

# The Biblical Roots of the Hermeneutic in Revelation

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## Introduction

**T**he author of Revelation begins with arguably the most pressing introduction within all of divine literature:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.<sup>2</sup>

John the Apostle begins by identifying the source of the revelation, the stance by which to receive it, the result of those

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<sup>2</sup> Revelation 1:1–3 (NASB). All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

who read and keep its contents and repeats the urgency that defines the information of the revelation.

The book of Revelation is a critical part of the biblical canon,<sup>3</sup> yet often misunderstood due to either a shift in hermeneutics when approaching the book or simply a poor hermeneutic consistently used throughout the Bible as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof points this out in his critique of premillennialism: “The theory [premillennialism] is based on a literal interpretation of the prophetic delineations of the future of Israel and of the Kingdom of God, which is entirely untenable.”<sup>5</sup> Although Berkhof disagrees with the conclusion of premillennialism, or a literal interpretation of prophecy, he recognizes the battlefield of a proper view of prophecy is that of interpretation or hermeneutics.

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 1:1–3, 22:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17; Christopher Cone presents a convincing paper on the necessity of biblically derived premillennialism within the study of socio-political thought. While his topic is not specific to Revelation, Revelation is a major source of understanding for biblically derived premillennialism. See Christopher Cone, “Biblically Derived Premillennialism as a Necessary Condition for a Biblical Socio-Political Model,” *Council on Dispensation Hermeneutics*, Calvary Bible College, Kansas City, MO, September 17, 2014, <https://www.drcone.com/2014/09/18/biblically-derived-premillennialism-as-a-necessary-condition-for-a-biblical-socio-political-model/>.

<sup>4</sup> Andy Woods writes an article regarding Revelation 17–18 and addresses Apocalyptic literature exploring the genre of Revelation. Within this context, Woods establishes the different hermeneutic approaches to Revelation and connects it with one’s understanding of the acceptance of the apocalyptic genre. See Andy Woods, “What is the Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18?” *Pre-trib Research Center*, accessed August 30, 2021, [https://www.pre-trib.org/articles/dr-thomas-ice/message/what-is-the-identity-of-babylon-in-revelation-17-18/read#\\_ftnref214](https://www.pre-trib.org/articles/dr-thomas-ice/message/what-is-the-identity-of-babylon-in-revelation-17-18/read#_ftnref214). For an example of this in practice, see Kevin DeYoung, “Theological Primer: The 144,000” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), April 28, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/theological-primer-the-144000/>; Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views, a Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 712.

Hermeneutics finds its proper place in epistemology, the foundational category of one's worldview.<sup>6</sup> Within epistemology (the study of knowledge/certainty), the source of authority and how to interpret or understand that authority is established. How should one understand the book of Revelation? Berkhof was correct—the varying answers to this question lead to varying disagreements within the metaphysics topic of eschatology. However, the more foundational question is “How should one understand the book of Revelation *based on the proper authority?*”

Hermeneutics is an important study but must be established on the proper authority. If the hermeneutic theory is not grounded upon God's word, it is fallacious and insufficient for a proper understanding of the Bible—if indeed the Bible is the word of God.<sup>7</sup>

Berkhof posits the idea that understanding prophecy using a literal methodology is entirely untenable. Berkhof presents a methodology for interpreting prophecy which goes against a normative understanding.<sup>8</sup> For example, Berkhof posits,

Moreover, he should not proceed on the assumption that prophecies are always fulfilled in the exact form in which they were uttered.

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<sup>6</sup> One could argue for metaphysics being foundational, but before one could understand reality, one must understand *how* to understand reality. Without a proper understanding of how to view, it would be impossible to study metaphysics with any certainty. Christopher Cone addresses this issue extensively in *Priority in Biblical Hermeneutics and Theological Method* (Raymore, MO: Exegetica Publishing, 2018), 1–4.

<sup>7</sup> Understandably some may object due to circular reasoning. However, the purpose of language presupposes a basic nature of understanding. As God created language with the purpose of understanding, a basic level of understanding is presupposed.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. “In such cases the prophetic horizon was enlarged, they sensed something of the passing character of the old forms, and gave ideal descriptions of the blessings of the New Testament Church” (Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 152).

