

The Legitimacy of the Apocalyptic Genre in Biblical Interpretation

by Ethan S. Augustus¹

When it comes to accurately understanding and applying something you are reading, properly identifying its genre is an important first step. Mistaking the assembly instructions to your new IKEA chair for motivational self-help reading, for example, could leave you sitting on the floor—though perhaps feeling better about yourself—in a pile of collapsed chair parts. Understanding what genre a text belongs to, along with its accompanying “rules,” is the first step of responsible and profitable interpretation. This is just as true for Scripture as for any text—perhaps more so. Due to the great variety of literary forms contained in the Old and New Testaments (e.g., narrative, poetry, epistolary, prophecy), the matter of genre often features significantly in hermeneutical discussions. One genre identification that often features prominently in such discussions—particularly discussions on prophetic passages—is that of apocalyptic literature.

Portions of both the Old and New Testaments are readily labeled as apocalyptic by the majority of biblical scholars, conservative and liberal alike. In many cases, scholars simply assert that a text is apocalyptic and argue from that (often unexamined) premise that the text should be interpreted symbolically. The fact that this genre stands at the center of a number of interpretive difficulties, many of which are central to one’s eschatological beliefs, shows that it warrants careful attention. What are the criteria for determining that a biblical text is apocalyptic? What is the nature of this genre in extra-biblical literature? Is the label legitimate or helpful for any portion of Scripture?

This paper stands as a critique against the widespread acceptance of the apocalyptic label in biblical interpretation.² The main contention of this paper is that, because of key differences that exist between extra-biblical apocalyptic texts and biblical texts, the latter can be more accurately understood within the confines of the prophetic genre. The label of apocalyptic for such texts is imprecise at best and directly misleading at worst. In order to examine this claim, this paper will first set the foundation for the discussion by briefly exploring how genre identification—specifically apocalyptic identification—can and does influence interpretation. Then, the mainstream definitions and proposed characteristics of apocalyptic literature will be examined. Following that, relevant portions of Scripture will be assessed to see if they are better identified as apocalyptic or prophetic.

¹ Ethan Augustus is assistant pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Flushing, MI. As part of his Master of Theology studies at BJU Seminary, he wrote this paper for the course STh 840 Advanced Biblical Hermeneutics under the guidance of Dr. Andreas Köstenberger.

² This paper will not seek to present a survey of the study of apocalyptic literature. Due to limited space, it will also not provide extensive analysis of extra-biblical apocalyptic literature. Such topics, though important in their own right, will be addressed only as they contribute directly to the stated goal of discerning whether or not the apocalyptic genre identification is appropriate for select biblical passages.

Interpretive Implications

In hermeneutics, properly identifying a text's genre is of first importance. As Cotterell and Turner aptly summarize, "Our identification of what we take to be the genre to which a particular text belongs raises certain expectations about how the contents of the writing are to be understood."³ What are the expectations raised by the identification of the apocalyptic genre? A few examples will suffice to demonstrate interpretive tendencies.

In his commentary on Ezekiel, John Taylor prefaces chapters 40–48 (which speak extensively on the new temple) by saying, "[Apocalyptic's] features are symbolism, numerical symmetry, and futurism. . . . If the vision is interpreted on these lines, and not as prophecy in the conventional sense, *readers will be spared the necessity of trying to look for some fulfilment of the words in past or future history.*"⁴ Lamar Cooper, however, identifies these chapters as "prophetic-apocalyptic." While conceding some element of apocalypticism, he believes the chapters communicate "an essentially literal description of a real future kingdom."⁵ With reference to Revelation, Leon Morris identifies the book as apocalyptic (while acknowledging differences from other such texts), observing that it "abounds in symbolism of a typically apocalyptic character."⁶ Among other places, the implications of this assessment are clear in his treatment of Revelation 20, in which he denies the reality of a future, literal millennium in favor of a symbolic interpretation characteristic of amillennialism.⁷ On the other end of the spectrum, Robert Thomas denies the apocalyptic identification of Revelation altogether (not even conceding "prophetic-apocalyptic"), asserting rather that it is prophecy and should therefore be understood in a characteristically literal sense, leading to premillennial pretribulationism.⁸

Such examples could be multiplied.⁹ Differing views of this nature are common regarding prophetic texts in both the Old and New Testaments. Clearly, one's understanding of the identity and nature of the apocalyptic genre—and the extent to which it applies to biblical texts—is of central importance, particularly with regard to understanding biblical prophecy. The fact is that, for many interpreters, the identification of a text as belonging to the apocalyptic genre stands as sufficient warrant for interpreting its contents symbolically.¹⁰ As it pertains to biblical prophecies, this

³ Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 99.

⁴ John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1969), 241 (emphasis added).

⁵ Lamar Cooper, *Ezekiel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 352–53.

⁶ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 222ff.

⁸ Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 23–29.

⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, in detailing several reasons why he is "not a fundamentalist," provides a succinct picture of the nature of this distinction. In speaking of the figural relationship between Israel and the church, he concludes, "The hermeneutics of dispensationalism is insufficiently sensitive, I believe, to the literary sense of the text (in this case, to the literary genres of prophecy and apocalyptic)." A more symbolic reading, Vanhoozer concludes, more faithfully reflects the text. *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 429–30.

¹⁰ This is the primary line of reasoning this paper seeks to argue against. The paper does not argue that the portions of Scripture under consideration contain no symbolic language. The primary contention here is that the grounds for

identification often means that predictions are not to be taken literally; they either refer symbolically to future events, or they do not speak of literal events at all.

With divergent conclusions reached in so many key prophetic texts, how can any kind of determination be made as to which interpretation is more legitimate? A great deal of ink has been spilled discussing which interpretation or interpretive system best accounts for all the data. In many cases, however, the issue is not that one interpretation or another is incoherent when all the textual facts are considered. If that were the case, such debates might be quite a bit shorter. The heart of the issue is more foundational and often stems, at least to some degree, from this matter of genre identification. For example, an amillennialist position may be fully coherent *if* it is true that the plethora of passages in the prophets and Revelation are to be interpreted symbolically for one reason or another. Conversely, *if* such passages are to be understood in a predominantly literal sense, premillennialism would stand as the more coherent option.¹¹

This leads to the interpretive crux of the matter—the reason that answering this question about apocalyptic genre is so important. The magnifying glass must turn to the very presuppositional bases upon which such systems are built—specifically, in this case, *generic* presuppositions. Hirsch helpfully summarizes along these lines:

Since the quality of coherence depends upon the context inferred, there is no absolute standard of coherence by which we can adjudicate between different coherent readings. Verification by coherence implies therefore verification of the grounds on which the reading is coherent. *It is necessary to establish that the context invoked is the most probable context.* Only then, in relation to an established context, can we judge that one reading is more coherent than another.¹²

In our case, the “context” under consideration is the *genre* of relevant biblical texts. Specifically, because of its widespread acceptance, careful attention must be given to the apocalyptic genre—its identity, characteristics, and relevance.

