

## **Naked Bible Podcast Transcript**

### **Episode 29**

### **The Bible's Literary Context: Prophecy and Apocalyptic (Part 8 of 8-part series)**

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### **Summary**

In this episode, we're going to talk about two genres: prophecy and apocalyptic. The reason for doubling up will become apparent as we proceed, but basically, we need to talk about these two genres because most modern Bible students don't realize there are clear differences between the two. That is, most people assume that "prophecy" has something to do with predicting the end times – but it actually doesn't – that's the apocalyptic genre.

### **Transcript**

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

In our last podcast, we talked about the comedic genre and the New Testament with our guest speaker, Sam Lamerson. In this episode, we're going to talk about two genres as we continue our series on interpreting the Bible in its own literary context. This time we're going to talk about the genres of prophecy and apocalyptic. The reason for doubling up will become apparent as we proceed, but basically, we need to talk about these two genres because most modern Bible students don't realize there are clear differences between the two. That is, most people assume that prophecy has something to do with predicting the end times or the end of the world. That's actually not technically correct. It's the apocalyptic genre that does that.

Let's take prophecy first, toward articulating an understanding a difference between the two. In simplest terms, prophecy is what a prophet says: sermons or speeches of prophets or prophetic figures of the Bible. If you actually read through the Prophets, you'll find that most of the time they don't predict anything. They rail against something. That's why, in any academic study of the prophets, the distinction will be made between a prophet's forth-telling (his preaching and diatribes against someone or something) and his fore-telling (his actual prediction of future events). About 80-percent of the prophetic material in the Bible actually falls into the first category: forth-telling (preaching)—that is, messages for the prophet's immediate audience about their own time and their own failures, hence their own near future if they refuse to repent.

Prophets were broadly defined as someone who acted as a spokesperson for God—just someone generically who spoke God's truth. The biblical prophets were basically covenant-enforcers (that's how I like to describe it). That is, they railed against the unrighteousness of the people, the kings, or other nations and declared how they were out of bounds in some way with God's covenants or God's holiness. Consequently, predicting future events was not their main focus. Even when prophets *did* predict future events, they were nearly always oriented to their own time period—the near future of the unrighteous Israelites or the pagan nations that were part of Israel's world. The prophet would often render explicit predictions about the impending doom of Israel or some other nation that were not aimed at future events thousands of years beyond their own time period—that is, the end of the world scenarios.

Such predictions as the end of the world scenario are actually rare in scripture. They belong to the next genre: apocalyptic. Apocalyptic could be thought of as a subset of prophecy—one with features markedly different than normal forth-telling prophecy and even different than normal predictive prophecy, since most predictions in the prophets are near in view, not far, far distant in the future. The apocalyptic genre describes prophecies in which God reveals hidden future plans that are cataclysmic and designed in some ultimate sense to punish evil and reward the faithful. Apocalyptic prophecy is usually conveyed through dreams or visions with elaborate and strange symbolism, and such apocalyptic predictions are often conveyed through intermediaries like angels.

On page 385 of their excellent introduction to hermeneutics, entitled *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, William Kline and Craig Blomberg list out the differences between prophecy and apocalyptic. I'm going to post their short chart on the podcast "Bibliography" page so that you can take a look at it, but let me read the distinctions to you here. Prophecy versus apocalyptic [consulting chart]:

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- The genre of prophecy primarily focuses on repentance from sin, whereas in the apocalyptic genre, sin is viewed as just too great. We're beyond the point of repenting, and destruction is inevitable.
- Going back to the prophecy genre, it often deals with God's displeasure with his evil people, whereas apocalyptic has in view the idea of the people's displeasure with evil and the desire for God's intervention.
- Prophecy focuses on a call for God's people to repent. Apocalyptic focuses on a call for a faithful remnant to persevere through what's coming (again, this cataclysmic upheaval/chaos that's going to ensue at the Day of the Lord—the end of the world scenario).
- Prophecy focuses, as well, on divine intervention by natural or human means. Apocalyptic, though, describes divine intervention by supernatural means. So in the one (prophecy), God uses people to do this or that to bring either something that comes to pass or bring about repentance, but

in apocalyptic you have supernatural agents that are often involved with this great, final, cataclysmic judgment that's coming.

