (4) **dualistic view**; however, in the essential features it seems to have been truly Jewish. (5) The radical negation of the present age and the affirmation of the future age calls for the **resurrection scene**. The resurrection hope provides the new hope of transformation. It is the answer to the problem of transformation from the old to the new.

#### **Thoughts for discussion**

- \* How do we view this world: as second best in comparison to the life of faith, or as an unavoidable evil, or as something to be fled from?
- \* Is there something in Pascal's warning: "We never keep to the present ... We anticipate the future as if we found it too slow in coming and were trying to hurry it up, or we recall the past as if to say it's too rapid flight. We are so unwise that we wander about in times that do not belong to us, and do not think of the only one that does. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live." (Pensees)
- \* What are the implications of either being a lighthouse or a houselight?
- \* Bring forth Biblical examples about what happened when the individual initiated God's promise
- \* Is the judgement a time of revenge or reconciliation?

#### **Biblical narrative and its authority**

*I believe in Biblical revelation as in the dawning sun. I don't believe in it because I see it, but since in its light I see everything else.* *C.S.Lewis*

To understand God's authority manifested in the Bible, we have to determine authority itself. Every time we are stopped in traffic by the police, every time we take an expert's word for it, every time we see a conductor move a great orchestra through a symphony, every time we submit our lives to the promises and claims of the Word of God, we experience authority. What we experience is someone's assumption that he/she has power and the right to lead us and tell us what to do or what to think.

Authority seems to be a blend of power and legitimacy, of might and right. Sheer power without legitimacy is not real authority. If you claim legitimacy without having power, you can not count on your authority. Authority is a legitimate power to prevail over other people's wills. Similarly Jesus needed the trust of people in order to exercise authority.

What convinced people of Jesus' authority? People heard and saw and felt something in Jesus that made them believe He was a legitimate power. They conceded His right to prevail as a power in their lives because they saw the very clear healing, helping, saving purpose in His power. He used power over them to heal, never to demand. He cured their diseases and asked nothing in return. He claimed to be Lord, yet used His lordship to liberate them.

Note that this is a liberating notion of authority. Authority is not the power to control people and crush them and keep them in little boxes. Rather, God's

authority is designed, to liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free to be fully human.

The Bible's authority is rooted not in itself, but in the authority of God. That means, that the Bible is itself subject to God's authority and is therefore, at least in some way, relativized by that authority. This should encourage the teacher to explore with the student obvious shifts of God's assertions in the Bible (Jer. 7:22).

### Thoughts for discussion

- \* Authority seems to be given to the Bible by the very ones over whom it is exercised.
- \* Can the Bible lose its authority because the individual no longer has confidence in it?
- \* How does a story told and retold function authoritatively?

### Biblical narrative: our sense of consciousness of God

*God is known best by not knowing him.      Augustin*

The reading or hearing of the Bible does not necessarily lead to understanding it or accepting it as true. Jesus told his contemporaries that they did not know the Scripture they themselves had read (Mark 12:24,26). The artistic literary form, the subject matter or the historic veneration cannot convince the reader of the truth of the Bible. A further act is necessary that could be described as the inner persuasion. John reminds us that God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

To study the Bible reflectively, means relating it to our present experience. This approach will make us aware, of our spiritual attitudes and feelings, of the power of thoughts and words, of our sense of connectedness with God. The quest to be spiritual goes beyond the study of the Bible. It is sharing the sense of God's presence, nearness and concern, with our immediate community as well as with the rest of humanity. It is this sense of closeness that provides the space for spiritual growth.

The Bible is above human rationale, not equal to it. Our presupposition of the Bible ought to be in harmony with, and subject to, the claims it places on us (1Cor. 2:1-6). It is in accordance with God's will that we use our rationale to its fullest but within the scope of His Word and subject to its authority. It is the spirit of God that enables us to perceive, understand and apply the Biblical truths to our lives (John 16:12-14). Only those who have already inherited the revealed truths into their lives can expect the Spirit to enlighten them with further truth (1 Cor. 2:10-12; John 14:21).