The presumption is that, if they are fulfilled in a later dispensation, the dispensational form will be disregarded in the fulfillment.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, though Berkhof argues for the illegitimacy of understanding prophecies in a normative fashion, he defines a prophecy as a proclamation of that which God has revealed.<sup>10</sup> The claim, then, can be understood that within this specific genre, that which God has revealed should not always be taken normatively based on the context of when it was said and the surrounding literature. This, however, goes against the exegetical evidence found within various places of the Bible.

Christopher Cone illustrates this point well in a similar study throughout the books of Genesis and Job.<sup>11</sup> Cone observes an exegetically derived basis for a normative approach to the biblical canon through examining each speech act of God and the response to that speech act. Cone concludes,

Because of the two-thousand-year precedent evident in Genesis and Job, any departure from the simplicity of this method bears a strong exegetical burden of proof, requiring that there be *explicit exegetical support for any change one might perceive as necessary in handling later Scriptures*.<sup>12</sup>

Cone demonstrates the necessity of a normative understanding in two books which are commonly recognized as narrative.<sup>13</sup> Many have made the claim that all messianic prophecies pointing to Jesus' first advent were fulfilled in a

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>11</sup> Cone, *Priority in Biblical Hermeneutics*, 17–36.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>13</sup> This is not necessarily true for all of Genesis and Job. An example of a specific area contrary to the given statement is the understanding of Genesis 1–3. Many debates are had regarding the genre of writing for the creation account. For an exegetical and quantitative study on the genre of Genesis 1–3, see Larry Vardiman, Andrew A. Snelling, and Eugene F. Chaffin, *Radioisotopes and the Age of the Earth: A Young-Earth Creationist Research Initiative* (Dallas: Institution for Creation Research, 2000).

literal or normative fashion. Charles Ryrie says it this way: “The prophecies of the first advent of Christ were all fulfilled literally. This obvious but extremely significant fact argues for the validity and use of the literal hermeneutics in all of biblical interpretation.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***A Significant Reason for Recent Departure from Normative Understanding***

As Cone and Ryrie have demonstrated, there is much exegetical support within Genesis, Job, and various prophecies for a normative understanding of the Scriptures. However, within fairly recent development, the genre of apocalyptic literature has taken root and spread throughout the theological community.<sup>15</sup> Due to various reasons such as the ambiguity of the definition of “apocalyptic,” many theologians have assumed an apocalyptic genre designation and consequently an allegorical understanding of the book of Revelation. But if the genre diagnosis is incorrect, then what about the resulting hermeneutic method?

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 129. It is worth noting the lack of citations showing one’s work within the topic of Christ’s fulfillment of messianic prophecy. Some have disputed this claim, but upon further investigation, it seems they have misunderstood what is meant by the term “literal.” For further understanding, see Thomas D. Ice, “The Literal Fulfillment of Bible Prophecy” *Scholars Crossing*, May 2009, [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=pretrib\\_arch](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=pretrib_arch).

<sup>15</sup> William W. Klein, et. al, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 444–48; Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 1991), 243; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutic Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 275–90; Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature ... and Get More Out of it* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

Robert Thomas points out, “No consensus exists as to a precise definition of *genre*.”<sup>16</sup> Thomas recognizes an important consequence: “... so attempts to classify portions of the New Testament, including Revelation, are at best vague.” While in some kinds of literature genre designations may be ambiguous, the Biblical author seems to leave no room for ambiguity within the book of Revelation.<sup>17</sup> Andy Woods presents an argument for the prophetic delineation of Revelation where he establishes the necessity to consistently use the literal grammatical historical hermeneutic.<sup>18</sup> Robert Thomas, likewise in his commentary on Revelation, states,

Most distinctive of all, however, is that this book calls itself a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Its contents fully justify this self-claim. 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 (which does not apply to Revelation). Alleged differences between the Apocalypse and generally accepted works of prophecy often rest upon inadequate interpretations of the Apocalypse.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 324.

<sup>17</sup> Revelation 1:3. This author recognizes the external factors in establishing genres. The nature of genres would involve finding commonality among writings, grouping them under a heading pointing to those similarities, and calling that a genre. As an exegete, it is this author’s intention to let God’s word reign authoritative whenever it speaks. Some theologians have made the case that John does designate the genre as apocalyptic due to the first word of the book. However, after further study, there isn’t any reason to believe John was dealing with genre as the Greek word simply means to reveal as J. Ramsey Michaels clearly points out in his work. Cf. J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, IVP NT Commentary 20 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); N. T. Wright, *The New Testament in its World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 821.

