

## I. Introduction

### A. Some of you are familiar with the German-speaking Mennonites who lived in the Volga region of Russia about 150 years ago

1. You may know that a large migration of those Mennonites came to the U.S. & Canada in the 1870's after the Russian government revoked their privileges, including exemption from military service
2. What you may not know so well is the story of one group of those Mennonites who literally took a trip to the middle of nowhere all because of how one man read the book of Revelation

### B. A preacher named Claas Epp, Jr. believed that the end of the age and the return of Christ was coming soon



1. While most Mennonites leaving Russia went to America in the West, Epp believed that his own flock of followers were the new church of "Philadelphia" from Revelation 3, before whom God had set the open door.
2. So he proclaimed they would find God's deliverance in the East
  - a) In 1880 he led a small group of 3 wagon trains from their settlement in Russia on a long trek to the wild barren land of what is now Uzbekistan in central Asia



- b) Known as the Great Trek, this pilgrimage was so his people could meet the Lord & inaugurate the 1000-year reign of Christ on earth
- c) Along the way they were met by hostile tribes, hunger, thirst, dysentery & the deaths of many children
- d) Thanks to the kindness of a Muslim Khan, they were given some protected land, and settled there making a living with their craftsmanship

### 3. Claas Epp declared that he was going to meet Elijah in the skies and ascend with him bodily to heaven

- a) The day set for this to happen and for Christ to return was March 8, 1889, and the people eagerly gathered to bid Epp farewell as he stood in his ascension robes
- b) When nothing happened, the date was changed to 1891 ... with the same results.
- c) After that, his followers dwindled in number and Epp was eventually excommunicated. He died in central Asia in 1913.  
[\[http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Epp,\\_Claas\\_\(1838-1913\);](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Epp,_Claas_(1838-1913);)  
<http://walteratliff.com/2011/02/wonderful-book-review-from-mhsbc/> accessed 4-29-15]

**C. This legendary true story is an example of the devastating theological extremes to which some Christians, including Mennonites, have gone in interpreting the Revelation of John.**

**II. But even before the book of Revelation there were some believers looking for Jesus in the wrong places**

Text: Rev. 5:1-14; 21:1-5

(YOTB) 3

**A. Some 60 or 70 years before a man named John wrote down his visions, a group of Jesus' followers found themselves with a couple of angels literally in a strange place**

1. In the very 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of book of Acts, the apostles interact with the risen Jesus, but they misunderstand his mission (*Q from v. 6 ...*)
  - a) They still expect a military messiah ... still have visions of a grand Jewish kingdom centered in Jerusalem, harkening back to the heydays of Kings David & Solomon
  - b) Jesus gives a rather dismissive response to their question, and he gives a promise of the coming Holy Spirit, along with the fact that they will become witnesses of his
  - c) Then he is taken up to heaven in a cloud ... this is known as The Ascension, portrayed in this famous painting.



2. The apostles stay gazing up into heaven ... they seem paralyzed with their focus "out there" somewhere
  - a) But their gaze is abruptly brought back to earth by 2 men in white ... angels perhaps, who ask, "Why are you looking up there?"
  - b) They declare that Jesus will come again, in the same way the apostles had seen him go
  - c) The implication is, "Until he does come again, stop looking up and start looking around. You're still on earth, and there's still ministry to be done down here."

## **B. Over nearly 2K years, Christians have been reading their own current situations and world events back into the book of Revelation**

1. The 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ has been predicted continually by Christian leaders like Claas Epp and many others ... and how many of these predictions have come to pass? NOT ONE
2. For almost 2K years, there have been Christians looking up to the skies for Christ to come again, or looking down at their calendars to calculate when it would be, but not looking around to focus on ministries Jesus called them to do in their own neighborhoods

