

# Handouts

## Including

### Notes & Questions



# How to understand apocalyptic passages in the Bible

Teacher: Yvon Prehn

## **We've been talking about the prophets**

- From Elijah to Jeremiah, they reminded the people of the covenant they made with God.
- The blessings that would follow if they obeyed what was in it,
- The judgment that would come if they didn't.
- The time has come for judgment.

## **But God has not abandoned His people!**

- Even among the exiles, God has his spokesmen,
- There are still prophets speaking God's messages to His people.
- Daniel (and his three friends) are in the palace, in the government.
- Ezekiel is a pastor (formerly priest) with the captive people.
- We will talk specifically about them and the content of their books in another lesson, but first. .

## **If you've started reading Ezekiel you might be saying to yourself.....**

- Whoa.....what is going on?
- Whirring wheels within wheels and eyes and beasts and all sorts of fantastic visions and dreams.
- What is happening?
- We need to clarify a new type of literature, just as we had historical, and prophetic passages in the Bible, here we have....

## **Apocalyptic Literature**

- In the secular world this term has taken on the idea of end of the world, or massive collapse of society, etc.
- The Biblical meaning, though it can be that is a little different—
- The Greek term *apokalypsis*, from which we get our English word *apocalypse*, literally means “unveiling.” It also means a revelation.
- God is unveiling, giving special revelation, special insight to His prophets, enabling them to see things from HIS viewpoint.

## **And sometimes that view can get a bit wild and difficult to understand**

- It is important to understand that though not all prophetic writing is apocalyptic.
- Most prophetic messages are quite clear—“You were supposed to do this, you didn't, judgment will come.”
- ***Apocalyptic adds to this, it brings in divine visual imagery that is often difficult to understand.***
- One commentator said, “We would expect it to be this way if the message is truly from God and deals with the things of God.”
- Another said, “How can you show a prophet what may have never happened yet? That it is from God and filled with His power?”
- Images are a way to this.

## **The Power of Images**

- Images summarize a group of ideas.
- If you want to describe the perfect super-hero, a sterling example of strength, integrity, leadership, and self-giving, you could list these characteristics in minute dictionary detail or you could simply say, “Captain America.”
- If you want to tell people about a team you support—you wear a t-shirt

or paint your face their colors.

- An image can contain volumes of backstory and meaning in a few words—the key to understanding the message is that you need to understand the meaning of the image.

### **The challenge to modern readers**

- Is that we don't know the backstory of the imagery. For us of the current wheels within wheels and the creatures with 4 heads of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle make about as much sense to us as Captain America, Thor, and Spiderman would make to the Old Testament Jews.
- So how do we deal with these book?
- How do we understand them?
- What are they supposed to "reveal?"
- That is the challenge with ALL apocalyptic passages and if we don't at least acknowledge this people can come up with wildly incorrect interpretations.

### **A caveat, disclaimer to start**

- There is probably no ONE correct meaning to any apocalyptic vision.
- You will find little agreement among even the most conservative, Bible-believing scholars.
- So don't be too hard on yourself if you struggle with it.
- It is not a copout to go to Isaiah 55:8-9
- <sup>8</sup> *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord.*
- <sup>9</sup> *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*
- In all of what you read that follows, keep that in mind and that the God whose ways and thoughts are far above ours loves us and works out all for our good.

### **At the same time, we shouldn't be lazy, but seek to understand what we can**

- I believe simply struggling with them will deepen your understanding, wonder, and worship of your God.
- To help you do that, I'll share some overall resources and some examples of how they can help.
- This is in addition to what you are already doing—reading through the Bible, getting to know the entire Bible, learning the imagery and backstories, because that is foundational to understanding anything else.
- I have videos describing how to use what follows on the [www.YouTube/Bible805](http://www.YouTube/Bible805) channel and I hope to do more on other resources there—do subscribe!

### **First, let's review Gordon and Fee's book, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, as we've use it for understanding other genres/types in the Bible**

- ***Here is how they define this type of Biblical writing:***
- ***Apocalyptic Definition:*** *A type of Jewish and early Christian lit., the bulk of which stems from the years 200 b.c.-a.d. 100, containing visions or revelations (hence the term "apocalyptic," from the Gr. apokalypsis, meaning "a revelation" or "a disclosure") from God concerning the imminent coming of the end of the present evil age and the final advent of God's kingdom.*

- *When reading apocalyptic literature, here are a couple of important guidelines to keep in mind—*