The Identity of Apocalyptic

What *is* the apocalyptic genre? And how can it be properly identified? This section will survey the most widely recognized scholarly work in this area, first noting proposed definitions and then exploring key characteristics of the genre.

identifying symbolism in such passages must arise *from the passages themselves* and not merely from the apocalyptic genre-identification.

¹¹ This is often why it is a monumental (if not impossible) task to convince someone of a different system simply by “laying out all the facts.” Different interpretive systems or views (e.g., dispensationalism vs. covenant theology, premillennial vs. amillennial) may be entirely coherent in their own right. The discussion, then, must take place at a more foundational level.

¹² E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 238.

Proposed Definition

The most generally accepted and referenced definition of apocalyptic came originally from the work of a group of scholars from the Society of Bible Literature in the 1970s. The definition, published by John Collins, defines apocalyptic as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”¹³ While this definition has received its fair share of critique, for many it remains a helpful standard.¹⁴ Hellholm, for example, says, “For a paradigmatically established definition of the genre ‘Apocalypse’ I would be willing to accept the definition . . . provided the following addition on the same level of abstraction, ‘intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority.’”¹⁵

Aune, however, rejects both Hellholm’s addition (believing it to be insufficient for accurately describing function) and Collins’s definition. While he acknowledges the latter to be a helpful advance, he takes issue with the way it fails to address function and with the way Collins’s approach to determining the definition fails to hierarchically arrange salient literary features of apocalypses. Aune concludes that Collins’s definition “cannot deal with the virtualities or potentialities of the apocalyptic genre and shows little hermeneutical promise.”¹⁶ Instead, he proposes the following definition:

In *form*, an apocalypse is an autobiographical prose narrative reporting revelatory visions experienced by the author and structured to emphasize the central revelatory message. The *content* of an apocalypse is the communication of a transcendent, often eschatological, perspective on human experience. In *function*, an apocalypse legitimates the transcendent authority of the message by mediating a new revelatory experience for the audience to encourage them to modify their cognition and behavior in conformity with transcendent perspectives.¹⁷

While other definitions could be noted,¹⁸ it will suffice at this point to observe that *no consensus exists regarding the proper definition of the apocalyptic genre*. This lack of consensus does not in itself mean that the concept of the genre is invalid. It does, however, demonstrate that the identity of the apocalyptic genre is not as clear-cut a matter as many scholars and commentators seem to imply.

While no definition may be agreed on, a consideration of the proposed defining characteristics of apocalyptic—which can be drawn from these definitions—may help shed further light on its range of

¹³ John Collins, “Towards the Morphology of a Genre: Introduction,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9.

¹⁴ For a helpful summary of key work in this area over the last fifty or so years, including critiques of this definition, see David Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 67–76.

¹⁵ David Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 27. Collins, however, believes that current knowledge of the function and social setting of such ancient literature is too hypothetical to inform part of a definition. J. Collins, “Morphology,” 1–2.

¹⁶ Aune, “The Apocalypse of John,” 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65–66.

¹⁸ E.g., see Paul Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 27–28.

applicability. The following table, taken with minimal adaptation from Brian Hand,¹⁹ presents an effective summary of key characteristics drawn from the definitions already discussed, with the addition of another key voice.

Table 1. Components of Apocalyptic Literature Related to Form, Content, and Function

Component	Aune	A. Collins ²⁰	J. Collins	Hellholm
Form: Revelatory literature	•	•	•	•
Form: Narrative framework	•	•	•	•
Form: Mediation by other-worldly being		•	•	•
Form: Autobiographical	•			
Form: Central message is literary climax	•			
Form: Human recipient	•	•	•	•
Content: Transcendent Reality	•	•	•	•
Content: Eschatological salvation	•	•	•	•
Content: Supernatural world	•	•	•	•
Function: Give authority to a self-created message	•	•		
Function: Change cognition and behavior	•	•		
Function: Exhort and console a group in the middle of crisis				•
Function: Interpret present in light of future, earth in light of heaven		•		

As the table above demonstrates, even some of the leading voices in this discussion do not agree entirely on the key characteristics of apocalyptic when it comes to *defining* the genre. What is the function of the apocalyptic genre? Should function even be a component of the definition? Are characteristics such as autobiographical form or mediation of an other-worldly being intrinsic to the genre or merely characteristic of some works? Still, while the definitions referenced above do not attain complete homogeny, there is substantial agreement among them, indicating characteristics that are believed to be central to the genre. For example, all four authors included in their definitions some form of reference to revelatory literature, narrative framework, a human recipient, eschatological salvation, and content that is both transcendent and supernatural.

It is worth observing, however, that these areas of complete agreement remain relatively superficial. The same characteristics, for example, are common to a great deal of biblical prophetic literature. In other words, nothing in these definitional characteristics seems to warrant the establishment of an

¹⁹ Brian Hand, *The Worthy Champion: A Christology of the Book of Revelation Based on Elements of Its Literary Composition* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2008), 23.

²⁰ Adela Yarbro Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism," *Semeia* 36 (1986): 2ff.

independent genre. This illustrates an important concept related to the creation of generic definitions—the more precise they are, the more useful they are; but genres by nature are often difficult to define specifically due to the variegated nature of the works that they comprise.

Key Characteristics

If there is no consensus regarding a precise definition of the apocalyptic genre, what are its defining characteristics? It should be noted from the outset that, as with the matter of a precise definition, there exists no consensus in the scholarly community regarding the defining characteristics of the apocalyptic genre. John Bailey observes, “In the enumeration and discussion of these various features which are alleged to characterize apocalyptic it must become apparent that no little confusion prevails.”²¹

Even so, while no precise consensus has emerged, it is nonetheless helpful to survey the characteristics that various scholars view as present or key to some extent in apocalyptic literature. Hellholm lists thirty-one such characteristics, organizing them according to the divisions of content, form, and function.²² He is quick to provide two observations, however: (1) none of these characteristics is exclusive to apocalyptic; and (2) no apocalyptic work contains all thirty-one characteristics. These two observations should lead naturally to the conclusion that, in order to arrive at some form of generic identification, these characteristics must have some form of hierarchy. In other words, there must be *distinguishing* characteristics of apocalyptic literature—characteristics that warrant its treatment as an independent genre. In addition to standard features that receive virtually unanimous recognition (viz., narrative framework, eschatological focus, vision reports), several characteristics seem especially noteworthy along these lines.

