

Before talking about apocalyptic writing in the Bible I want to make the point that apocalyptic literature is only one form of many forms of literature in the Bible, and I will do this by mentioning other forms of literature in the Bible.

For instance, there is **myth**.” In the beginning God created heaven and earth. Or, “then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image...Or, “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal.” (Gen) We believe the truth that myth tells us, but do not require that the story be historically accurate. Myth is a traditional story, and its purpose is to unfold a worldview. Not historically true, but still truth.

Then there is **legend**. A legend is a story that comes down from the past, and presumes to be true, but is of questionable historicity. Yet it is important for people’s understanding of themselves. “Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro...then the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush.“...”David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck Goliath the Philistine with a sling and a stone, bringing down the Philistine and killing him. “ (I Sam 17:49) Questionable historicity, but important for a people’s self-understanding.

And **legal codes**: “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.” (Lev 18:11)

There is **history**: “Solomon decided to build a temple for the name of the Lord, and a royal palace for himself.” (2 Chron. 2:1)

There are **folk tales** with a moral or a message, such as Job: ‘There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.’”

The writers of the Bible also used **hymns or psalms**, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” (Psalm 23)

And **proverbs and wise sayings**, “For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die.”

Writers used **prophetic words**: Ancient words in Isaiah have been used as prophecy by the Church, “for a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:2)

There are **laments**, “As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had recognized on this day the things that make for peace!’” (Lk 19:41)

And **parables**,” Jesus replied, ‘a man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him for dead.’” (Lk. 10:30)

They used **epistles, or letters**, “I, Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle set apart for the gospel of God...” (Rom 1:1)

And finally, there is **apocalyptic literature**. What does apocalyptic literature sound like? In the Gospel lesson last Sunday there were apocalyptic words: “Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs were also opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.” (Matt. 27:50)

Mark 13 is **apocalyptic**, referring to the Roman imposition of worship of the emperor in the Temple. “But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the leader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; the one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days.”

And, of course, the Revelation to John, the last book in the New Testament, is **apocalyptic**.

My first point is that not all biblical writing is the same. It is not written at the same time, or by the same person, or to make the same point. People say, “The Bible says...” and they quote some part as if it was a universal truth, but different parts have different functions. Some was written to condemn the enemies of Israel, some to reassure Israel that God was on her side; some to warn Israel she had betrayed God, some to comfort, some to condemn, some to gather, some to separate, some to proclaim good news, some to instruct in the new ways of the Christian faith, some to portray the future.

With all these different forms and messages, how do we know what to believe when we read the Bible? We Presbyterians read the Bible in the Reformed tradition. That means we use Jesus Christ as a lens through which we view Biblical writing, and if a part of scripture does not match the grace and mercy and justice and peace of God revealed in Jesus, then we understand that writing as not containing the Gospel message. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a standard by which we judge Scripture. For instance, in the Old Testament you might find witness to the Gospel when you encounter the grace, justice, and peace of God; and in the New Testament, conversely, you might find words that are not Gospel. The lens for reading the Bible, in the Reformed tradition, is the grace of God revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The wonderful preacher at Riverside Church years ago, Ernest Campbell, has written; “I believe the Bible is basic to the life of the church, but that the Bible does not have to be

taken literally to be taken seriously.” He also wrote, “I believe that the worldview of the biblical writers has been rendered obsolete by modern physics and kindred sciences, and that preachers ought not to blink at this fact or resist it.”

As you can see, this is not biblical literalism, the belief that all scripture is equally the Word of God. Of course, even biblical literalism is not used consistently. So fundamentalists might be against ordination of women because it is not explicitly in the Bible even though Jesus chose women as leaders; but fundamentalists might not be against lending money at exorbitant rates of interest, which the Bible condemns.

That, then, is my first point: how we read the Bible. And that is important because then we know how to evaluate apocalyptic literature, and how to assess whether or not it is Gospel.

Now, my second point, which is apocalyptic writing, itself. **What does the word apocalyptic mean?** The word itself is Greek for “the uncovering.” Apocalyptic writing is intended to uncover the future, to forecast the ultimate destiny of the world.

**Why is it important to take note of apocalyptic writing?** There are at least three reasons.

First, you probably have noticed that there are several current books blaming Christianity for the world situation. This thesis is that the idea of God is a human invention used by one group of people to dominate another group. These authors have been called the “new atheists,” and their books include “Letter to a Christian Nation” by Sam Harris, and “The God Delusion” by Richard Dawkins. They blame religion for the world’s ills. Certainly there is some truth to this, but I think by examining apocalyptic we will discover that the culprit is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but one version of apocalyptic literature that some Christians have embraced.

Secondly, it is important to study apocalyptic literature because it is used to frighten people and make them vulnerable to religious despots, driving them into paranoid groups, and setting up all sorts of conflict. It is divisive and destruction of human community.

Thirdly, there are some good and useful functions of apocalyptic literature. It can give us a richer understanding of Jesus as well as a more appropriate view of the evil that humankind, not God, can do to the world.