### Biblical narrative: a shared meaning and purpose

*God thinks in the genius, dreams in the poet and sleeps in the ordinary man.  
Altenberg*

The Bible is a Book of faith and about faith. Thus, it can only be received through faith. Faith touches the whole being. Faith is a feeling that everything is in God's hands. Faith is knowledge, as when we try to express our faith in

concepts or as thoughts. Faith is also a will to function according to Christian values, that means, in accordance with the divine will. Faith is also deeds through which Christian values are actualized. Faith is God's transforming power which takes the form of feelings, knowledge, will and deeds. In this fashion the Biblical message becomes a living experience spreading healing.

Faith is keen to search deeper, to inhabit God's revelation. Therefore, faith does not seek quick answers, but answers which are the individual's own, since they are foundations for his/her life, issues the individual has to live out, not memorize.

Getting acquainted with the stages of mature faith development enables the teacher to be sensitive to the student's quest for a deeper faith as he/she matures. Fowlers six-stage model of faith and development incorporates features of Piaget's, Erikson's, and Kohlberg's thoughts. This model is not concerned with the content of faith or what one believes. Its focus is on processes and structures, a person's way of seeing him/herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose. Thus, the how, not the what, of faith is important. A student's commitment to a particular faith or worldview may be held in very different ways. (Table 7)

**Table 7 Fowlers six-stage model of faith**

**Intuitive-Projective Faith:** The stage of intuitive-projective faith—appropriate for the preschool child—is a fantasy-filled time for imitation of others. The religious feelings and practices of significant adults can permanently and powerfully influence the child. Thinking is egocentric, and fact and fantasy are poorly distinguished.

**Mythic-Literal Faith:** Children usually reach the mythic-literal level by 7 or 8 years of age. One starts to differentiate religious claims from fantasy, and adopts the stories, beliefs, and observances of one's religious community. Beliefs and moral rules are held literally and concretely. Authorities are asked for answers to any conflicts. Deity images are anthropomorphic. Some adults remain at this stage.

**Synthetic-Conventional Faith:** By age 12 or 13 one's experience of the world has commonly been greatly extended. Faith must meaningfully and coherently integrate all one's involvements. One accomplishes this by accepting the consensus of "meaningful others" in one's environment—by choosing authorities. Typically, differing opinions are resolved by establishing a hierarchy of such authorities; for example, believe first the church, then teachers, then parents, etc. This is the faith mode of many people who adhere to institutional authority.

**Individuating-Reflexive Faith:** Capacity for the individuating-reflexive faith style ideally emerges at college age or young adulthood, though it may result from upheaval in later life. It brings assumption of responsibility for managing one's own choices and commitments. The breakdown of the previous stage often pushes people to ideas outside their understanding of conventional religion. An inspiring leader or an appealing idea may bring conversion to a chosen faith. Certain universal tensions that synthetic-conventional faith can avoid arise: subjectivity versus objectivity, feeling versus thinking, autonomy versus heteronomy, particular versus universal, individual versus community, self-fulfillment versus service to others, and relative versus the absolute. People often resolve such tension by choosing one value wholeheartedly and excluding the other.

**Paradoxial-Consolidative Faith:** One is unlikely to reach the complex stance of paradoxial-consolidative faith before midlife. At this stage, people acknowledge validity and truth in faiths other than their own—maintaining their own commitments while recognizing their relativity. This often involves reviving the tensions settled in the previous stage and learning how to live with them. Such people are fully aware of and willing to pay the cost of identifying themselves beyond the narrow limits of their own community. However, the discomfort of living between an untransformed world and a transforming vision may paralyze a person's action or lead to cynical withdrawal.

**Universalizing Faith:** The very rare universalizing faith stage implies well-developed religious genius. Universalizes may offend our parochial perceptions ... They threaten our measured standards of righteousness and goodness and prudence ... [They] frequently become martyrs for the visions they incarnate ... They have become actualizes of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community.