The first is the *esoteric nature* of apocalyptic literature. Morris notes this characteristic and observes, “It cannot ever have been easy to interpret in detail, and it properly belongs within a sect or party. It is for ‘the wise,’ those initiated (not necessarily in any formal sense) into the apocalyptic group.”²³ This esoteric nature is directly related to the highly symbolic nature of the visions contained in the writings and also explains the frequent presence of a supernatural being to interpret what is being communicated—another key feature of the genre. John Collins notes, “The constant element is the presence of an angel who interprets the vision or serves as guide on the otherworldly journey. This figure indicates that the revelation is not intelligible without supernatural aid.”²⁴

A second key feature of apocalyptic is *pseudonymity*—the practice of writing under the name of another; in the case of the Jewish apocalypses, authors assumed the name of an ancient and well-noted figure. John Collins concludes that pseudonymity is “universal in Jewish and Gnostic apocalypses and very common in the Christian ones.”²⁵ John Bailey notes the predominance of this feature, stating that

²¹ John Bailey, “Jewish Apocalyptic Literature,” *The Biblical World* 25, no. 1 (1905): 36.

²² Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre,” 23–24. See also J. Collins, “Morphology,” 6–8.

²³ Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 33.

²⁴ John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 15.

²⁵ J. Collins, “Morphology,” 11.

apocalypses are “almost invariably pseudonymous.”²⁶ Though not all define this as a *necessary* characteristic of the genre (see below), there is large agreement among scholars that this is one of the *key* characteristics of the genre. Additionally, while there is no consensus as to why the apocalyptists chose to utilize the method,²⁷ its nearly ubiquitous presence and its rhetorical impact are recognized by the vast majority of scholars.

A third key feature of the apocalyptic genre is *ex eventu prophecy*. With this rhetorical device, past historical events are “predicted” in the form of prophecies. In his organization of Jewish apocalypses, John Collins distinguishes on a basic level those that have other-worldly journeys and those that do not; he concludes, “All apocalypses which do not have an otherworldly journey contain an *ex eventu* prophecy of history.”²⁸ Aune also lists “reviews of history presented as prophecies” as one of the striking features of the apocalyptic genre.²⁹ While this feature is not common to all apocalypses, it is nonetheless a key characteristic of many works in the genre.

The definitions and key characteristics above typify the leading scholarly discussion regarding the identity of the apocalyptic genre. But just how clear are the generic boundaries being proposed? Do the definitions and key characteristics proposed stand up to scrutiny? And if they do, can they be accurately said to apply to biblical texts?

The Relevance of Apocalyptic

Attention can now be given to an evaluation of the extent to which the apocalyptic genre can be applied to the biblical text. Before examining specific biblical books or passages (as the next section will do), it will be helpful to evaluate on a more general level the definitions and key characteristics proposed above. This section will (1) examine the shared features of the apocalyptic and prophetic genres and evaluate the implications of that intersection; and (2) draw attention to key areas of distinction between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres.

Similarities of Apocalyptic and Prophecy

Referring specifically to OT apocalyptic, Paul Hanson observes, “We are dealing with a term worthy of preservation only if it aids us in designating and understanding certain biblical writings that, while betraying connections with other types of literature, can best be studied as a discrete group.”³⁰

²⁶ Bailey, “Jewish Apocalyptic Literature,” 34. He goes on to deny, however, that pseudonymity is a *defining* characteristic because it was “simply a literary characteristic of the whole period; it characterizes no particular class of literature.”

²⁷ Some believe authors were making a genuine attempt to convince others that the writing came from the alleged source, thereby providing a sense of authority; others see it as a mere rhetorical device not intended to deceive. For overviews, see J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 40–41, and R. J. Bauckham, “Apocalyptic,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 53–54.

²⁸ John Collins, “The Jewish Apocalypses,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 22.

²⁹ David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 108.

³⁰ Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, 25.

While Hanson would not agree with the premise of this paper, his observation nonetheless provides a helpful guiding principle for the present discussion. If apocalyptic is to be considered a valid biblical genre, it must be sufficiently different from other genres to warrant individual treatment. But is this the case? When closely examined, it becomes clear that the majority of the apocalyptic genre's defining characteristics are, in fact, also characteristics of the genre of biblical prophecy.

Consider, for example, the content and function of apocalyptic texts as described by the definitions above. As far as content is concerned, there is of course a plethora of purely prophetic texts that focus on transcendent reality, eschatological salvation, and realities of the supernatural world. Regarding function, prophecies as well are often designed to change cognition and behavior, exhort and console a group in the middle of crisis, and interpret the present in light of the future and earthly realities in light of transcendent realities; such functions, in fact, describe almost all—if not all—prophetic texts. Regarding form, prophetic texts are revelatory in nature, they frequently feature a narrative framework, and they also frequently employ autobiographical accounts.

Even areas that are often put forward as distinctions between prophetic and apocalyptic genres are, in fact, not so dissimilar as some would claim. One such distinction regards the kingdom of God and eschatological salvation. Some have tried to emphasize the distinction that apocalyptic texts present the kingdom of God as arising at the end of time through cataclysmic events rather than the prophetic presentation of the kingdom as arising out of history. Ladd, however, is quick to observe that “the expectation of a cataclysmic irruption into history is intrinsic to the prophetic hope of the OT.”³¹ In many cases, when commentators or scholars observe that an OT prophetic passage is apocalyptic, this kind of eschatology is in reality what they are referring to.³² While there is legitimacy to this distinction on a certain level (see next section), it is not valid to conclude that a text is apocalyptic *simply because* it contains this kind of cataclysmic eschatology, as such can be clearly found in early prophetic texts.

In reality, there is a great deal of overlap between extra-biblical apocalyptic literature and biblical prophecy. Robert Thomas comes to a similar conclusion; though he speaks with specific regard to the genre identification of Revelation, his analysis holds true for other biblical texts as well. Citing Hellholm's lists of defining characteristics, Thomas concludes, “Of the thirty-one characteristics that have been cited in attempts to define apocalyptic, all when properly understood could apply to prophecy as well, with the possible exception of pseudonymity. . . . Alleged differences between the Apocalypse and generally accepted works of prophecy often rest upon inadequate interpretations of the Apocalypse.”³³ As will be discussed in greater detail below, this analysis holds true for other portions of Scripture typically defined as apocalyptic.

When examined closely, it becomes clear that there is a great deal of overlap between biblical prophetic literature and extra-biblical apocalyptic literature. This should, at the very least, raise some

³¹ George Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” *ISBE*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:151–152.

³² This is why most scholars in this field tend to distinguish between apocalyptic *genre* and apocalyptic *eschatology*; a passage may contain the latter without being the former. Some also add another distinguishing element of apocalyptic *sociological ideology*. See J. Collins, “Morphology,” 3.

