

APOCALYPTIC STYLE

(Tremper Longman III)

Today many people use a form of apocalyptic writing as a kind of calendar of the end times. Ears perk up when someone claims to have discovered the key to unlocking the mysteries of future events. Yet the purposes of apocalyptic writing in the Bible go beyond satisfying our chronological curiosity. These writings offer great comfort and hope.

Present Comfort.

Jesus Christ is at the center of apocalyptic writing, both in the Old and New Testaments. New Testament passages (such as Matthew 24:30, Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27 and Revelation 1:7) identify the “*cloud rider*” in Daniel 7:13 (the one “like a son of man”) with Jesus Christ. Apocalyptic writing's ultimate message is that Christ is coming again as a warrior to rescue His people from this present evil world. In the process He is going to destroy all earthly and heavenly evil. The point is: all of this is to comfort us as we struggle with present circumstances. God has completed the script of history, and it will turn out exactly as He has written it.

Some apocalyptic passages can give the impression, if wrongly read that we can know all the details of that script today—especially when Christ is coming again. Or more generally, some people claim that apocalyptic passages give us signs to look for when the time is near. Jesus did tell the disciples before His death to be on the lookout for the “signs of the time,” which are the appearance of false messiahs, wars, earthquakes, and famines (see Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). So at the turn of the Millennium, what do we see all around us? Many wars, a number of earthquakes, reports of famines, and even the appearance of false messiahs. Clearly we must be near the end!

But Jesus' words, delivered in the same speech, ought to continue echoing in the back of our minds:

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If He comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’” (Mark 13:32-37)

Jesus seems to give us a road map to the end and then tells us we can't use it to find the end of the road. Is this a contradiction? Of course not. Jesus' purpose in the whole thirteenth chapter of Mark is to tell the disciples—and tell us through them—one thing: we must always be ready for His return.

The signs of the time listed here and elsewhere in the New Testament are always present. There have been wars, famines, earthquakes, and false messiahs from the time of Christ's death and resurrection to the present day. These things continually remind us that we're living in the time before Christ's coming. When we hear a report of another war, we're not to say, “Maybe this is the sign of the end! Rather, we are reminded that we're still living in the time period between the first and second comings of Christ—the time when the world still suffers under the curse of the Fall.

If it isn't the purpose of apocalyptic writings to give us a secret knowledge of the time of Christ's return, what good is it? And how does apocalyptic writing function as a mirror and a seed as we have said all Scripture does?

Apocalyptic literature speaks to all believers who find themselves struggling in an evil world, no matter the time or place.

The Bible tells us that all of us live under the thrall of worldly evil. God's people in Iran today greet the message of apocalyptic writing with more urgency than those of us in the democratic West—but it's a matter of degree and not a difference in kind.

The purpose of apocalyptic writing is to provide comfort to the people of God in the midst of struggle, pain, and trouble. Not only is it a misuse to try to discover the date of the end or any other secret knowledge, it's a mockery of the gospel. After hundreds and even thousands of such perverse interpretations through the centuries, we might think we'd learn. But charlatans and worse will continue to use these wonderfully powerful passages of Scripture to tear down the church rather than build it up.



Careful students of the Bible need to be especially wary to avoid supporting what will surely be an increase in the abuse of these passages of Scripture.

Future Hope

We do need present comfort, but we also need hope for the future. Life is hard. Even as Christians we still struggle. We experience the heartache of disappointment, sickness, death, and failed relationships. We continue to sin and to be the object of sin. If the present is all there is, it wouldn't be worth the effort, would it?

But God reveals to us in apocalyptic passages that death is not the final scene. Death is followed by resurrection. Seeming defeat gives way to victory. Wrongs will be righted and evil will be defeated once and for all.

Christianity has been criticized as a religion that focuses too much on the future, avoiding the problems of the present. We've been accused of longing for that "pie in the sky by and by." Certainly there are emphases within Christianity that deserve this kind of parody. We should never avoid the problems nor denigrate the pleasures of the present by simply ignoring all things but future heavenly realities. We need to work to better ourselves, our churches, and our society.

However, we can do this work while still recognizing that things will never be made perfect this side of heaven. We may stave off the forces of danger and decay, but they will never disappear. Our ultimate hope, according to biblical apocalypse, is our continued relationship with God after death in heaven.

The hope God wants to create within us is not a mere wishful desire for something that may or may not come. Biblical hope is the confidence that God will not let present realities continue. Evil may appear to be on top right now, and it may always have the upper hand in this world. But it is absolutely certain, beyond any doubt, that God will right all wrongs in the future. God wants us to stay rooted in the present, but life engenders a future hope in us. He does this through the powerful images we find in apocalyptic literature, especially those images in the last two chapters of Revelation.

These chapters bring to culmination a number of themes initiated in the Old Testament. First, God the warrior wins the ultimate victory over the forces of evil. Revelation 19:11-20 pictures Jesus Christ, armed with a sword, leading the heavenly army in the final battle against the beast and His armies. This climaxes the battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan that began as early as Genesis 3, when the fall into sin created a conflict between those who followed God and those who continued in the way of the serpent.

It is also in the last chapters of Revelation that we hear of the coming of the New Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the place where God chose to meet His people with special intimacy during the Old Testament period. God made His presence known there, and those who wanted to meet with Him would journey to that city. The New Jerusalem, unlike its Old Testament precursor, is a description of the whole of the new heavens and new earth. That is, everywhere is now Jerusalem, the place where God dwells. As a matter of fact, there's no need for a temple in the New Jerusalem (21:22) because God's presence permeates all of the city.

This city has a river, and on both banks of this river is a garden. The garden has not just one, but many trees of life. Eden is restored, yet it's something better than original Eden! Revelation 22, the last chapter of the Bible, thus brings us back to the first two chapters of Genesis. Thanks to the work of Christ, God's people find themselves completely restored in their relationship with God, enjoying the bliss of being in His presence.

The apocalyptic style is not an esoteric code language that provides the grist for our speculations about the future. The apocalyptic teaching of the Bible gives us a vision of the future that generates hope in the present. We must not avoid reading it because it's difficult to understand or because it may be unsettling.

Apocalyptic writing invites us to live for the future. We don't lose touch with the present, but we're always mindful of what is coming. Christ's kingdom is with us now in seed form, but its full manifestation is coming at the end of the age. We don't know when that will be, but we must be ready.

In the meantime, God inspires us to keep taking on the character of Christ as He gives us the picture of the new kingdom, which is our eternal inheritance. In response to this great vision, at the conclusion of the Bible we say with John, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."