**Thoughts for discussion**

- \* In which values do we believe and why are they important?
- \* On what premise can we claim that life necessitates both knowledge and faith?
- \* When and how can science and religion collide? How can we avoid such a dichotomy?
- \* What are the different views about reality?

**Teaching: an act of love**

*If my aim is to assist a person to reach the goal, I have to go and find that person where s/he is, and begin from there. If I am unable to do that, I am deceiving myself into thinking that I can be of help to others. To help someone, of course, I need to understand than the one I want to serve, but above all I have to show understanding for the things s/he comprehends. If I am incapable of doing that, having more knowledge won't help me. And if I try to exhibit how much I know, it means that I am arrogant and void and seek admiration from the one I desire to support, instead of providing help. All genuine helpfulness starts with humility towards the one I want to help, therefore I ought to understand that helping is not controlling, but serving. If I am not capable of that, I am unable to serve.*

*S. Kierkegaard*

In our human relations, love motivates us to search understanding in thoughts, opinions, principles, feelings and visions about the future. If you assume love without striving towards understanding, that love has no substance. Love compels us to explore means of enhancing happiness. Love is geared towards producing wisdom. "Love the Lord your God with all ... your mind ..." Jesus does not only give us a permission to think, He requires thinking from us all (Mark 12:30).

For this reason Paul encourages us to study the Bible to get to know God's wisdom. This wisdom is not a secret path, or a series of actions guided by prophetic pre-knowledge. God desires to lead us into a life which is filled of wisdom, something we have understood, internalized, chosen and formed individually.

From God's perspective it is not as important to know all the answers in life as to find questions. He delights to see us explore the motives of our choices and question our reasoning. Our calling as Bible believing educators is not merely to give good Bible training, but we are in the business of influencing the world with ideas, enhancing Biblical thinking. We are not educators just for the sake of keeping up an image.

Faith can easily slip into acts of performance. To memorize rules for our actions, and to pass down religious patterns and procedures, is painless compared to searching for wisdom and understanding in each new given situation. Integration of faith and learning designates a learning process which compels conscious thinking, critical frames, tolerance, humility, depth and diversity. Knowing God, understanding His will and integrating that into our reality is not an easy task to undertake. Above all, faith-learning integration is not a quick fix which instantly transforms us into ideal Christian individuals. The integration of faith and learning is hard scholarly work. Like other scholarly work, it takes much time and effort to produce significant achievement.

God delights in revealing Himself to the meek and humble. Wisdom, knowledge and understanding is offered and accessible to all. "Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech: How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will fools hate knowledge? You who are simple, gain prudence; you who are foolish, gain understanding." (Prov. 1:20-22, 8:5.)

The call to wisdom, maturity and sensibility is sent to all humanity. To be unwise means to have a closed consciousness, a mind that is not open for new questions and answers. In the mind of the fool everything is already understood. The fool is not the one who has few answers. He might have many answers and they may even be correct, but he has no questions. He loves simplicity, since questions only complicate clear systems. The fool does not ask or listen any more, s/he only answers and explains.

It does not depend on how many or how few answers the wise has, s/he will always have questions. The keen mind is open to a continuous evaluation of old presuppositions. The wise is always ready to listen and ponder. S/he believes in what s/he teaches and explains, but s/he does not protect it from criticism. Every educator must at some point confront the questions: what is most important to learn, and to what end is it learned?

Christian thinking is not a privilege of a few academics or some educated and intellectually talented people. Real wisdom and understanding is not attributed alone to the smart and brisk theologian-philosopher-psychologist-sociologist-politician, who understand the exegetical hermeneutical and epistemological implications and complications of every Biblical passage. Wisdom is not the same as intelligence and education. Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. That is why s/he who has little knowledge can be wiser than the one with a lot of acumen.

We are encouraged to acquire knowledge but not limit ourselves to what we comprehend now. When we understand enough about God to confine in Him even if we don't grasp His will we should use our learning, our thinking and the experience that have formed our insights to trust in God. The more we know about God the more we can trust in Him even when our understanding has reached an end and our questions outnumber our answers.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart" (Prov 3:5)

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