³³ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 25.

level of suspicion regarding the legitimacy of the apocalyptic genre in biblical literature. But it does not by itself mean that apocalyptic is illegitimate for select biblical texts. If the genre is to have a place in certain biblical texts, however, it must, despite the abundance of overlaps, feature key distinctives that (1) distinguish it from biblical prophecy and (2) can be legitimately applied to the biblical texts. Both of these factors deserve closer attention.

Distinctions Between Apocalyptic and Prophecy

While there are a number of similarities between extra-biblical apocalyptic texts and biblical prophetic texts, there are also a number of key differences. As observed earlier in the paper, if one is to formulate anything close to a generic definition for apocalyptic, there must be some level of hierarchy as it relates to evaluating its key characteristics. Some characteristics are simply more notable than others. In light of that, the key factor in this discussion is not the number of *minor* characteristics the apocalyptic and prophetic genres may have in common, but rather several *major* differences that distinguish them. In comparison with biblical prophecy, a number of key differences separate the two genres and, due to the nature of these differences, outweigh any similarities the genres may share. These differences include the genres' primacy of ethical exhortation (or lack thereof), their view of the relationship between eschatology and history, the identity of the prophet or seer, the timing of the prophecies contained in the works, and the level of authorial control possessed by the prophet or seer.

Primacy of Exhortation

The first difference between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres relates to tone, specifically that of ethical exhortation—or lack thereof. Regarding this difference in tone, Morris says, “The typical prophet has an urgent ethical imperative the apocalyptist does not have. He has a sense that God, none less, has spoken, and men must accept God’s word with awe. This does not seem to be characteristic of apocalyptic.”³⁴ The ethical exhortation of the biblical prophets, however, is one of their defining characteristics. Rather than primarily foretelling future events (as some may perceive the role of the prophet to be), the prophets repeatedly and urgently call for God’s people to be faithful to the covenant. Regular focus is placed upon the sin of the people and their need for repentance.

This emphasis is almost entirely lacking in extra-biblical apocalyptic literature. The focus of the apocalyptists tends to be on the existing distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous and the differing fates of both. Bailey points to this focus as a possible cause of their lack of exhortation, observing that the focus on “the evil which oppressed them from without tended to deaden the sense of the evil within.” He goes on to state that, in general, apocalyptic literature demonstrates “non-recognition of any defection on the part of the chosen or elect.”³⁵ Hand further notes the distinction, saying, “Apocalypses rarely exhort their communities to do anything other than ‘hang on’ until the end. Prophecy requires its broader audience to respond to personal deficiencies by faith in the revealed

³⁴ Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 33.

³⁵ Bailey, “Jewish Apocalyptic Literature,” 39–40.

Word.”³⁶ This difference in tone presents a marked point of contrast between biblical prophecy and extra-biblical apocalyptic literature.

View of Eschatology and History

Another key difference between apocalyptic and prophetic texts relates to their views of the relationship between eschatology and history. As discussed above, both apocalyptic literature and biblical prophecy anticipate cataclysmic divine intervention at the end of the age. For apocalyptic literature, however, the heavy emphasis on this expectation results in a largely dualistic sense of world history and eschatology—the present age and the future age are viewed as entirely distinct. The salvation of God’s people and the judgment of the wicked do not arise through the normal course of world history but rather through decisive and cataclysmic divine intervention at the end of the age. On the other hand, biblical prophets, while also proclaiming the reality of such divine intervention, are also profoundly aware of God’s working in and through the course of human history. This emphasis on God’s hand at work in human history is evident, among other ways, in the way OT prophets at times speak of immediately impending events while using similar terminology to describe events anticipated at the end of the age.³⁷ They viewed God as active in the events of their times and anticipated that his activity would continue through the end of the age and manifest itself in even greater ways.

In light of this difference between apocalyptic and prophecy, Ladd observes, “The tension between history and eschatology is one of the most distinctive marks of prophetic eschatology in contrast to Jewish apocalyptic.”³⁸ The apocalyptic view of history and the time period of its authors is characteristically pessimistic. The writings convey the reality that God’s hand is largely absent from the current age (which is hopelessly evil), and only at the end of the age will God finally intervene in the course of human affairs. The prophets, however, see God’s hand at work in the course of history and call their readers to do the same. Morris observes, “[M]ore characteristically the prophets are interested in what takes place on this present earth. They are interested in the resolution of present difficulties and they concentrate on national hopes and the like.”³⁹ Though the prophets at times express despair over the current conditions of the world and the *apparent* lack of divine intervention, they typically also present a counterbalancing emphasis on God’s present work. The prophets and the apocalyptists possess characteristically differing views on the course of world history and God’s involvement within it.

³⁶ Hand, *The Worthy Champion*, 32.

³⁷ Amos, for example, uses “Day of the LORD” terminology to prophesy exile and judgment for the people of Israel—a judgment that would follow soon after his prophecy (see Amos 5:18–20, 27). While also speaking of the Day of the Lord, however, he foretells a time of greater, worldwide judgment (8:7–10) as well as a time of future restoration for Israel (9:11–15). See Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 153 for further discussion on this point.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁹ Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 42.

The Identity of the Prophet or Seer

While the last few subsections have highlighted various ways in which the prophetic and apocalyptic genres are distinct, the next three distinctions are of such a nature that they strain any similarities between the generic categories virtually—if not in reality—to the point of making the genres mutually exclusive. Each of the following three distinctions relates to the *nature of the supposed revelation and the revelatory process*.

The first relates to the identity of the prophet or seer. Of particular relevance here is the prevalence of pseudonymity in apocalyptic writings. Again, pseudonymity is one of the defining characteristics of the apocalyptic genre. As referenced above, Bailey seeks to discount that this as a defining characteristic, stating that much of the literature in that time period—including large parts of the OT—was pseudonymous.⁴⁰ But for the conservative who upholds scriptural authorial claims, such a line of reasoning is, of course, problematic. If the Bible's authorial claims are true, then no portion of the Old or New Testaments could rightfully be claimed to be pseudonymous. The Book of Revelation, in fact, is the primary book scholars point to as an example of an apocalyptic work that is *not* pseudonymous. But if Revelation is *not* accepted as apocalyptic (see below for further discussion), then the case for pseudonymity as a defining characteristic of the genre becomes much stronger. Overall, apocalyptic works are demonstrably pseudonymous; the same cannot be said for the biblical prophets.

The Timing of Prophecies

Another difference between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres related to the nature of revelation is the timing of the prophecies contained in the books. As discussed above, both Collins and Aune acknowledge that, though not present in all apocalyptic texts, *ex eventu* prophecy is a notable feature of the genre.⁴¹ Biblical prophecy, on the other hand, contains legitimate prophecies of future events. It is vital that the importance of this distinction not be downplayed. When prophecy appears in extra-biblical apocalypses, it is *always* pseudo-prophecy—description of past historical events in the form of prophetic predictions. For a biblical prophetic text to be labeled as apocalyptic, then, one of two things would need to be true: (1) the book would need to lack a key defining characteristic *that typifies all extra-biblical apocalyptic prophecies*, or (2) the biblical prophecy would, in fact, have to be *ex eventu*.