- The prophecy genre typically contains direct speech by God, whereas the apocalyptic genre often has God speaking in indirect ways—weird symbols, bizarre sorts of language, numbers, that sort of thing. Not only is it indirect in that nature, it's also indirect in that God gives the information through some intermediate figure (often an angel). If you think about the book of Revelation, there are angels in that book that do lots of talking.
- Finally, prophecy is primarily concerned with the prediction of imminent future events, whereas apocalyptic concerns itself with the prediction of cosmic, final events—final solutions.

That chart highlights some important distinctions of apocalyptic literature that separate it from more common prophecy. The basic distinction is that non-apocalyptic prophecy is a) mostly not predicting anything (it's basically preaching) and b) when it does predict something, it predicts near-future events. In that regard, most Old Testament prophecy, therefore, has already been fulfilled, either in the Old Testament period itself or the New Testament period. So a lot of Old Testament prophecy that often gets picked up in popular prophecy discussion is really being taken out of context. Most Old Testament prophecy should not be ripped out of its original context and its original fulfillment and made to talk about events future to us. The apocalyptic material of the Old Testament (and, of course, the New Testament), on the other hand, is a different story.

As the chart sketched, apocalyptic material contains veiled and sometimes truly bizarre revelations, often mediated by angels. The material often includes descriptions of activities in the supernatural world. That would be another thing to look for. Not mentioned in the chart is also the notion of the division of history into periods and sort of a progression toward this final, cataclysmic end. That's very common in apocalyptic literature. It leads to some sort of cosmic transformation—destructive or positive. Those things are stock elements in apocalyptic material. Since those are stock elements, it shouldn't surprise any of us that the judgment of the dead and resurrection is also a big part of the apocalyptic genre.

So what do we do about prophecy and apocalyptic? Kline and Blomberg (referring back to that book, as well as other academic books on hermeneutics) have a number of recommendations as to how to interpret texts in these genres. I'm going to go over a few of them for you.

1. Since more space is devoted to prophecy than apocalyptic in the Bible... You can just read through your Old Testament, especially, and look for the presence or absence of those apocalyptic features we just described. You'll find that more space is devoted to prophecy as a genre than apocalyptic. Since that's the case, we ought not to assume that a prophecy *without* apocalyptic features is saying anything about the final

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- end-times. We need to let scripture's own genres and their usage guide us here.
2. The Bible itself is the best guide for determining which prophecies were fulfilled during the Old Testament time period and during the New Testament time period—the biblical period itself. When considering a prediction in the Old Testament prophets, if the passage is not apocalyptic in genre or if it's clearly quoted or alluded to in the New Testament as being fulfilled, then it's unwise to assume that a prophecy in the Old Testament Prophets is pointing to our own time period or some yet distant future. We need to let the Bible provide parameters for us in those regards.
  3. In many (and perhaps most) cases, Old Testament prophecies about Israel and Zion find their fulfillment in the Church by the New Testament's own reckoning and quotation. The book of Hebrews is a good example of temple and Zion theology applied directly to the Church. Since the Church is a historical entity, this is still historical, real-time fulfillment, but it's something that's already accomplished. If the New Testament is silent about a specific Old Testament prophecy dealing with the physical nation of Israel, then that prophecy might anticipate a future historical fulfillment in that direction. But again, if you're catching the drift here, we're trying to let the New Testament be our guide as to what has been fulfilled and what's still out there.
  4. Apocalyptic prophecies' symbols were given to people in the biblical period for their own understanding. That is, while symbols are cryptic and weird, the referent point of a symbol is something knowable to the audience to whom it came and to whom it was given. It might be foreign to us, but they would have understood it. Otherwise, it would be meaningless. That means that symbolic language is not to be deciphered by what *we* know in *our* world, but by what *they* knew in *their* world.
  5. When the New Testament assigns meaning and fulfillment to an Old Testament apocalyptic symbol, we ought not disregard it and assume the symbol stands for something in our own world. For example, the locust imagery of the book of Revelation ought to be understood the way the Old Testament uses locust imagery: for invading human armies—not for helicopters or strange hybrid monster creatures from inner earth or outer space. That would have been utterly meaningless to the original recipients of that kind of material.

I hope these guidelines are helpful. I hope the discussion was helpful for distinguishing prophecy and apocalyptic. I think you can see that the rule of thumb in this sort of material is to let the Bible itself be our guide—to honor the genres that God used to communicate things to us in, and also to honor the way the Bible itself says this or that was fulfilled. If we do that, it's not going to

eliminate the idea of predictive prophecy at a future time yet future to us, but it's going to give us some guideposts and some boundaries that are going to be really helpful and that will keep us from going off the deep-end (in some cases, literally) when we look at this material in the Bible.