

Prophecy and Apocalypse

Prophecy is an important part of God's self-revelation recorded in the Bible.

However, much of what passes for Bible prophecy in some Christian circles today is not really prophecy at all. It is misnamed. It is actually concerned with a form of literature that students of the Bible refer to as "apocalyptic" literature. "Apocalypse" comes from the Greek word for "revealing," "unveiling," "revelation."

Prophecy

The word "prophet" first appears in the Bible as a description of Abraham (see Gen. 20:7), but the concept is most fully developed in connection with the ministry of Moses. Moses was specifically called by God to serve as His "mouthpiece" to the Hebrew people. He taught them the law of God and called them to obedience and faithfulness. He served as intercessor on their behalf, taking their concerns to God (see Exod. 18:19; Num. 27:5). He helped his people to understand and to interpret God's presence in the events of their daily lives (e.g., Exod. 15:1-21).

Throughout the Old Testament, prophets like Moses regularly appeared at God's direction to call the people to faithfulness (which included strongly denouncing sin) and to help them to discern His hand in the events of their time.

Apocalypse

There came a time when prophecy began to wane. Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, lived about 500 years before Jesus. From his time until the appearance of John the Baptist, prophecy in Israel seems to have been silent. It was during this time that apocalyptic writings came into prominence. Between about 250 BC and AD 250, dozens of apocalyptic writings circulated in Israel. Such writings provided encouragement in the apparent hopelessness of this time in Israel's history. They vividly portray the catastrophic end of this age and its evil powers, and describe the victorious reign of God in an altogether new age.

Apocalypse is similar

in some ways to prophecy. Like prophecy, its main purpose is to convey God's message to His people during times of trouble. In addition, it often denounces the serious sins of the day.

However, apocalypse is for the most part quite unique and distinctive. For instance, it almost always attributes the source of its message to dreams, visions, and journeys to heaven by its author. The Old Testament prophets sometimes received their word from God in such ways, but in apocalypse this is virtually the only means of divine revelation. Apocalypse is also highly symbolic. This is perhaps its most typical feature (and the thing that makes it so difficult to interpret). Apocalyptic writers employed vivid and sensational—sometimes even bizarre—symbols to express the messages they received.

Apocalypse is pessimistic about human intervention. That is, it reflects a loss of confidence and hope concerning the present age. It projects all hope for victory over evil into God's direct intervention in an "age to come." The Old Testament prophets sometimes appealed to the future and what God would do there, but the future they envisioned was normally continuous with the present: it would unfold in this

world, perfected and renewed. Apocalypse, however, pictures this world and the present age as hopelessly corrupt, and doomed to extinction. It focuses much of its attention on events marking the end of this present age and the inauguration of the age to come.

Apocalypse is also deterministic. It portrays events surrounding the end of the age as predetermined and certain. Everything rests entirely in God's hands. There is nothing human beings can do either to hasten or delay the unfolding of events that have been revealed.

Apocalyptic Speculation

Today, many Christians are fascinated with so-called Bible prophecy. They read books about the great tribulation to come and the rapture of the church, and debate whether the rapture will occur before, during, or after the tribulation. Church groups watch films portraying the horrors of the last days. Each new world crisis inspires a new collection of books claiming to show how the crisis was prophesied in the Bible and is part of God's plan for the end times.

These modern versions might better be called apocalyptic rather than biblical prophecy, since they generally center on the two most highly apocalyptic books in the

Bible, Revelation and the last six chapters of Daniel. Apocalyptic speculation focuses almost exclusively on end times, whereas biblical prophets were mainly concerned with redeeming the present.

The greatest inspiration behind present-day apocalyptic speculation is the movement known as "Dispensationalism." This movement can be traced back about 150 years. Most of its ideas were first developed by John Nelson Darby (1800-82), a minister who helped to found the Plymouth Brethren in Great Britain. Darby's ideas spread to other parts of the world, and became especially popular in the late 1800s through a series of Bible conferences sponsored by the famous American evangelist, Dwight L. Moody.