As did the previous distinction, this represents an area in which those who hold a high view of Scripture must be careful not to be unduly swayed by the reasoning of those who deny inspiration and inerrancy. For many, the failure to give proper weight to this generic distinction arises from the fact that they do not believe that Scripture contains *any* legitimate prophecies; all such passages are viewed as either symbolic or as *ex eventu*.⁴² For those who hold to the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, then, the remaining option regarding an apocalyptic identification of such texts is that they must be labeled as apocalyptic *despite the fact that they lack a key defining characteristic that typifies all extra-*

⁴⁰ Bailey, "Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," 34.

⁴¹ J. Collins, "The Jewish Apocalypses," 22; Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 108.

⁴² As discussed below, the dominant view from critical scholars is that Daniel 7–12, for example, was written centuries after it claims to have been written.

biblical apocalyptic prophecies. While such could be possible, the more simple explanation—and the explanation that allows defining generic categories to carry due weight—is that such biblical passages should not be labeled as apocalyptic.

This distinction arises naturally from the previous one: because apocalyptic texts were pseudonymous, the prophecies they contain necessarily feature nothing more than highly symbolic retellings of past events. Conversely, because biblical prophecies came from genuine prophets, they contain legitimate prophecies. The final distinction related to the nature of revelation carries forward a similar emphasis.

The Level of Authorial Control

A final notable difference related to the nature of revelation is the level of control exerted over the message by the author (i.e., the prophet or seer). In short, biblical prophecy places a heavy emphasis on the inspired speech of God, and the prophets themselves often seem to play little to no role in determining the content and shape of the message they proclaim. The apocalyptists, however, seem to exert a much greater degree of control over the content of their writings, and they place much less emphasis on the inspired, authoritative speech of the Lord. Collins summarizes, “We seldom find direct inspired speech, which is typical of prophetic oracles, in the apocalypses.”⁴³

The biblical prophets feature a clear emphasis on the inspired word of the Lord. For example, their writings are replete with the introductory formula, “Thus says the LORD.”⁴⁴ A number of passages in the prophets also feature instructions to the prophets that they are to speak what God tells them.⁴⁵ Second Peter 1:20–21 contains one of Scripture’s clearest statements on the matter of authorial control in revelation: “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (ESV). While the ministry of the prophets involved more than mere repetition, their messages were always centered on the communication of God himself. The biblical prophets were responsible to proclaim the message they had been given by the Lord—not their own.

On many occasions, however, apocalyptists seem to display a great deal of control over the form and content of the messages they proclaim.⁴⁶ D. S. Russell observes, “The apocalyptists *give full rein to their imaginations* in extravagant and exotic language and in imagery of a fantastic and bizarre kind. To such an extent is this true that symbolism may be said to be the language of apocalyptic.”⁴⁷ Later, he similarly observes, “This is a highly imaginative literature in which *the inventive faculties of the*

⁴³ J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 18.

⁴⁴ This construction appears over 350 times in the prophets; similarly, 221 of the OT’s 241 occurrences of the phrase, “the word of the LORD,” appear in the prophetic books. See Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Roeker, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 362, 364.

⁴⁵ Consider alone the prophetic calls of Isaiah (Isa 6:8–9), Jeremiah (Jer 1:7–9), and Ezekiel (Ezek 4:1–11).

⁴⁶ Aune observes, “Apocalyptic literature is often distinguished from prophecy by emphasizing the interpretative role of the apocalyptist in contrast to the direct revelation characteristic of OT classical prophecy.” Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 113.

⁴⁷ D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 122 (emphasis added).

writers are given free scope.”⁴⁸ The fact that the apocalyptic writers had to shape their message—and that they did so with highly symbolic language—makes perfect sense in light of the fact that their messages did not come from God (as did the prophets’), and their prophesies were illegitimate.⁴⁹

Each of these distinctions underscores the profound level of separation between the biblical prophets and the extra-biblical apocalyptists. In conclusion, when apocalyptic characteristics that cannot be legitimately applied to biblical texts (e.g., pseudonymity, *ex eventu* prophecy) are taken out of consideration, the remaining characteristics can be unproblematically attributed to the prophetic genre. While similar in many ways, the two genres possess key differences that far outweigh any similarities they may possess. In the case of biblical texts, the high degree of overlap with apocalyptic simply points to the reality that there is no need to establish a separate genre for so-called apocalyptic texts.

In light of these observations, it seems best to conclude that texts contained within biblical prophetic books cannot be accurately labeled as apocalyptic—a claim that will be examined in greater detail below. But if such is truly the case, how should they be treated? What generic classification best suits them?

The Hermeneutical Alternative

To return to Hanson’s metric, the generic label of apocalyptic is useful only if the texts under consideration are sufficiently unique so as to warrant specialized treatment.⁵⁰ But what if, as this paper has argued, that is not the case? The previous section argued (1) that the apocalyptic and biblical prophetic genres display significant overlap, which at least provides room for the possibility that the former may not be a necessary category, and (2) that even if the texts under consideration display some unique attributes, the label of apocalyptic is illegitimate due to key differences between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres. But if the label is judged to be illegitimate, how should relevant biblical passages be handled? What is the most accurate generic designation?

The great degree of similarity between the prophetic and apocalyptic genres has led many to suggest a genre identification that features some combination of the two labels. Ladd, for example, argues that “prophetic-apocalyptic” is a suitable designation that describes the teaching of the prophets and even of Jesus.⁵¹ But is such a designation actually helpful? On careful analysis, it seems best to avoid such a combination for several reasons. First, as the previous section demonstrated, while there is a good deal of overlap between the genres, there are a number of striking differences. And the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 158 (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ Along these lines, Hand observes, “That a predominantly symbolic method applies at least to extra-canonical apocalypses is self-evident since none of the non-canonical apocalypses address literal future events. The writers of the apocalypses had no divine input and could not accurately depict the world to come.” Brian Hand, *The Climax of Biblical Prophecy: A Guide to Interpreting Revelation* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth Academic, 2012), 152.

⁵⁰ Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, 25.