<sup>18</sup> Woods, “What is the Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18?”

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 25.

### *Purpose of the Study*

While the correct genre designation of the book of Revelation is not the primary purpose of this writing, it seems necessary to give some background information regarding departures and disagreements about the proper interpretation of the book. Still, the primary question is whether or not God provides an interpretive method *within* the book of Revelation. If so, it would seem the genre classification of the book of Revelation has little to no effect on the necessary interpretive approach, especially as the apocalyptic genre is an extra-biblical designation. In fact, an external designation which requires interpretive variation from the normative understanding of Scripture places that external data as authoritative, usurping the rightful authority of God.

A brief note on the sufficiency of Scripture is necessary at this point to justify the priority of internal evidence for an appropriate interpretive method. Solomon establishes *the* prerequisite for knowledge and wisdom: the fear of the Lord.<sup>20</sup> Solomon continues to provide the source of that wisdom and knowledge: the mouth of God.<sup>21</sup> This leads to superiority of God's special revelation for gaining true knowledge and wisdom. In this current era, with a closed canon, that special revelation is found in written form – namely the Bible.<sup>22</sup> The Bible is sufficient to equip the believer (and contains the necessary information to convert the unbeliever) for the good works which God has prepared beforehand.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, God has given the believer everything pertaining to life and godliness which is through the knowledge of him,<sup>24</sup> which we understand to proceed from the mouth of God. Because of this, the Bible should be considered sufficient to provide its own interpretive method. After all, if external data was needed to ascertain the knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures, then how could the Scriptures themselves be sufficient to transform the believer

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<sup>20</sup> Proverbs 1:7; 9:6.

<sup>21</sup> Proverbs 2:6.

<sup>22</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:16–21.

<sup>23</sup> Ephesians 2:10.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Peter 1:3–4.

through the renewing of the mind?<sup>25</sup> Would the Bible alone be able to provide true knowledge and certainty? The answer seems clear enough. It would lack capacity for certainty and could only provide understanding to the level that fallen humanity's reasoning is able to deliver.

### **An Internal Model for Understanding the Bible Found Within the Book of Revelation**

In order to derive an internal precedent for a normative interpretive approach to the book of Revelation each speech act<sup>26</sup> is recorded and the responses are noted. By identifying a normative understanding of the speech act, one can consider the response and observe whether the intended audience understood the speech act normatively. Each response is categorized in one of two groups: Category 1 (C1) which is regarded as a normative response or Category 2 (C2) which is regarded as a response not based on a normative understanding.<sup>27</sup>

Various conjugates of *lego* (λέγω) appear 94 times in 90 verses of Revelation. Among these instances, 22 of them receive a response in the immediate context. Of the verses containing the responses, another 9 instances are accounted. Twenty of the 94 instances appear in Revelation 2–3. In these contexts, there are no responses because the recipients hadn't yet received the communication. The remaining 43 speech act contexts do not provide responses.

### ***Speech Acts and Responses***

#### **Speech Act – Revelation 1:11**

Jesus commands John to write about everything he sees and send it to the seven churches.

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<sup>25</sup> Romans 12:1–2.

<sup>26</sup> This writer is not invoking speech act theory. The terminology “speech act” is simply pointing to an occurrence of one speaking to another.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting, this study does not identify specific types of responses outside of one based on a normative understanding. It will either be normative or not. If it is not, it will be the burden of the next student to identify specifically what type of understanding was utilized based on the response.



Response – Revelation 1:4; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14

John provides a C1 response as he writes the book of Revelation and specific sections addressed to the seven churches. The absence of a C1 response recorded for the sending of the letter does not show a C2 response, but the act of sending the book of Revelation would not be expected to have been recorded elsewhere in the Bible as Revelation is the conclusion of the canon.

Speech Act – Revelation 1:19

Jesus implores John to write the things he has seen, the things which are present, and the things to come which will be shown him.

Response

There are two ways to address the response. First, the existence of the book of Revelation shows a C1 response as John wrote the things he was told to write. Second, John wrote the book of Revelation in the three mandated categories. He wrote the things which he had seen (Rev 1), the things which are (Rev 2–3) and the things to come (Rev 4–22).

Speech Act – Revelation 4:1b

“The first voice” commanded that John ascend or come up to see what must take place in future events.