## **C. What's amazing to me is this:**

1. All this end-times sky-gazing over the years flies directly in the face of Jesus himself in this story from Acts 1!
  - a) Remember Jesus' response to the apostles' misguided question? He said, "It's not for you to know the times and the places ..."
  - b) In other words, "Don't calendarize!"
2. The first apostles were essentially told to stop waiting around until Jesus came back ... and start focusing on how they were going to be faithful to Jesus in the here & now, until he did come back
3. That's still a valid lesson for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> C
4. But to avoid following similar bizarre and sometimes disastrous paths from the book of Revelation, we need to understand more about apocalyptic literature in the Bible

## **III. Brief intro to apocalyptic genre of writing in the Bible**

**A. Material I'm sharing comes mostly from retired Hesston College Bible professor Marion Bontrager, and from Dr. Loren Johns, New Testament professor at AMBS, who spoke here on this subject a little over a month ago on a Wednesday evening**

1. Preaching an overview message like this on a Sunday morning is very humbling because we are actually only scratching the surface of making sense of John's Apocalypse
2. We call Revelation apocalyptic literature because the Greek title for this book literally means "a revealing" or "an unveiling"

# Introduction to Apocalyptic Genre

Apocalypse = "A revealing/  
an unveiling"

3. Apocalyptic literature was an especially common form of writing in the period from about 300 BC to 70 AD

- a) It was used both by Jewish writers and later by Christians
- b) Besides the Apocalypse of John, other examples of apocalyptic writings you might recognize include Daniel ch. 7-12, and 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Gospel of Mark

# Introduction to Apocalyptic Genre

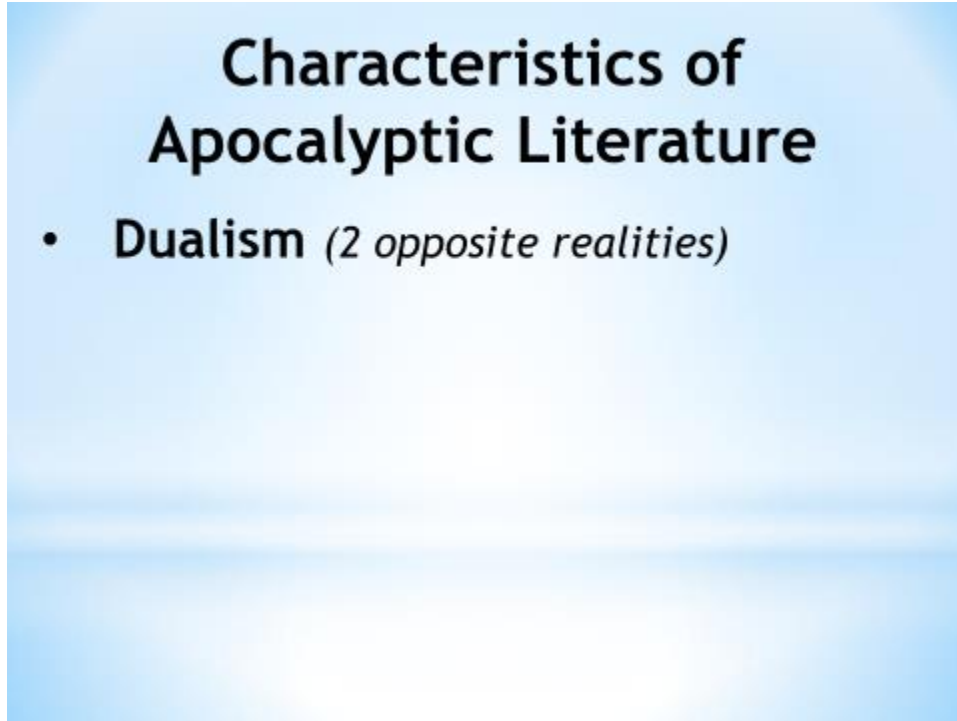
Apocalypse = "A revealing/  
an unveiling"