⁵¹ George Ladd, “Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?” *JBL* 76, no. 3 (1957): 196. It should be noted that Ladd here is referring to *eschatology* more than *genre* (the primary focus of this paper); still, his observation has implications for the latter and is representative of the desire for a combined focus.

differences are of such a nature that the two genres cannot stand side by side without doing interpretive violence to one set of generic characteristics or the other.⁵²

Second, as illustrated in the opening section, the label *apocalyptic*, even if it is combined with another qualifier, typically signals to readers that they should be anticipating highly symbolic interpretation. In light of that, it is questionable whether such a combined label is helpful. Thomas observes similarly along these lines with specific reference to Revelation, saying, “A blending of genres such as ‘prophetic-apocalyptic’ or ‘prophetic-apocalyptic-epistolary’ is not the best answer because it does not allow for the preeminence of the book’s prophetic character.”⁵³ In some cases, when authors use such combined designations, they are simply attempting to refer to unique aspects of the scriptural material that are genuinely present in the text (e.g., the unique nature of the heavenly visions). But the contention of this paper is that the apocalyptic label has enough “baggage” associated with it (viz., the automatic expectation of highly symbolic language) that its use causes more confusion than help.⁵⁴

It seems preferable, then, to view the passages under consideration simply as prophetic while acknowledging that they may possess unique attributes that distinguish them from other portions of prophecy. This is not to deny, of course, that distinct “sub-genres” or forms may appear within an overarching genre. Richard Patterson observes that the prophetic books contain the “minor genres” of prayer, hymns and songs, laments, satire, vision reports, and more.⁵⁵ But it is doubtful whether apocalyptic should even be considered as a legitimate sub-genre based on the significant distinctions between prophesy and apocalypse. As stated above, when apocalyptic characteristics that cannot be legitimately applied to biblical texts (e.g., pseudonymity, *ex eventu* prophecy) are taken out of consideration, all of the remaining “apocalyptic” characteristics—including visions, the presence of other-worldly beings, and symbolic language—can be satisfactorily explained within the confines of the prophetic genre.

The identification and interpretation of such features, then, must be driven primarily by the immediate context and not by a genre identification (viz., apocalyptic). Avoiding the inaccurate or misleading apocalyptic label can help protect against imposing foreign hermeneutical principles such as the undue predisposition toward symbolic interpretation. As for the interpretation of visions, symbolic language, and cataclysmic eschatology—supposedly all characteristics of apocalyptic—the

⁵² See “Genre of Apocalypse,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 35–36. Hand makes this observation with regard to the generic identification of Revelation. He says, “Many scholars acknowledge that Revelation lacks a number of prominent characteristics of standard apocalypses including pseudonymity, *ex eventu* prophecy, and pessimism; but by defining apocalypse broadly, they are able to dismiss these characteristics as tangential to the genre debate. This requires the assumption that the text is apocalypse whether it meets the standard qualifications or not. *A predisposition toward the inclusion of a text that has striking dissimilarities with the other texts of the genre distorts the definition of that genre.*” *The Worthy Champion*, 24 (emphasis added).

⁵³ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 28.

⁵⁴ Again, this is not to argue that the texts under consideration contain no symbolic language. Scripture is full of symbolic language, and the prophetic texts are no exception. The main contention here is that the apocalyptic label unnecessarily predisposes toward symbolic interpretation when the warrant for such an interpretation must instead be grounded in the text itself.

⁵⁵ Richard Patterson, “Old Testament Prophecy,” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 304–5.

passages that contain them should be understood according to the normal conventions of biblical interpretation. And despite the unique characteristics of such elements, that means interpreting with a characteristically literal hermeneutic that properly takes poetic and symbolic language into account.⁵⁶

Examination of Relevant Texts

With this general hermeneutical alternative in mind, it will now be helpful to briefly examine specific passages or books that are commonly identified as apocalyptic, assessing that identification according to the features of the passages themselves. A detailed generic assessment of each passage is beyond the scope of this paper. What follows is simply an overview that serves to illustrate and apply the analysis above with reference to specific biblical texts typically labeled as apocalyptic. In light of that, attention will be given only to the features of these books or passages that are most influential regarding their alleged apocalyptic identities. In the survey that follows, greater attention will be given to Daniel and Revelation as the two portions of Scripture most commonly identified as apocalyptic. Between those two sections, more abbreviated attention will be given simultaneously to portions of Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Zechariah and then to the Olivet Discourse.

Daniel 7–12

The latter half of the Book of Daniel is one of two portions of Scripture most readily labeled as apocalyptic by the majority of biblical scholars (the other being Revelation). Collins, for example, identifies these chapters as “the only full-blown apocalypse in the Hebrew Bible.”⁵⁷ Ladd further identifies Daniel 7–12 as the earliest apocalypse, standing as the source that subsequent apocalypses imitated.⁵⁸ But is this assessment—which enjoys such widespread support—legitimate in the end?

The case for an apocalyptic designation is not as favorable as many would assume. Baldwin, for example, observes, “Scholars are generally agreed that the book of Daniel is the example par excellence of apocalyptic in the Old Testament, and yet, on most definitions of the term, *it proves to be an exception*.”⁵⁹ The ready identification of the book as apocalyptic is, in fact, founded on two coordinating, faulty assumptions: its late date and its pseudonymous authorship. In his commentary on Daniel, for example, Collins points to pseudonymity and *ex eventu* prophecy as defining features of the apocalyptic genre. After noting the “essentially accurate” Hellenistic details in chapter 11 and the “notoriously confused” Babylonian and Persian elements, Collins concludes, “In view of these

⁵⁶ For a brief but helpful discussion on the basis of a characteristically literal interpretation and how that applies to biblical symbolism, see Hand, *The Climax of Biblical Prophecy*, 10–21. In this section Hand defends the idea that a word or phrase should be understood in its plain, literal sense unless the context makes it clear that this is so. He also presents and defends the ideas that (1) Scripture regularly indicates and interprets symbols, and (2) the record of fulfilled biblical prophecy sets a precedent for the expectation of a literal fulfillment of prophecy.

⁵⁷ J. Collins, “The Jewish Apocalypses,” 30.

⁵⁸ Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 151.

⁵⁹ Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 52 (emphasis added).

considerations, the balance of probability is overwhelmingly in favor of a Maccabean date, at least for the revelation of chapters 7–12, which clearly have their focus in that period.”⁶⁰

Both assumptions, however, are ultimately unproven and unnecessary. First, the belief that Daniel is pseudonymous makes little sense when considered in light of the standard practice of apocalyptic pseudonymity. The other Jewish apocalypses are written under the names of renowned Jewish figures of the past—Abraham, Enoch, and Ezra, for example.⁶¹ Daniel, however, is unknown in the Jewish canon outside of the book that bears his name. For an apocalyptic author to assume the identity of such a figure (particularly one who resided in a foreign land) runs counter to the standard practice of the apocalyptic authors of the day. Insistence on pseudonymity in this case, however, seems to be rooted in the second unproven and unnecessary assumption—the late date of the book.