Moses before the burning bush by Raphael (1483—1520). The word "prophet" first appears in the Bible as a description of Abraham (see Gen. 20:7), but the concept is most fully developed in connection with the ministry of Moses. Throughout the Old Testament, prophets like Moses regularly appeared at God's direction to call the people to faithfulness (which included strongly denouncing sin) and to help them to discern His hand in the events of their time.

Dispensationalism tends to interpret all of Scripture in light of the Bible's most apocalyptic sections. These are seen as the key to understanding God's activity throughout human history. This tends to produce a rigid, very dogmatic approach to Bible interpretation. For most dispensationalists, history is already set and believers have little to do other than secure themselves so they can endure the

impending storm of evil's consequences and God's judgment.

As Wesleyans, we have great confidence in God's powerful and transforming grace. He can and does change lives and situations here and now. Wesleyans have always believed and taught that God's grace is rich enough to overcome all sin and evil. God's Spirit is at work everywhere and is always calling the world to redemption—even in the darkest points of

history. As a result, Wesleyans feel that their place is not deep in the ship, away from the wind and the waves, but on the railing with Jesus, looking for anyone who is seeking to be saved from the sea of sin.

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Matthew 24 in History and Literature

Matthew 24 is one of the most challenging chapters in the first gospel. The chapter is set on the Mount of Olives, so Matthew 24 and the parallel passages in Mark 13 and Luke 21 are often called the Olivet Discourse. In these passages, Jesus describes the destruction of the temple and speaks of the end of the world.

These descriptions are so intertwined that on a first reading, one might conclude the two events would happen at the same time. However, the Roman army destroyed the temple in AD 70. This did not bring about the end of the world, leaving readers wondering how the two events are related. Awareness of the historical context of and the literary devices used in chapter 24 help us better understand Jesus' words.

The Historical Context

The date of the Olivet Discourse is easy to identify. All three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record this teaching from Jesus during the middle of what we now call Holy Week. A few days after this, Jesus would celebrate the Passover and be arrested and crucified. The year was most likely AD 30. Thus, Jesus would have delivered the Olivet Discourse in early April of that year.

Jerusalem and the surrounding territory of Judea had been under Rome's control since 63 BC. The Romans appointed Herod the Great as king of Judea in 37 despite the fact that most Jews ferociously hated him. One of Herod's attempts to win Jewish favor was a massive remodeling

of the temple. The major work was done between 20 and 10 BC. However, various small beautification projects continued from 10 BC until AD 66.

Herod's temple was widely admired as one of the most beautiful architectural monuments of the early Roman Empire. This is the background for the disciples' comment in Matthew 24:1 calling Jesus' attention to the temple. The parallels in Mark 13:1 and Luke 21:5 are even more explicit in their admiration. Jesus' response that "not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (Matt. 24:2) would have shocked the disciples. The destruction of this massive, stately building, which had stood for more than 500 years and represented Jewish identity, was hard to imagine.

The Jewish Revolt Against Rome

The relationship between the Romans and the Jews worsened steadily for most of the first century. This was in spite of Rome's

efforts to accommodate Jewish sensitivities. For example, the great gold standards and shields with the images of eagles that were normally carried by Roman soldiers were left behind in Caesarea when the governor and his soldiers went to Jerusalem for his periodic visits. The sole reason was that Jewish leaders had protested that these images violated the second commandment.

Things only got worse. The Jews resented the Roman presence in their country. While there were benefits to Roman rule, there was also a downside. Roman taxation increased, raising Jewish frustrations, and Jewish demands increased, irritating the Romans. Tensions grew to the boiling point and in AD 66, a Jewish revolt broke out in Galilee and quickly spread to Judea. Pent-up Jewish hatred led the rebels to early victories over the relatively small Roman garrisons.

Rome quickly sent in its top general, Vespasian, and three legions. Galilee quickly fell, and Vespasian turned to Jerusalem. The

city's inevitable fall was momentarily postponed when Vespasian became emperor of Rome in 69. He left his son, Titus, in charge of the military action at Jerusalem.