Response – Revelation 4:2

John provides a C1 response by ascending immediately to the throne room of God where he begins his journey of future events.

Speech Act – Revelation 5:2

“A strong angel” asks a question regarding the opening of the scroll which is in the hand of the one who sits on the throne.

Response – Revelation 5:3

John shows a C1 response by weeping as he found no one worthy of opening the scroll. Furthermore, the angel comforts John by showing him one who is able to open the scroll and break the seals.

### Speech Act – Revelation 5:5

As John weeps from not being able to identify anyone worthy of opening the seals within the scroll God holds, the angel comforts John by identifying one who is worthy. He further implies that the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Lamb of God, will open the scroll because he has overcome.

### Response – Revelation 5:6–7

We see Jesus provide a C1 response as he does, in fact, get up, take the scroll, and begin breaking the seals within.

### Speech Act – Revelation 7:13

One of the elders approaches John and asks him, “What is the identity of the multitudes dressed in white robes?”

### Response – Revelation 7:14

After John responds that the elder already knows, the elder provides a C1 response to his own question by answering the question in a normative way. The elder identifies the multitudes and why they have white robes.

### Speech Act – Revelation 8:13

The eagle flies over the earth and proclaims a woe to all the earth for the three trumpets that remain.

### Response – Revelation 9:1, 13; 11:15

The angels provide a C1 response to the eagle’s warning as they blow the remaining three trumpets. The result of the trumpets is mass destruction and woeful events for those on the earth.

### Speech Act – Revelation 10:4

After “seven peals of thunder” spoke, John was about to write what was spoken but a voice from heaven told him not to.

### Response – Revelation 10:4–5

The absence of what was said by the peals of thunder provide a C1 response. While this instance is an argument from absence

or silence, silence was the imperative and provides adequate evidence for a C1 categorization.

#### Speech Act – Revelation 10:8

The voice from heaven tells John to approach the angel who was previously described in verses 1–7 and take the scroll from his hand.

#### Response – Revelation 10:9a

John provides a C1 response as he immediately approaches the angel and takes the scroll from his hand.

#### Speech Act – Revelation 10:9b

After John takes the scroll from the angel's hand, the angel tells John to eat the scroll. He also communicates that the scroll will be bitter in his stomach and sweet in the mouth.

#### Response – Revelation 10:10

John provides another C1 response by eating the scroll and describes the experience as bitter in the stomach and sweet in the mouth.

#### Speech Act – Revelation 11:12

After the two prophets of Revelation 11 are resurrected, they hear a voice from heaven giving the imperative to “come up here.”

#### Response – Revelation 11:12

The two prophets provide a C1 response as they “went up into heaven in the cloud.”

#### Speech Act – Revelation 11:15

Loud voices in heaven proclaim the beginning of the kingdom and the truth of Christ's reign forever.

#### Response – Revelation 11:17

The twenty-four elders respond by praising God for his reign. While the elders are not acting, their response to the truth

proclaimed by the multitude of voices provide precedent for categorizing their response as a C1.

Speech Act – Revelation 14:15

“One like a son of man” was sitting on a cloud, crowned with a sickle in his hand. An angel, leaving the temple, tells him to swing the sickle across the earth for it was ripe.

Response – Revelation 14:16

“The one like a son of man” provides a C1 response as he swings his sickle across the earth as directed.

Speech Act – Revelation 14:18

Similar to the previous speech act, another angel tells the “one like a son of man” to swing the sickle and gather the grapes from the earth.

Response – Revelation 14:19–20

He swings his sickle and gathers the grapes, providing another C1 response.

Speech Act – Revelation 16:1

A loud voice comes from the temple commanding seven angels to pour out seven bowls of judgement on the world.

Response – Revelation 16:2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17

A C1 response is provided as the seven angels are recorded pouring out the bowls on the earth.

Speech Act – Revelation 17:1–2

One of the seven angels tells John that he is going to carry him away to see “the judgement of the great harlot....”

Response – Revelation 17:3

A C1 response is provided in 17:3 as John is immediately carried away into a wilderness and shown the details of the great harlot.

### Speech Act – Revelation 17:7

As John is being shown the details of the great harlot, he “wondered with great wonder.” As the angel responsible for revealing these things to him sees his wonder, he responds by telling John that the angel will explain everything regarding what John has seen in the previous six verses.