**This is what they recommend overall**

- ***First, each detail does not necessarily carry symbolic significance.*** Even the details that do carry symbolic significance may not be transparent to us, and speculating accomplishes little.
- ***Second, it is important to remember that the apocalyptic vision is not the message itself, but rather is the vehicle or occasion for the message.*** So, e.g., the message of the first vision of Zechariah ([Zec 1:7 – 17](#)) is not that there are going to be four horses of different colors in a myrtle grove. The message is laid out very clearly in [Zec 1:14 – 17](#)—(that God will judge those who conquered Israel and will once again give her prosperity and comfort—NOT that 4 horses will suddenly start running around the land .)
- ***Apocalyptic literature is simply a medium, and in the end it is more interested in revealing God than in revealing the future.*** (and showing us how little we can comprehend Him)

**NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible** Copyright © 2016 by Zondervan

**Commentaries can help reveal more of our God and His message behind the images**

- Useful not only for difficult passages, but to check on all study conclusions.
- They also prevents faulty interpretations and pride.
- Do be careful of the commentaries you read—not all equal in value—most solid ones basically agree though they say things a bit differently.
- Use in both in print and online, one is not better than another.
- Can be overwhelming, pace yourself.

**Biblegateway.com**

**some free, paid study resources plan highly recommended**

- Some resources free, many Bible verses, great to check different ones.
- 40+ resources \$40.00 a year
- Few ads.
- Easy to use.
- Contemporary sources, solid, reliable.

**Super easy Greek and Hebrew basic words**

**Drill down to the specific word**

**[www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org)**

- The oldest of its kind from the early days of the internet
- Best for original language study, topical studies, word studies, easy access to Strong's Concordance
- Limited commentaries, but useful
- Additional resources in audio, about hymns, misc.

**Other commentary sites that are useful**

- <http://www.gotquestions.org> Q&A format, often find the related article through a Google search—not great scholarship, but solid and useful.
- [www.equip.org](http://www.equip.org) started as an apologetic site, but good to check on various topics. Well researched articles.
- [www.preceptaustin.org](http://www.preceptaustin.org) it used to be better than it is now. A huge number of excellent resources, but virtually not indexed and an organizational mess. If you have time, though real gems are there—I have a video that might help on [www.Youtube.com/Bible805](http://www.Youtube.com/Bible805)

- [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) surprised? Though not the greatest for biblical study—very secular views of theology, great for general historical background, images (the wonderful paintings of the masters), and sometimes to see what the secular view of something is, very helpful.
- **Lots of others**, but I tend to avoid those with lots of ads and the one paid one I like is the Biblegateway, other paid ones similar, but I like the selection of resources here.

### **The point of this apocalyptic vision of God and the future**

- The apocalyptic writings and the commentaries about them are not to confuse us or then to merely explain the confusion.
- *“Life is not concerned with time alone. There is an overruling power which works in time to prepare for eternity.”* William Orr
- Dallas Willard said, our world is a *“crucible of soul-making.”*
- In this soul making for eternity, apocalyptic Bible passages give us a vision beyond the ordinary.

### **Challenge to us with the vision we’ve been given, what can we do to be a vision of God’s life to our world?**

- *“If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.”*  
C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity.
- What can we do in our world to show that our focus, our heart, our treasure is on the one to come?
- How can we reflect the values of the Kingdom of God—not the Kingdom of me?
- The best way to do that, is to spend time in the passages we are reading, to think about them, to ask our Lord to reveal himself to us and pray that as we see our Lord more clearly, we will become more like Him.

### **www.Bible805.com**

- **Links to:**
- Podcasts, blogs, and eBooks
- Printables & merch of Bible verses & encouraging sayings
- Chronological Bible-reading schedules

The Expository Files from the website <http://bible.ca/>

**Bible805 note: a good example of how commentary on an apocalyptic passage can suggest meaning and application to us. We shouldn't apply as exact commands, but useful thoughts to consider.**

## **The Appearance of the Likeness of the Glory of the Lord, Ezekiel 1**

It has never been an easy thing to think about God. I can talk about His attributes easily enough. I can say He is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, glorious, love and righteousness. But I cannot come up with a mental picture of God. Others have tried to and have failed. He does not look like man, or any other creature of flesh and blood. God is spirit. (John 4:24; Luke 24:36-39; Romans 1:21-23).

But we do have a picture of God's glory. Want to see it?

It is a "word picture" which is designed to bring to our minds a mental image that expresses something about God's glory in terms the human mind can comprehend. It was not concocted by the imperfect mind of man, but rather a picture God chose Himself. Let's look at the picture God paints of Himself!