So, let’s talk about current apocalyptic literature in the secular world. For instance, **some popular novels of the day** are based on apocalyptic beliefs. The Left Behind Series, written by Tim LaHaye, and selling millions of copies, opens with passengers on a commercial flight encountering difficult and strange conditions, suddenly to realize that half the people have vanished. The rapture has begun. The saving remnants of Christians have been lifted to heaven, leaving the rest of us to face Armageddon. Matthew 24:41 is the template for the “Left Behind” series. “Then two will be in the field; one will be taken

and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be take and one will be left.” That is an apocalyptic belief based on some words in scripture.

**Fear mongers use apocalypticism.** Fundamentalist preachers like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell tell us that 9/11 is sign of the judgment of God because we do not cast out homosexuals, secular humanists, Muslims, abortionists, civil libertarians, and feminists, from our midst. These folk are accused of thwarting the sovereignty of the USA and distracting America from its providential assignment of bringing the nations of the world to their democratic and Christian destiny.

Notice the signs of apocalyptically induced fear around us. Many movies are about apocalyptic events; many video games assault our senses with ultimate destruction. Even the weather channel runs features of the worst storms to hit the earth, adding to this sense that we live in apocalyptic times. Disaster is in the air, with the unspoken and sometimes shouted claim that disaster is God’s punishment upon sinners.

I have wondered why so many people are fascinated with tales of aliens from outer space, or the risen dead, or horrendous evils in our midst? Do we draw near to these horrendous events as a way of trying to cope with real evil? I don’t know. As Dick Fenn has written, in “Dreams of Glory?” we live in a terrifying world which has flown out of our control, and we hold on to apocalyptic beliefs as a way of seeking guidance and security, even when those beliefs fuel terror itself.

**What is the promise of apocalypticism?** The apocalyptic end promises compensation to the faithful for a lost future. It offers people more than life is ordinarily able to give. It offers rigid beliefs in the midst of confusion and dilemma. For a society in which many do feel left behind, with no guarantees of recognition or reward as people lose jobs, pensions or health care, it offers an imaginary hope. Even though the stakes of the apocalypse are high, the proposition is clear: be a fanatical believer, and a warrior against all those other people, and we will be rewarded, just as surely as those young men who strap bombs around their waists hope to be rewarded by paradise.

**Apocalypticism is offered as an antidote for modernity.** Religious extremism is a reaction to social change. Modernity is another word for the sense that the pace of history is quickening and the old order is disintegrating. The modern brings the unprecedented, the unique and irreversible, and these always threaten the social order. In modern societies, jobs and capital are like the wind, passing through a place and leaving. Outsourcing takes jobs away from local communities, and friends and family leave. With no investment and savings left, no sense of community, people are drained of life itself.

**The Christian Right** believes that, to fulfill what they perceive as the biblical promises to Israel, the USA must engage in a world-saving battle, the sooner the better, since the faithful are getting tired of waiting for the promised satisfactions for those who are saved. Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell have given their blessings to the first use of devastating, genocidal weapons. Using the biblical image of an apocalyptic battle between good and evil they justify their desire to see a final incineration, believing there will be a saved

remnant of true Christians and converted Jews. The return of Jews from various parts of the world to gather under the sovereignty of Israel is a prelude to the final struggle in which Jews will follow a new messiah, suffer terrible losses, be converted to Christianity, and finally be superseded forever in the advent of the Christian millennium.

There are thousands of millennial groups armed with weapons or fortified with prayers in the USA waiting for the end to begin. Some are Jewish, some Christian fundamentalists, and some Mormon.

**Aggravating the anxiety of Americans, governments have succeeded in widening the gap between rich and poor**, and inflaming resentments against those taking welfare, even though the great majority are the aged, single parents, or the chronically ill. Poor whites get poorer and lose their foothold on middle class status. These conditions are conducive to fascist governments and make apocalyptic dreams more popular. We are inclined to give government more power to protect us from our enemies, even though it means an assault on our privacies and liberties. But tragically, holding on to apocalyptic dreams of glory keeps us from dealing with real and immediate problems, separates the body politic, misunderstands the love and grace of God as our help, silences prophecy about the real evils in our midst, dashes hope, destroys community, and leaves us ever more despairing.

**Is there another way of understanding apocalyptic literature?** How can we use the lens of the Gospel to understand the apocalyptic message? How do we understand Jesus as an apocalyptic figure who brings grace and mercy, not condemnation and damnation? In two weeks we will talk about a more hopeful way of understanding apocalyptic literature.

Next time we will talk about an understanding of apocalyptic literature that is Gospel, that is, filled with grace and mercy and justice and peace. It is an apocalypticism that helps us understand the humanity of Jesus, and give us a model for our own humanity.

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The book I have used to get an overview of the power of apocalyptic literature and theology in our current condition is Richard Fenn's *Dreams of Glory, the Sources of Apocalyptic Terror*. Many of the sentences are taken directly from *Dreams of Glory*.