The implication derived from a natural reading of the book of Daniel itself is that it was written (or completed) around the sixth century B.C. Most scholars who readily define the book as pseudonymous, however, posit a second-century date for the book. While a detailed discussion of the dating and unity of the book is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be observed that there is no extant evidence that demands a late date of the book, and there is a great deal of evidence that favors an early date.⁶² As Hand observes, however, one of the primary reasons for this late dating is the accuracy of the prophecies contained in these chapters; because the referents (particularly those of chapter 11) are so clear, liberal interpreters default to a late date because to do otherwise would be to open the door for the legitimacy of prophecy.⁶³

Based on a conservative understanding of date and authorship, then, the Book of Daniel has little reason to be classified as apocalyptic. Several of the characteristics most regularly pointed to in support of the identification—pseudonymity and *ex eventu* prophecy—do not, in reality, apply to the book. Additionally, a fifth-to-sixth century date of composition puts the book well outside the influence of other apocalyptic writings, making its inclusion in the genre unrealistic and inaccurate. Along these lines, some of the other features of chapters 7–12 that are typically identified as apocalyptic (e.g., visionary experiences, a supernatural mediator) may be explained by the fact that the extra-biblical apocalypses—which followed some three to five centuries later—copied Daniel’s method and content.⁶⁴ To force Daniel into the apocalyptic mold, then, is somewhat of a “generic anachronism.” The book fits much more naturally within the prophetic tradition.

Ezekiel 40–48, Isaiah 24–27, and Zechariah 9–14

Though each of these three sections could receive extensive individual treatment with regard to their supposed apocalyptic identity (particularly Ezekiel), they will be treated together due to limited space and because the factors involved in all three sections feature a great deal of overlap. This overlap

⁶⁰ John Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 26.

⁶¹ Even Baruch would have been a recognizable name due to his place in Jeremiah.

⁶² For a helpful treatment of the unity and date of the book, see Baldwin, *Daniel*, 39–52.

⁶³ Hand, *The Climax of Biblical Prophecy*, 16.

⁶⁴ Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 151.

begins with the fact that most scholars acknowledge that these sections should *not* be labeled as fully apocalyptic with regard to genre. Collins helpfully summarizes this perspective:

In Trito-Isaiah, and the Isaianic “apocalypse” and less clearly in Zechariah 9–14, Joel and Ezekiel 38–39, we may recognize some of the major characteristics of apocalyptic eschatology and the reflection of an early form of Jewish apocalypticism. However, all these writings must still be categorized formally as prophetic oracles, not as apocalypses, since they lack the apocalyptic manner of revelation, with an otherworldly mediator.⁶⁵

While these units are rarely labeled as fully apocalyptic in the generic sense, they are nonetheless regularly given the apocalyptic label. In large part, this is due to the supposedly apocalyptic eschatology they contain. This is especially true of Isaiah 24–27 (regularly referred to as Isaiah’s “Little Apocalypse”) and Zechariah 9–14, which feature extensive discussion on the Day of the Lord and its accompanying cataclysmic events. Ezekiel 40–48 is regularly described as apocalyptic in light of what many perceive to be highly symbolic language; additionally, Ezekiel’s visionary journey and personal interaction with supernatural beings bear notable resemblances to later apocalyptic literature.⁶⁶

Despite these similarities, several considerations lead away from the conclusion that these passages should be considered apocalyptic. First, the cataclysmic eschatology that is regularly categorized as apocalyptic is, as discussed above, seen regularly throughout the prophets. The distinctive mark of apocalyptic is not the *presence* of cataclysmic eschatology so much as it is the *exclusive focus* on such eschatology. The presence of such language and teaching, then, is not by itself enough to warrant a passage belonging in any way to the apocalyptic genre. To insist on such an identification is to wrongly assert that the interpretation of these early prophetic passages should be constrained by interpretive rules that govern later texts of a different genre.

Second, the distinctions noted above between prophetic and apocalyptic texts—particularly those related to the nature of revelation—should caution interpreters from identifying such passages as some early form of apocalyptic literature, as Collins does.⁶⁷ What is recorded in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah is not the incipient form of a literary method imaginatively employed for religious purposes—as the apocalyptic genre would come to be. These passages constitute the inspired Word of the Lord. The form and content of these passages were not merely a stylistic choice made by the prophets; these reflect their genuine visionary experiences as they were directed by the Spirit and given the genuine Word of God. In light of that, any hermeneutical understanding necessary for the interpretation of these passages—including the proper interpretation of symbolic language—can be found squarely within the prophetic tradition and generic identification.

⁶⁵ J. Collins, “The Jewish Apocalypses,” 29.

⁶⁶ See Cooper’s listing of four similarities between the introductory material in Ezekiel 40 and apocalyptic texts. Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 356.

⁶⁷ See also Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, 35.

The Olivet Discourse

As with the OT passages above, no one asserts that the Olivet Discourse (recorded in Matt 24–25, Mark 13, and Luke 21) is truly apocalyptic in terms of its generic identification. The discourse lacks several key characteristics of the genre, including visionary experiences and pseudonymous authorship. Many assert, however, that the discourse contains apocalyptic features that warrant special attention. R. T. France encapsulates the position well in his introduction to Matthew 24:

The whole chapter is deeply indebted to the language of the Old Testament . . . by the constant use of the language particularly of the apocalyptic parts of the Old Testament (esp. Daniel). Sometimes there is a clear allusion to a specific passage; more often the language is reminiscent of recurring apocalyptic themes. It is important in interpreting this chapter to recognize the conventional associations of such language, and not to attempt to interpret literally terms which had an accepted figurative significance in such contexts.⁶⁸

Here again it becomes clear that the apocalyptic identification heavily implies symbolic interpretation. It must be acknowledged that, more than the OT passages discussed above, there may be some legitimacy to the proposal of apocalyptic influence on these teachings due simply to their date. Nonetheless, a few cursory observations point in a different direction. First, as France's statement indicates, at least some of this reasoning is based on the assumption that the OT passages and terminology being referenced are *themselves* apocalyptic. As argued above, however, this is likely not the best way to understand these OT passages. In light of that, more than mere association with certain OT texts is required for an apocalyptic identification.

Second, Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse features a number of key differences from apocalyptic ideology. While the discourse no doubt contains elements featured regularly in apocalyptic (e.g., cataclysmic language), it also possesses features that would be out of place in such writings. For example, specifically referencing Mark 13, Morris notes that Jesus' discussion of both Israel and the Temple experiencing harm would have been discordant with apocalyptic belief. He goes on to acknowledge that, while it seems clear that the chapter has been influenced by apocalyptic language, the author is clearly writing from his own perspective and not merely as a representative of apocalyptic thought.⁶⁹ Going a step further, Charles Cousar actually sees Mark 13 as *anti-apocalyptic* in some regards. He believes that Jesus, while using apocalyptic terminology, directly combats several modes of apocalyptic thought through his distinct ethical teaching.⁷⁰

Finally, Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse aligns fully with the OT prophetic tradition. Again, apocalyptic literature and prophetic literature *both* feature a measure of eschatological dualism and

⁶⁸ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 339.