**Bible examples: Daniel chap. 7-12  
Mark chap. 13  
Revelation**

- c) There were actually dozens of lesser known apocalypses circulating that did not make it into our Bible, such as the Apocalypses of Enoch

**B. I want to quickly name four main characteristics of apocalyptic literature that will help us understand it** (Marion G Bontrager, Hesston College BibLit notebook, ch. 30)

1. Dualism (2 opposite realities)



- a) Apocalyptic writers saw a black & white world ... a world of stark contrasts between supernatural powers of good & powers of evil
- b) They also saw history in terms of a present evil age under Satan's control, and a future eternal age under God's direction
- c) They thought in terms of opposites and either/or realities

2. Determinism (that's just the way it is)

## Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

- **Dualism** (*2 opposite realities*)
- **Determinism** (*that's just how it is*)
  - Positive: *God's victory is assured*
  - Pessimistic: *Can't change the evil ...  
only endure it now*

a) Positive side:

God is sovereign over everything. God's victory is already determined!

b) Pessimistic side:

Nothing can be done today about the evil forces.

Faithful response = enduring the current suffering, for sake of a future reward

### 3. Eschatology (end times, the last things)

## Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

- **Dualism** (*2 opposite realities*)
- **Determinism** (*that's just how it is*)
  - Positive: *God's victory is assured*
  - Pessimistic: *Can't change the evil ... only endure it now*
- **Eschatology** (*last things, end times*)

a) This view is not the same as OT prophecy

Prophecy is concerned with giving God's perspective on THIS life and THIS age ... so God often uses kings & empires for God's purposes

Occasional future prediction, but that's not central to OT prophecy

b) Apoc. Eschatology has a grander cosmic vision of the whole universe & isn't just concerned with what happens to God's select people

God does radical supernatural interventions into human experience

The time frame is more indefinite and more long-term

4. Symbolism (things aren't always what they seem)



## Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

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  - Positive: *God's victory is assured*
  - Pessimistic: *Can't change the evil ... only endure it now*
- **Eschatology** (*last things, end times*)
- **Symbolism** (*things aren't always what they seem*)

a) There's lots of symbolic language in apocalyptic literature ... lots of colors & animals & numbers

b) It's not meant to be read in a linear or scientific fashion ... It's not a roadmap or a high-definition photo of the future

c) It may be better to think of apocalyptic writings more like a political cartoon or an abstract painting: you don't take it literally and it may not be immediately obvious what it means



## IV. Bridging the Apocalypse then & us now ...

### A. (Naming the disconnect)

1. It's all well & good to explain apocalypticism & an eschatological viewpoint but some of us may still say, "So what?"
2. Fact is, even if we do try to read it, many of us today find it very hard to connect with Apocalypse of John. Here's why I think that is ...

### B. I see 2 realities causing that disconnect today

#### 1. Our discomfort with dualism

- a) The world is not as simple as it was 2000 years ago and many of us are not satisfied with simplistic black and white answers ... there are gray areas in our world today.

Yes, I realize that sometimes there are only 2 choices ... but the longer I live the more I get suspicious when a politician or a leader tells me that there are only 2 options.

There are almost always more than 2 options, if we have the imagination and courage to consider alternatives.

- b) As Christians, we're not ready to abandon the truth found in God through Jesus Christ & revealed in the Bible, but it's only honest to say that God's truth can often be hard to discern.

The dualistic thinking of apocalyptic literature is not the way that many of us think today.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't read Revelation, but it does make it a bigger challenge.

#### 2. We don't live in the 1<sup>st</sup> C Roman Empire

- a) Our context is so different from those believers John wrote to, that it's no wonder we misunderstand his Apocalypse or that we avoid it altogether because we just don't "get it"

- b) Of course we don't "get it"! Look at us (most of us here) ...