The change of Roman leadership was a minor matter compared with the turmoil within Jerusalem. Jewish extremists had entered the city, and civil war between various Jewish factions broke out in the spring of 69. Various Jewish leaders were claiming almost messianic status and demanding allegiance from other Jews. Jesus' statements in Matthew 24:5, 10, and 23-24 make sense (or can



Model of the first-century AD Jerusalem temple. Herod's temple was widely admired as one of the most beautiful architectural monuments of the early Roman Empire.

be understood) in this context, in addition to describing the confusing allegiances that will occur as the end times approach.

Hundreds were killed in the conflicts between the opposing Jewish factions. Valuable stores of grain that were needed for food when the Roman army finally lay siege to the city were destroyed in the civil war. The “great distress” described in 24:21-22 matches the desperate circumstances in Jerusalem as the people awaited Rome’s final blow.

Titus was now in charge of the Roman assault against Jerusalem. He laid siege to the city in early 70. In May, he attacked from the north and, after violent fighting, broke through the first wall. The situation became desperate. Because of the siege and the lost grain, people were starving within the city. Those who tried to escape were either killed by warring factions inside the city or by Titus’s troops outside the wall.

In July, Titus broke through a second wall and recaptured the old Roman garrison beside the temple, the Antonia Fortress. In early August, he captured the temple itself, plundered it, and set it on fire, killing thousands in the process. As a further insult to the Jews, Titus’s soldiers offered sacrifices to the images on their standards in the temple courts.

By September, the Romans had captured the city and razed the temple and the city walls to the ground. Titus brought nearly



Model of the Antonia Fortress. The fortress lay just outside the temple court.

100,000 prisoners of war to Rome the following spring.

The Literary Context

Most New Testament scholars believe Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple—perhaps sometime between AD 80 and 90. Many also believe that Mark’s gospel was written just before the destruction of Jerusalem. If so, it creates the unusual situation of (1) Jesus prophesying the destruction of the temple in AD 30; (2) Mark recording Jesus’ prophecy; (3) the actual destruction of the temple in 70; and (4) Matthew (and Luke) writing in the 80s about what Jesus said in the 30s.

Matthew distinguishes Jesus’ words about the destruction of the temple and the end of the age. In 24:3, the disciples’ question

comes in two parts: (1) When would the temple be destroyed, and (2) what would be the sign of Christ’s coming and the end of the age? In contrast, neither Mark nor Luke separates the two issues in the disciples’ question to Jesus.

Some believe Matthew organized Jesus’ answer in this order: He answered the question about the destruction of the temple first, and then, beginning in verse 21, 32, or 36, He answered the second question. The disagreement about where the transition takes place tells us this suggestion is too simplistic.

So, What Was Jesus Talking About?

The disciples’ questions in verse 3 are therefore crucial to our understanding of this passage. They suggest we should distinguish between verses that apply to the destruction of the temple, those that apply to the end of time, and those that might apply to both. An awareness of the historical context helps us to make these distinctions by making it clear that much of Matthew 24:4-25 can be understood in light of the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

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Bible Dictionary: Words on Last Things

Are you a premillennialist or a postmillennialist? Will there be one antichrist or many? Or has the antichrist already come? What about the beast and the false prophet? How do they fit into end-time theology?

Thoroughly confused yet? The vocabulary of the end times is quite varied and can be confusing if we aren’t conversant with the many, many theories that have been proposed. So, we’ve provided a dictionary of end-time terminology to help you as you study the end times.*

Alpha and Omega

The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This term is of great theological significance because in Revelation (1:8; 21:6; 22:13), it is used as a title for God as well as for Christ. This is one of John’s strong affirmations of the full deity of Jesus. Not only is God the beginning and end of all things, but Christ, as creator and redeemer, is, in a unique way, the beginning and end of all history.

Apocalypse, Apocalyptic

A type of largely Jewish literature dating

for the most part between 170 BC and AD 135. This was an era of recurring crises in Israel’s history. The apocalyptic message was directed to a people in trouble, a people who could not otherwise understand the working of God during persecution and overwhelming evil.

Armageddon

This word occurs only once in the Bible, in Revelation 16:16, and literally means the “Mount of Megiddo.” Megiddo is a promontory on the south side of the plain of

Jezeel, and an ancient military stronghold. Armageddon represents the last great battle between Christ and the antichrist. From this biblical background, the word has become a very familiar term designating the final holocaust resulting from the struggle between good and evil.