### **Ezekiel's Vision**

*"...the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God... the word of the LORD came expressly to Ezekiel the priest... in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and there the hand of the LORD was upon him." (Ezekiel 1:1-3).*

This occurred in the 5th month of the year 593 B.C. We know this from the information given in verse two.

Ezekiel was far from home. He, along with ten thousand other leaders of Judah, had been taken into captivity during the first deportation by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (or Chaldea). Soon, according to prophecy, there would be yet more deportations and finally the city of Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed. This would also be fulfilled the following decade.

Ezekiel and others were relocated by the River of Chebar. Recent excavations have uncovered Jewish settlements there giving further evidence that this account is historically accurate.

It is here that the "word of the Lord" came to Ezekiel in the form of a vision. In dealing with visions and their meanings, it is best to keep it simple. For example, if I say "cat" you picture a "cat" in your mind. You do not get bogged down with the history of the word; the sound one makes when he says the word, and so forth. Just look at the symbols shown to Ezekiel and consider what each one might suggest about God.

### **God's Purpose**

*"And as I looked, behold, a great storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire." (Ezekiel 1:4).*

In verse 4-21, we have a description of heavenly purposes being fulfilled. The words "like" and "likeness" occurs some 15 times in these verses. This suggests the inadequacy of human language to convey

exactly what Ezekiel saw. The best that could be done was to find earthly things in the human experience that were "like" the things in the vision.

Out of the dark cloud descending from the north Ezekiel sees figures resembling four living things (vs. 5). They looked somewhat human in form, but closer examination shows otherwise. They each had four wings (freedom of movement) faces (seeing every direction; vs. 6). This would suggest ability to know and act in whatever way God commands.

Their feet were glowing (purity of purpose; vs. 7) and hands (helping hands; working hands; vs. 8). Their faces never changed direction (singleness of purpose; vs. 9). The four faces on each creature were different (vs. 10). Each had the face of a man (reason); lion (majesty); ox (strength) and eagle (swiftness).

The tips of their wings touched one another (unity; vs 11). There was flashes of light coming from the midst of these beings, perhaps suggesting judgment (vs. 13,14). There is a description of wheels (vs. 16-21). Forget about designing one of these yourself! Suggested is that the steady, ongoing work of God will continue through all obstacles and conflict. God's purpose will always prevail!

### **God in His Glory**

*"Now, over the heads of the living beings there was something like an expanse... above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, and on that which resembled a throne was a figure..." (Ezekiel 1:22-26).*

First, we are called to look at the throne of God, sitting on something like an awesome, gleaming crystal platform (vs. 22,23). This vision is complete with audio, and there are three similes used to describe the sounds Ezekiel was hearing (vs. 24,25). There was the sound like abundant waters; the sound like the voice of the Almighty (thunder; Psalm 29:3,5) and the sound like that of an army on the move. These sounds came from the wings of the creatures. When the wings stopped, so did the sounds.

The figure on the throne was like that of a man, but the upper portion was like glowing metal with fire all around it. The lower portion was like fire, and there was a radiant, multi-colored glow all around Him, like a rainbow, the sign of hope (vs. 26-28). Out of the dark, flashing cloud of judgment comes peace and hope. Other passages also describe the glory of God (Exodus 33:20; 19:16-18; 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10).

God then speaks to Ezekiel. "Then He said to me, 'Son of man, stand up that I may speak to you!'" (Ezekiel 2:1). He speaks to Ezekiel about judgment upon the people for their faithlessness. He speaks to Ezekiel of his mission to speak to them whether they will listen or not. He also speaks of mercy which will be extended to those who will repent.

God still speaks to us today. It is the same God; no different from the One of Ezekiel's vision. His purposes will be accomplished. He has not been silent and speaks to us through His Son (Hebrews 1:3). We'd best be listening to and obeying Him!

By Jon W. Quinn

From Expository Files 8.8; August 2001, from the site: <http://bible.ca/>

## ***DISCUSSION QUESTIONS***

---

### **How to understand Apocalyptic Passages**

1. What does the term “apocalyptic” mean? What is a common misconception of it?
2. In attempting to understand the apocalyptic passages in the Bible, what is the place of understanding images in the process and why is it so hard for us to understand the connotations of images from the past?
3. Overall, how can commentaries help us in understanding our study of the Bible, and not just the apocalyptic passages?
4. Have you used any of the tools we talked about in the class? Have they been helpful? What is your experience with them? Any others that have been helpful to you?
5. APPLICATION—How can you look at the apocalyptic passages in the Bible to help you become more and more like Jesus?