⁶⁹ Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 76–77.

⁷⁰ Charles Cousar, "Eschatology and Mark's Theologia Crucis," *Interpretation* 24, no. 3 (1970): 326. The same could be true to an extent regarding other NT portions often identified as apocalyptic. As OT authors occasionally used mythological language from surrounding religions in a polemical manner, so too NT authors may have adopted apocalyptic language not to espouse its ideology, but rather to emphasize their own distinct teaching (all while under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit).

cataclysmic language. But the latter is distinct from the former in its emphasis on God's working in and through history. Along these lines, Ladd observes, "While Jesus shares the eschatological dualism of apocalyptic, with its expectation of a cosmic catastrophe, He stands squarely in the prophetic tradition in that He also sees the hand of God in historical events."⁷¹ Everything in the Olivet Discourse, including Jesus' continued use of Son of Man terminology, is firmly rooted in the teaching of the OT. In light of such differences between the Olivet Discourse and apocalyptic literature, there is good warrant to conclude that the discourse is not apocalyptic.

Revelation

Biblical scholars tend to classify Revelation as some form of apocalyptic. While the book's epistolary form may be acknowledged, most treatments offer little qualification for apocalyptic identification and assert that a proper understanding of the rules of apocalyptic interpretation is vital for accurately interpreting Revelation.⁷² As mentioned at the outset of the paper, this apocalyptic identification and its accompanying symbolic interpretation lead many interpreters to conclude that most of the book's prophecies refer either to past events or to spiritual realities and are thus not meant to predict literal future events.

Again, space does not permit a thorough treatment of this matter, but a survey of the book's characteristics will show that the apocalyptic label is not nearly as self-evident as many would like to believe. First, it should be apparent that the Greek label ἀποκάλυψις lends no weight to the claim that the book is apocalyptic. The term means simply "revelation" and is used throughout the NT in a non-technical sense.⁷³

Additionally, a number of the book's characteristics show that it lacks true conformity with the principal expectations of the apocalyptic genre. First, the book's introduction—including its epistolary structure and its self-identification as ἀποκάλυψις—distinguishes it from the apocalyptic tradition.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Revelation lacks pseudonymity and *ex eventu* prophecy, two key defining characteristics of apocalyptic literature.⁷⁵ Mazzaferri summarizes these and other elements in his conclusion regarding Revelation's relationship to the apocalyptic genre:

The title, apocalyptic, certainly derives from Revelation, but this is irrelevant. *Apokalypsis* is not a technical term in John's day, although he employs it prophetically. In terms of actual generic definition, Revelation cannot be equated with apocalyptic in form. It lacks essential pseudonymity, while its written form is circumstantial. Neither does it qualify in contents. Its eschatology is

⁷¹ Ladd, "Apocalyptic Literature," 154.

⁷² For example, Schreiner says, "The apocalyptic genre is especially important in interpreting the book because we must see the symbolism shaping the work. Otherwise we are apt to misread what the author teaches us." Thomas Schreiner, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 46.

⁷³ See BDAG, s.v. "ἀποκαλύπτω" and "ἀποκάλυψις."

⁷⁴ See Table 17 in Hand, *The Worthy Champion*, 158.

⁷⁵ Most acknowledge that Revelation is not pseudonymous, but some who hold to a preterist or historicist view of the book do argue that it contains *ex eventu* prophecy. The latter conclusion, however, is unnecessary. See Hand, *The Climax of Biblical Prophecy*, 31–72 for a helpful overview and analysis.

Christian, with a modified temporal dualism and an optimistic view of the present. Its imminence is explicit and personal, not pseudo-prophetic, and conditional, not deterministic. . . . Despite certain superficial similarities, *Revelation completely fails to qualify as a genuine apocalypse*.⁷⁶

Alan Johnson concurs with Mazzaferri's judgment, also observing that Revelation lacks the extensive focus on interpreting angels that characterizes apocalyptic. He further notes that John nowhere assumes among his readers a familiarity with extra-biblical apocalyptic. Rather, John demonstrates a consistent dependence on the OT—in a manner that is also distinct from extra-biblical apocalyptic texts.⁷⁷

In addition to these distinctions, a number of Revelation's characteristics align the book closely with the prophetic tradition. At a foundational level, Revelation identifies *itself* as prophecy five times (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). This self-identification is substantiated by a number of the book's characteristics. First, Revelation features ethical appeal consistent with the prophetic tradition. This is most notable in the numerous exhortations of the second and third chapters of the book, which contain the letters to the seven churches.⁷⁸ Second, Revelation is steeped in OT allusions, tying it strongly to the OT prophetic tradition. Hand observes that Revelation "alludes to Old Testament prophecy more frequently than any other book of the Bible," and that "John writes self-consciously in the line of the prophets."⁷⁹

In summary then, despite the fact that Revelation is considered by many to be the foremost example of biblical apocalyptic literature, there is good reason to reject the identification. The book stands much more closely aligned with the prophetic tradition.

Conclusion

Genre identification is a vital first step in the interpretive process. Misidentifying the genre of a text, therefore, can result in interpretation and application that are warped at best and completely erroneous at worst. The preceding survey has attempted to show that the apocalyptic genre is both unnecessary and inappropriate with regard to the books of the biblical canon. The eschatology and key characteristics of relevant portions of Scripture are more accurately explained through appeal to the genre of biblical prophecy. Though such passages still contain interpretive challenges, properly identifying their generic backdrop at least opens the door for accurate interpretation and protects against misleading preconceptions, such as a predisposition toward symbolic interpretation. Despite

⁷⁶ Frederick Mazzaferri, cited in Alan Johnson, "Revelation," in *EBCRev*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 13:577 (emphasis added).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 577.

⁷⁸ This stands in marked contrast to the apocalyptic literature. Ladd observes, "With the exception of Enoch 92–105, there is almost no ethical exhortation in the entire corpus of non-canonical apocalyptic literature." Ladd, "Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?" 199.

⁷⁹ Hand, *The Worthy Champion*, 161. The self-consciously prophetic nature of Revelation is further evidenced by the repeated use (seven times in chapters 2–3) of *Τάδε λέγει*, or "this is what he says." As both Hand and Schreiner observe, this introductory formula appears hundreds of times in the prophetic sections of the LXX, where the most usual English translation is something along the lines of, "Thus says the Lord." *Ibid.*, 159–60; Schreiner, *Revelation*, 37.

the profusion of support the apocalyptic identification enjoys in mainstream biblical scholarship, careful analysis reveals stronger alternatives.