Babylon

The destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the subsequent exile had profound theological effects on the people of God. Exile meant living in an unclean land and being ruled by people who had rejected the Lord as their God. The corruption, luxury, power, and immorality of Babylon typified all that God opposed. Therefore, Babylon came to represent existence alienated from God and the forces of evil ranged against God and His people. As the city in which every type of wickedness exists, it stands in opposition to Jerusalem, the city of God.

Day of the Lord

Israel saw in this day the sovereignty of God over all the world and the glorification of Israel; therefore, they eagerly awaited the day. The prophet Amos corrected this view and saw the day as a time of judgment on a rebellious Israel, whose power, wealth, and inordinate ambition made the nation self-deifying. The New Testament writers see in it the day of Christ and speak of the last judgment and the glorious triumph of the kingdom of God.

Eschatology

Traditionally refers to the biblical teachings concerning events that will occur at the end of world history. The incarnation of Christ marked the inauguration of eschatological events and realities, but the full realization of the eschaton lies in the future—the future will bring to completion that which was begun in the mission of Jesus. This interpretation seems to reflect the New Testament teachings most accurately.

Man of Lawlessness, Antichrist(s)

Although the term “antichrist” is typically associated with Revelation, it never appears in Revelation, but is found

only in 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7. The “man of lawlessness” is an eschatological figure described by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Daniel (chaps. 7—8; 11—12) and other Old Testament passages gave rise in later Jewish and Christian circles to a belief that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by a period of religious apostasy and persecution, epitomized in a great world ruler. The man of lawlessness will be a final counterpart of Christ. He will proclaim himself to be God and demand the worship of the world. He will be the culmination of that satanically-inspired hostility to God and Christ that has been operative throughout history.

Millennium:

Refers to the future reign of Christ with His saints on the earth for 1,000 years.

Premillennialism

Teaches that Christ must come back in glory and power to establish His kingdom in this world as a political entity for 1,000 years.

Postmillennialism

The view that Christ will come supernaturally to earth to establish His kingdom after the 1,000-year period of peace, prosperity, blessing, and grace ruled over by the church.

Amillennialism

Interprets the 1,000-year reign of Christ spiritually, not literally. The argument for this view is that since Revelation is replete

with symbolism, it is inconsistent to make an exception in the interpretation of Revelation 20:1-7.

New Jerusalem

In the New Jerusalem that comes from God, there is no temple, for God and the Lamb take its place. This is the eternal city, the home of the saints.

New Heavens and New Earth

A phrase used several times in the Bible to describe the ultimate destiny of the redeemed. The earth was created to be our dwelling place, and at the end of the age, it will be redeemed and transformed to be the dwelling place of the resurrected saints.

Parousia

Another term for the eschatological coming of Jesus Christ in glory (second coming) at the end of the age.

Rapture

Refers to Paul's teaching concerning what will happen to living believers at the second coming (1 Thess. 4:14-17). Scripture affirms that the righteous, both living and dead, will be transformed at Jesus' Parousia, and caught up to meet Him in the air and so be forever with Him. It should be noted that the term “Rapture” is not in the Bible.

Tribulation

The New Testament teaches that Christians must expect tribulation throughout their time on earth (Mark 8:34; 10:21). At the end of the age, however, there will be a great tribulation (Matt. 24:21-22) that will be much worse in intensity. Revelation 13 says the beast will be allowed “to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them” (v. 7). In a later vision, John sees a victorious church standing before the throne of God, one that has triumphed over the beast (20:4). This seems like a contradiction, but the point is that the beast will make martyrs of the faithful. Yet, their triumph is that they stood the test and did not renounce their faith in Christ.



John on the island of Patmos, where he wrote the book of Revelation, is the subject of this painting by Nicolas Poussin (1594—1665). Apocalypse is similar in some ways to prophecy. Like prophecy, its main purpose is to convey God's message to His people during times of trouble. In addition, it often denounces the serious sins of the day. However, it is for the most part quite unique and distinctive. For instance, it almost always attributes the source of its message to dreams, visions, and journeys to heaven by its author.

*Definitions adapted from the *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, Richard S. Taylor, ed. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1983).