### Response – Revelation 17:8–18

The angel intends a C1 understanding, as the angel then proceeds to explain in detail what John has just seen. The highly figurative language has a normative meaning, and the angel explains the metaphor.

### Speech Act – Revelation 19:5

After the fall of Babylon, a voice from the throne gives the imperative to praise God.

### Response – Revelation 19:6

The multitude of God’s bond-servants provide a C1 response as they praise God by saying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.”

### Speech Act – Revelation 19:9

John is commanded to write “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb.”

### Response – Revelation 19:9

The fact that the words are recorded in the book of Revelation shows John’s C1 understanding.

### Speech Act – Revelation 19:17–18

As Christ returns to earth for the great war, an announcement is made for all the birds of heaven to come so they can feast on the fallen kings and beasts.

### Response – Revelation 19:21

The birds responded in a C1 fashion as they were “filled with their flesh.”

### Speech Act – Revelation 21:5

John is commanded to write the words which God had previously spoken in verses 3–4.

### Response – Revelation 21:3–4

The presence of the words in verses 3–4 provide adequate evidence to categorize John’s understanding as a C1 interpretation.

### Speech Act – Revelation 21:9

One of the seven angels tells John to come so that the angel could show him the “Bride of the Lamb.”

### Response – Revelation 21:10–11

A C1 response is recorded in verses 10–11 as the angel carried John away and showed him the details of the “Bride of the Lamb.”

## *Results*

After reviewing each speech act within the book of Revelation and the response to each, where one is provided, 22 of the 22 responses should be considered C1 responses. It is evident that 100% of the responses within the book of Revelation show a normative understanding of communication providing overwhelming evidence for an internal model of interpretation. Communication should be understood in a normative, common-sense fashion. The method of interpretation which models this straightforward approach has become known as the literal grammatical historical method, utilizing grammar and context to understand the normative usage of language in the communication.

Among the various speech acts and responses, many of them are found in contexts with figurative language. To understand Scripture in a normative way is not to disregard figurative language, but to utilize the context provided by the Scriptures themselves in order to understand when a figure of speech is used. A great example of this is found in Revelation 17:7–18. As John is being shown this vast metaphor, he stands in wonder as to how he should understand what is taking place. The context

reveals the obvious use of metaphor as the angel follows up by explaining what the metaphor is intended to communicate. There is a literal meaning behind the figurative language, and the presence of figures of speech should not change the hermeneutic employed by the reader.

### **A Brief Look at the Other Views**

After examining the text for an internal model of interpretation, it is worth interacting with other scholars regarding various passages, for illustrating the importance, examining reasons to disagree with the proposed model, and evaluating the worldview implications (specifically within epistemology).

Charles Hodge, a reformed theologian, makes the claim that “prophecy makes a general impression with regard to future events, which is reliable and salutary, while the details remain in obscurity.”<sup>28</sup> As an example of this, Hodge utilizes the failure of the first-century Jews to recognize the details of Jesus’ first advent. While, admittedly, in many ways the religious leaders of Jesus’ day got it wrong, to base the argument on the response of leaders whom Jesus consistently rebuked for their lack of understanding and misplacement of God’s word proves to be an unreliable foundation for argumentation.<sup>29</sup> As one examines the fulfillment of prophecies regarding Jesus’ first advent, the details are evident enough, although admittedly what one might consider detail versus vagueness does come into play.<sup>30</sup> The examples Hodge uses to justify his argument come from a misunderstanding of the prophecies themselves. For example, Hodge argues that first-century Jews misunderstood the prophecies regarding Jesus subduing the nations. As Hodge

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 791.

<sup>29</sup> It is important here to note the difference between descriptive and prescriptive text. While models of interpretation may be derived from descriptive passages, context and details of speakers/recipients is a critical part of deriving a proper model.

<sup>30</sup> Isaiah 53 is a great example of these prophecies. See Isaiah 53:3 and John 1:11; Isaiah 53:4–5 and Matthew 27:35; Isaiah 53:6 and Romans 4:25; etc.

states, “He is to subdue all nations, not by the sword, as they supposed, but by truth and love.”<sup>31</sup> This conclusion assumes that the prophecies referenced are in fact regarding Christ’s first advent alone. If one takes later revelation into consideration, the book of Revelation clearly shows that Jesus will, in the future come back and subdue the nations.<sup>32</sup> This type of interpretive method leads Hodge to spiritualize much of the prophecy found within the book of Revelation, including the nature of the millennial kingdom.<sup>33</sup> One’s metaphysical understanding of the kingdom has critical impact on one’s ethical and socio-political understandings of worldview.