Unlike the majority of people living in Caesar's empire, we have discretionary money to spend, so that we don't struggle to live

We have other resources like higher education and white privilege that we can draw upon

We live in a democracy where we have some political influence

- c) For comfortable people who are NOT oppressed and NOT powerless in our daily lives, apocalypticism does not have much natural appeal to us

because it's not the language we use

The closer your situation is to the persecuted 1<sup>st</sup> C churches, the more sense Revelation will make to you

Compared to us comfortable folks in the American heartland, the apocalyptic words of the Bible will be heard very differently today by Christians in

(a) Syria, or northeastern Nigeria,

(b) or even among African-American churches in Baltimore MD or Ferguson MO.

**C. Again, these difficult realities do not mean we ignore this apocalyptic book ... but even more than other biblical writings, we have to try to understand it in its own context**

1. In other words, we cross over the "hermeneutical bridge" from our current times and understandings and really try to understand it on its own terms
2. (That is in fact the 1<sup>st</sup> principle for interpreting apocalyptic literature ...)

## Principles for Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature

- Cross the "hermeneutical bridge"  
(*enter the ancient biblical world*)

### V. A few principles for interpreting apocalyptic lit. today

(Marion Bontrager)

**A. Enter the early biblical world ... cross over the "hermeneutical bridge"**

1. Put yourself in the place of the original audience ... Try to overcome the disconnect between your situation and that of the 1<sup>st</sup> C churches in Asia Minor
2. Revelation is a message to Christians facing conflict, persecution and possible martyrdom

**B. Assume a symbolic reading of it, although not everything in it will be symbolic**

## Principles for Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature

- Cross the "hermeneutical bridge" (*enter the ancient biblical world*)
- Assume a symbolic reading of it

1. Hold loosely the symbolism you find because symbols, by their very nature, can mean and say more than one thing.
2. Humbly admit the challenge of deciding what in the book is symbolic and what is more literal

**C. As I said earlier, referring to the Ascension story, do not calendarize!**

## Principles for Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature

- Cross the "hermeneutical bridge" (*enter the ancient biblical world*)
- Assume a symbolic reading of it
- Do not calendarize!

1. Can you trust in God's providence enough for the end times that you don't have to know exactly when Jesus returns again?

2. I heard it from a reliable source that former Goshen College Bible professor Stanley Shenk had a way of simplifying his eschatological beliefs:

*Stanley was once in a conversation with a fundamentalist Christian who held dispensationalist views on the second coming of Christ. To that believer, terms like "pre-millennial" and "post-millennial" were very important. Stanley told him "I'm a pan-millennialist."*

*The man said, "A pan-millennialist? I've never heard of that. What's a pan-millennialist?"*

*Stanley responded, "It's very simple. I trust in the Lord Jesus and I believe it will all pan out in the end."*

(conversation with Dan Shenk, 5-2-2015)

**D. Read it for its religious and inspirational value, more than for future predictions**

## Principles for Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature

- Cross the "hermeneutical bridge" (*enter the ancient biblical world*)
- Assume a symbolic reading of it
- Do not calendarize!
- Read it for its religious and inspirational value (*what does it tell us about Jesus?*)

1. Remember it is the "revealing of Jesus Christ"
2. Read Revelation with an eye toward what it tells us about Jesus and how that correlates with what else the New Testament tells us about Jesus.
3. Remember who is the central figure of this book: the Lamb of God who conquers nonviolently!

## VI. Conclusion

**A. According to John's Apocalypse, in this world full of the idolatry of greed, power and nation, **finding our names in the Lamb's book of life means giving our allegiance to none other than the Lamb!****

**B. When it comes to the message of the book of Revelation, I believe this world will eventually come to an end ... that the cosmic forces of evil will ultimately be defeated by God's way of the Lamb ... and that how & when that happens is not for us to know**

1. Like Stanley Shenk, I do believe that "it will all pan out in the end"
2. So let us be followers of Jesus who can be seen, not looking up into the sky for his return, but looking around for the ministries Christ is calling us to in this place and in this time

**C. Worthy is the Lamb: HIM let us follow!**