N. T. Wright models the importance of an internal precedent for interpretive method and genre classification. Wright posits the idea that the book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature and should be interpreted accordingly, just as one might interpret other apocalyptic literature from the same era.<sup>34</sup> Because of this, Wright concludes, “At the same time, as with biblical prophecy more generally, the rich symbolic language invites *multiple ‘applications’ and ‘interpretations’* as the various systems of pagan power behave in characteristic ways and the church is faced with the challenge both of understanding what is happening and acting appropriately [emphasis added].”<sup>35</sup> Many scholars rightly disagree with the idea of multiple interpretations for various reasons—one being the loss of all effective communication and meaning. However, because Wright considers the book of Revelation as apocalyptic literature, the text has a meaning for the time it was written and for future events. Note that Wright is not simply advocating for multiple applications but is also advocating for multiple correct interpretations.

This idea plays a role in Revelation 17–18 as Wright identifies Babylon the Great as symbolic for the nation of Rome

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<sup>31</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 791.

<sup>32</sup> Revelation 19:11–16.

<sup>33</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 841–42.

<sup>34</sup> Examples of these would be other pseudepigraphal books such as *Ascension of Isaiah* and *Apocalypse of Peter*.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, *New Testament in its World*, 828.



contemporary to the time of the writing of Revelation. He then contends, “We appropriate this vision for our twenty-first-century context by remembering that there are many Babylons and beasts, and we need to resist them all.”<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Wright makes the claim of ancient Rome being the true Babylon the Great but only defends his position by drawing parallels using further symbolism.<sup>37</sup> What is problematic is the lack of any internal evidence for interpreting the symbols this way. No doubt, Wright’s precommitment to the use of symbolism comes from his understanding of apocalyptic literature and his precommitment to the book of Revelation as apocalyptic.

Lastly, the 144,000 of Revelation 7 provides another useful case study. As Revelation presents the 144,000 as the “bond-servants of God”<sup>38</sup> coming from the “Tribes of Israel”<sup>39</sup> and continues by listing how many bond-servants from each tribe, a normative understanding of the passage would lead one to believe that the 144,000 are actually 144,000 Jews. However, Ryken posits, “The number of the redeemed—144,000—symbolizes completeness (foursquare symbolism of 12 times 12, and all 12 tribes represented) and magnitude (inasmuch as 1,000 symbolized a multitude in ancient times).”<sup>40</sup> Ryken provides the 144,000 as an example of how numbers should be taken figuratively within the book of Revelation. Ryken’s reasoning for the symbolic nature of numbers is based upon other *extra-biblical* apocalyptic sources.

Wright likewise states, “The number of 144,000 from the twelve tribes is symbolic for the church as the continuing expression of Israel,” yet provides no basis for his understanding. If one is understanding the Bible using a normative methodology, a symbolic understanding must be warranted within the context

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 844.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 838–39.

<sup>38</sup> Revelation 7:3.

<sup>39</sup> Revelation 7:4.

<sup>40</sup> Leland Ryken, *Symbols and Reality: A Guided Study of Prophecy, Apocalypse, and Visionary Literature: Reading the Bible as Literature* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham P, 2016), 99.

of the passage.<sup>41</sup> To establish a passage as symbolic simply because of an external genre designation places the genre—not the Bible—as authoritative, leading to a genre hermeneutic.

### **Conclusion**

Regardless of genre the book of Revelation presents an internal precedent for a normative (literal grammatical historical) interpretive method. Genre is an important consideration for studying books of the Bible, but because of the internal interpretive precedent established, genre simply does not play a role in interpretive methodology. Beyond this, to deviate from a normative interpretive method whenever approaching the Scriptures as a whole would demand strong exegetical evidence. To deviate from the literal grammatical historical hermeneutic without exegetical roots is to enthrone oneself as a source of authority in the worldview. The consequence is an altogether different epistemology and ultimately a catastrophic deviation from the biblical worldview.

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<sup>41</sup> For further study on how to identify symbolism, see Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1991); or Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).